**Book Reviews**

**Five Atonements**  
by Matthew Ladd

*Sugartown*, by David Rivard. Graywolf, 80 pp., $14.  

Poets are accused of political soapboxing almost as often as they’re deemed irrelevant, and as these judgments are equally chronic (not to mention one-dimensional), it should come as no surprise that American poetry is still tackling everything from autumn leaves to Guantánamo Bay—and sometimes in the same sentence. This is new only in the sense that, with each fresh newspaper headline, our sense of obligation to say something insightful about ourselves seems to intensify. Whether headlines are a good motivation or not is open to debate. What’s clear is that, whether we like it or not, we live in a guilty nation, and that the first step in coming to terms with that guilt is simply recognizing that it exists. The next step, as these five books demonstrate, is somewhat more difficult to agree on.

I

Jorie Graham’s most recent book takes its title from the WWII code name given to the Allied Powers’ European offensive, one that culminated in the D-Day landing on the beaches of Normandy. Her subject is ostensibly war, but she does not limit herself to the battlefield. The poems rather take battle as simply the most visible—and memorable—of theaters on which to enact dramas between the idea of personal morality and that of Christian redemption.
The poems in *Overlord* move chiefly between historical accounts of the events leading up to the D-Day invasion, often given in soldiers’ diaries or letters that Graham has excavated, and the narrator’s own attempts at prayer, each suitably titled “Praying.” In the opening prayer sequence, the speaker quickly reveals herself as someone who recreates war memories as a method of understanding her own relationship to an inhospitable world. God, if He exists, is merely the medium for this understanding, so that every prayer in this book becomes, sooner or later, an argument with oneself.

Plumbing the existential depths of our national memories, and doing it without sounding self-important, is an ambitious goal. Yet Graham’s language is rarely subsumed by the ideas behind it. Her words are surprisingly simple, and her diction is clear and emotionally subtle, as in the last lines of the opening poem “Other”:

> We can be part full, only part, and not die. We can be in and out of here, now, at once, and not die. The little song, the little river, has banks. We can pull up and sit on the banks. We can pull back from the being of our bodies, we can live in a portion of them, we can be absent, no one can tell.

This would be pretentious if it weren’t so damningly true. Indeed, some of the most interesting passages in these poems are those that are surprisingly void of image, those that surround their ideas with abstraction, self-analysis or, as in “Other,” outright lecture. Graham’s work has always been intellectual—sometimes annoyingly so—but these poems, continuously attuned to the numbing tragedies of war, possess a plainspoken intelligence that is personal, motivated and (considering the time of their publication) entirely relevant.

The abstractions also serve as much-needed breathing spaces between the more graphic descriptions of war. In the spirit of Jarrell’s “Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” and Owen’s “Dulce Et Decorum Est,” many of the poems graphically describe battles that are at best pyrrhic victories and, at worst, complete disasters. This sort of imagery is thickest in the book’s central triptych of poems, “Spoken From the Hedgerows,” a pastiche of soldiers’ words and Graham’s own dramatizations of World
War II firefights. In the second sequence, a squadron of American glider pilots is devastated by German anti-aircraft fire:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\ldots \text{bullets up through our feet, explosions of Jack’s face, more} \\
&\text{sudden openings} \\
&\text{in backs, shoulders, one in a neck, throat opens, I happen to see, I} \\
&\text{see an eye} \\
&\text{pushed back, through the face, then on back through} \\
&\text{the canvas skin …}
\end{align*}
\]

Graham is effective here, not because she’s trying to accurately capture the heat of battle (which she does), but because her language manages to be so immediate while also suggesting, with its clinical evocation of orifices and surgeries, that the knowledge of war alone isn’t inherently meaningful, and that our familiarity with its sheer unreasonableness doesn’t keep us from waging it.

*Overlord* is replete with violent images, then, because Graham recognizes that we have become, if not desensitized to those images, at least inured enough to misuse them. Hence her appropriation of the imagery for personal memory and theological reflection: humans can be selfish, and we often tend to recreate war as a catalyst for our own psychological crises. Interestingly, the book later observes that this tendency is *universal*, that we can’t help but see the entire outside world as a sort of enormous mirror, as in “Disenchantment,” where Graham addresses a tree outside her window: “The book tells me I can’t see you, / it’s all frames and lenses and you … / you are but a little flash, a cloud taking form in my neuron chamber …” Here the conflict is not physical but internal, a question of whether we can ever see past the machinery of our own thinking. To illustrate this conflict, the poem later includes a second narrator’s observation (taken verbatim from Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*) on the selfishness of the first: “‘Instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that.’”

This is one of the very few points where we’re likely to grumble and close the book, at least until we feel generous enough to watch a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet berate herself—albeit obliquely—for transforming her own subject into a beautiful and moving work of art. Many politically minded poems are either too sure of themselves (David Wojahn’s, for instance) or too visibly mired in uncertainty for that uncertainty to be convincing. Graham is far too subtle to be accused
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of jingoism, and when *Overlord* falters it does so because its self-doubt is sometimes too practiced. “Am I aware enough?” the poems ask. “Have I reached a level of introspection that legitimates my moral outrage?” Well, Yes, we want to reply, but you already knew that. Nobody should have to pray in front of a mirror.

This is not exactly the worst mistake a book can make, and given the complex metaphorical terrain, *Overlord*’s most powerful moments are those that implicate its speaker more honestly. Especially in the “Praying” poems, Graham suggests, without the meta-commentary, that there is indeed something about the lofty security of the page that threatens to invalidate what’s written. In “Copy,” for example, she signs an e-mail petition from Susan Sontag on behalf of Amnesty International, only to grapple with the familiar question of whether petitions really change anything. The poem questions everything—its speaker, its political motives, its willingness to look outside itself—everything, that is, except its language, whose confidence and skill are what allow Graham to successfully ask the questions in the first place.

Perhaps that is the most gratifying aspect of the poems in this book—their subject brings them to the edge of harangue, but they remain, in the end, firmly undecided, oscillating between outrage at the idiocy of war and the knowledge that, as humans, we carry a part of the burden that can’t simply be wiped away by signing a petition. This oscillation may dissatisfy readers of more overtly political poetry, but it ultimately produces a book whose relevance does not force it into polemics, and whose inwardness does not keep it from being relevant.

II

The proliferation of self-portraits in David Rivard’s most recent book—“Self–Portrait as a Boxful of Pigeons,” “as a Blind Snowy Owl,” “as Anchored Sunlight”—initially suggests that the poems in *Sugartown* will be solipsistic and surreal. They are neither. Rivard has a keen eye for satire and a healthy taste for irony, and his pages bristle with proper nouns—FedEx, Kangol, Prozac, Victoria’s Secret—bright, hollow symbols of an America whose advertisements are almost invisible because they’re so garish. These poems *know* their subjects. Rivard is especially good at describing teenagers, oddly enough, in a way that seems both accurate and surprisingly tender: “on the steps of the high school gym / a sunburnt swaying girl in denim short-shorts / kisses a
crab–shouldered dropout / a hottie as they say …” You get the sense, reading these poems, that teenagers would like Rivard, might even ask him to hang out—or at least wouldn’t compare him to their parents.

The best work in Sugartown, not coincidentally, continues to make individual people—the young, the disestablished, the chronically poor—its primary subjects. What’s more, when the poems succeed they do so not because Rivard is shedding some great light on what it means to be young or poor, but because he seems to take such great pleasure in the descriptions themselves. Take the last lines of “Delia,” for instance:

tho God forgave you this, & all else, later  
he was watching you then at home  
you were soaking in the tub, hair in a topknot, little breasts  
shadows of a light blue vein near an aureole  
your swarthy, pleasantly crossed thighs just below the water—  
that was you, dear.

A compelling tone emerges from these details. The startling intrusion of the “swarthy” thighs keeps the passage neatly balanced between eulogy and realism, and the last line’s brevity is strangely appropriate. The poem, like its subject, has become vulnerable, its tone sincere and unguarded.

Even more intriguing is Rivard’s ability to maintain that sincerity within the hyperactive urban colloquialisms he is so clearly fond of. “Delia,” it turns out, is relaxing after having “boosted an exceptionally lovely cell phone / the jellybean Nokia candy-clear kind / this one’s faceplate violet, I believe …” It’s almost as if the shoplifting is therapeutic, or at least imbued with a sort of transient value: if you’re going to steal something, it might as well be pretty. The phrasing is loose, irreverent, hip—but also weirdly intimate. When these poems succeed, then, it’s not because they surprise us with their language. It’s because their language transcends novelty by expressing verifiable human emotion. In doing so, the poems reconcile our failures—the flawed bodies, cramped apartments, guttering cars—to the need for a sense of humor with which, if we try, we can sometimes approach them. It’s a process of atonement quite different, though no less valid, than Jorie Graham’s.

Sometimes Rivard is so tuned in to the language of the tragically hip that it overtakes him, as in the first half of the title poem:
Sweet & lowdown,

you do
have a tongue
on you tho,

and it’s nice, what it’s doing
what it’s done too
to that popsicle stick
it’s licking.

But what it said earlier,
it hurt,

I can’t remember the words
exactly,
but they hurt,
and had
on the undercasing of their circuitry
the phrase
“patent pending”
stamped in dark blue ink.

The diction is pure jazz—amplified by the ampersand and shorthand “tho”—until it shifts midsentence into the sterile language of business electronics. We’re presumably supposed to read this as an abortive or alienating shift in the speaker’s thoughts, but it comes too easily and rings a little false, as if Rivard had created the first voice merely in order to distort it with the second. When the poem continues, “[y]ou hurt all manner of beings alive, / without knowing, // as a wind would / descending out of a storm cloud,” we’re presented with another voice, barren and omniscient, like something out of *Four Quartets*.

Rivard also occasionally falls under the long shadow of John Ashbery, as evidenced in “We Either Do or Don’t”: “And the dominoes the laughing sisters / threw far across the grass / have been stolen now by rooks. // So don’t speak too soon of acceptance. // That the sun stands apart / from all that it abuts, / unwilling to judge it, / may be our only real hope.” The governing structure here is non sequitur. But the vice is not so much in lacking logic—which many good poems do—as in following that lack with lines that seem to be selling us an
ersatz emotional urgency. Of what are we being persuaded here? Racial tolerance? Nature’s indifference to human ambition? The poem won’t tell us. The most compelling work in Sugartown is ultimately that which manages to find an equilibrium between the glitz of modern satire and the sobering stillness of reflection. Similarly, Rivard’s funhouse language is strongest in those moments when the trapdoors and false ceilings open to reveal, quite unexpectedly, some image whose strangeness is inseparable from its poignance: “And in the cages by the man’s head / the vulnerable & tired are asleep now too— / … —vexed birds, / the illiterate and beshitted messengers of the rolled-up / slipstream of days.”

III

The satisfying thing about reading a new and selected edition is that the end of the book leaves off right where it began, so that you feel as if you’ve come full circle. Unfortunately, this satisfaction is one of the few that David Wojahn’s newest collection reliably offers, for while it includes some excellent poems, especially in the early books, it is also evidence of a poetic voice that has been hardened, but not improved, by the fact of a violent world.

Most of the new work in For the Poltergeists: New Poems is eclipsed by Wojahn’s frustration at the current president. “Board Book & the Costume of a Whooping Crane,” for example, finds him marveling at his infant son’s intelligence but then getting distracted and angered by the TV: “The President’s rodent eye pulses out from CNN, darting & glazed, / squinting for the next thing // to lift to the mouth, for he must eat & eat …” A few pages later, he’s in a hospital room with his now feverish son, while the TV plays “a Bush campaign ad / Air Force One soaring down from the clouds // Like the opening of Triumph of the Will, the ferret face in slow dissolve” (“Dithyramb and Lamentation”). In these first thirty pages or so, President Bush proves to be a sharp thorn in Wojahn’s side, so much so that the language seems to unravel and go slack. The directness of these attacks ends up limiting their power—are n’t the most lasting polemical works usually those that suppress the villain’s name?

Given this taste of Wojahn’s latest work, it is a joy to finally read his earliest. The poems of Icehouse Lights and Glassworks, his first two books, are understated and precise, concerned mostly with private memories and written in quietly assertive phrases. Here is part I of “Glaucoma”: 
There’s an olive grove inside the fence that circles the home for the blind. I drive each day past the gate where they come to the crosswalk in mismatched couples, having one great thing in common. I’m braked, the motor off, making up names. There’s sightless Elena leaning on the stoplight, twelve-year-old Samuel gripping her wrist. Redhead Anya drops her cane to the curb, stops the traffic as she searches. I always picture their dorms at night. Roommates, Anya and Elena drink wine after lights-out. The gray, forbidden cat nudges their knees for food. Elena pours too much milk, filling the bowl from fingertip to knuckle.

Wojahn’s attention here is on depth, not breadth, of scope. His observations are painfully deliberate: as the speaker himself is tested for glaucoma, his interest in others’ blindness becomes a vision of his own future, as if he were rehearsing for an inescapable role. Almost every poem in *Icehouse Lights* takes its principal subject from the mundane—a neighbor bringing vegetables, the photograph of an aunt—and it is frequently through the mundane that Wojahn seems able to produce his best images and his most exacting language.

Curiously, some of these poems also capture the political relevance that the new poems contort themselves so fiercely to achieve. The circumference of *Glassworks* includes both a World War II-era POW camp (“Beyond the prison compound’s barbed / wire mesh, twenty yards away, my father / in his corporal’s stripes sips sick- / sweet grappa …”) and the imprisonment of Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet (who “cups his hand around / the single candle he’s been issued this week”). There’s a sharp pathos in lines like these that makes their context that much more immediate; we’re not observers here, but uncomfortable participants, and the poet’s voice seems just as uncomfortable, just as torn between dutifully recording the conflict and averting his eyes.
The poems of *Mystery Train* form a kind of musical/historical interlude that seems, at times, a microcosm of Wojahn’s entire oeuvre. The selections from the title sequence are snapshots of small, often fictional moments in the history of rock music—“Woody Guthrie Visited by Bob Dylan: Brooklyn State Hospital, New York, 1961,” for example, or “Delmore Schwartz at the First Performance of the Velvet Underground, New York, 1966”—moments that chronicle the evolution of rock music from its roots in folk and blues to the drug-addled frenzies of the late 60’s. Eventually, the musicians are not so much performers as they are highly visible bystanders, witnesses to a world where commercials, violence, and the commercialization of violence are all increasingly hard to ignore. By the time the poems reach 1987, Ted Turner is colorizing *Hard Day’s Night*, John Lennon’s assassination is reenacted in wax museums, and whatever innocence rock had in the 50’s has vanished for good.

The last three books—*Late Empire*, *The Falling Hour*, and *Spirit Cabinet*—begin to indicate that Wojahn’s poetic vision has become one of darkness. Their poems are frustrated, earnest, clearly disturbed by the events of the last fifty years. “The First Six Seals” is a case study of the failure of twentieth century religion; “Homage to Ryszard Kapuscinski” describes a scene in which the fanatical mourners at the Ayatollah Khomeini’s funeral “are one / Devouring Alpha and Omega, each face a frame / In a film with a cast of billions. The future belongs to Them.” (This last line is an ironic reply to Kapuscinski’s lament that “Only the past belongs to us.”) By the time we reach *Spirit Cabinet*, Wojahn is marrying environmental destruction and religious fervor—“consider God, now incarnate as Himself, / God-of-Pillar-of-Smoke-from-Heaven-DDT”—as if he were stumping for Greenpeace (“Poison, 1959”).

This is really too bad. Good political poetry is hard to find, a fact that should make us more eager to find the people who can write it. But the strongest poems in these last three books are once again private, as in “White Lanterns” or “The Shades,” a sequence that revisits the life and death of Wojahn’s father. He’s somehow more invested in these poems, more in control, even at his most experimental:

*My wordless father in a basement a rifle in his mouth*
*My father wordless in a basement a rifle in his mouth*
My father a rifle in his mouth
wordless in a basement

A rifle in his mouth my father wordless in a basement

The repetition, frank and relentless, seems the son’s only way of articulating this event. There is no blame here, only confusion and the desire to speak, as if the right combination of words might make sense of the scene they’re describing. The Falling Hour especially is proof that the poet, when he wants to, can capture the failures of the world much more effectively in his ruminations on sickness and death, as in “Oracle,” an elegy for Raymond Carver, or “Tractate for Doctor Tourette,” a moving homage to Carolyn Forche’s “The Colonel.” Much as Wojahn clearly wants us to know that he is relevant, the most relevant poems in this new collection are those that first engage us with their language before raising the curtain on our collective guilt.

IV

The blurbs on the back of Christian Wiman’s second collection mention Frost twice and Yeats once, which seems to suggest that Wiman will be channeling Frost twice as much. This turns out to be partially true, since Hard Night is built around three long, narrative poems that do in fact recall Frost’s long poems—those that always seem to go unread in favor of his shorter ones. I hope that this neglect will not be the case with Hard Night, because it is generally the longer poems that impress: one of this book’s more obvious strengths is its ability to create complex characters—and equally complex relationships—within the impatient space of a lyrical narrative.

The three long poems—“Sweet Nothing,” “The Ice Storm,” and “Being Serious”—owe their success partly to a diction as sparse and self-demanding, sometimes, as Geoffrey Hill’s or Anthony Hecht’s. Here is the opening of the first poem:

Built or torn away?
All I know is noise
of wood and workmen
woke me this morning
and for an hour or more
I’ve drowsed between
my body and next door . . .
This is the sort of seemingly effortless beginning that takes hours to compose: the lulling trimeter of the first two lines that picks up again in lines five and seven; the thick, lazy slant rhymes that mirror the speaker’s torpor; the sleepy “o” and “w” woven seamlessly into every phrase. As the poem continues, the narrative broadens; we’re shown “the moldy keeps / and closes of Suffolk, / cathedraled Cambridge, / Rotterdam and Rome,” and, a few pages later, “Burkina Faso, / that’s what I dreamed of, / a border that was nothing / but a line in the sand.” The diction reflects the shifts accordingly, becoming more dully elegant in Europe, more earthbound in West Africa. Something of the pilgrim emerges in these lines, a seasoned voice that’s more than the sum of its parts.

If Wiman’s first long poem is an exploration of geographical limits, his second, “The Ice Storm,” is a study of human ones:

Eva’s hours have nearer ends.
She heats the little disk the cat sleeps on;
chips, until her hands are gone,
the glaze off all the feeders for the birds;
then writes two friends
to thank them for the birthday chocolates they’ve sent.
The word alone makes her stomach burn.

These lines address themselves to us, to the slow accretion of habits and rituals that characterize our lives. And while many poets would be happy just maintaining the wilted modesty that Wiman creates here, “The Ice Storm” continually grows, collecting details from the marriages of William Gladstone and Gustav Mahler and developing them as historical counterpoints to the pale suburban drudgery of the Great American Old Couple, where Eva, the aging wife, serves “Sweet pickles and white bread” to a husband “so palsied now / he can’t keep his cocktails quiet.” This is the poet at his best, giving himself the space to address a range of human subjects and enough time to afford his observations a coherent structure. He’s stopped trying to channel Frost and has turned instead to the pithy satire of Philip Larkin.

This satire starts to overstep itself in “Being Serious,” a patchwork biography (occasionally reminiscent of Anne Carson’s “Autobiography of Red”) in which a man named Serious lives and dies amid the fatally self-reflective whirlpool that his name implies. In one scene, a schoolboy
Serious “Packs up his lunchbox, his dignity, / And his copy of Sartre” after telling his classmates of their mortality; in another, “Serious has a date with Doom, / . . . / Who always wants whatever Serious wants / And always agrees with what he has to say.” It’s certainly clever, but Wiman has already shown us that he doesn’t really need to be clever. The most enjoyable moments in this poem are those that try, in fact, to be Serious, and that perceive the poem’s subject as a human being rather than a human allegory. That, in fact, is the beauty of “The Ice Storm”: its characters are completely unaware of the roles they’re playing, and in their unawareness they remind us of ourselves. Through them, Wiman acknowledges and describes our individual failings but does not attempt to solve them—a tacit admission, perhaps, that coming to terms with guilt is less an intellectual matter than it is a private one. And Hard Night, like its melancholy anti-hero, thus seems most commendable when it’s not gazing at itself.

Wiman is also capable of demonstrating a hypnotic musicality, and not just in the long poems; “Reading Herodotus” shows us a vision of ancient Rome as sonorous as it is cruel:

They are gone now, swirled
in the dark earth with the ones who,
seeing their slaves go mad, killed them,
who are themselves gone, their bones
partaking of the same silence in which lie
all the dog-headed men of the mountains. . .

Here, as elsewhere, is a palpable tension between the meaning of the lines and their beauty. Wholesale slavery, perversion ... History eventually shrugs its shoulders and turns away (though the facts do not disappear). Wiman is adept at pointing out these wrongs, but he is also extremely conscious of how they confer irony to the notion of poems as songs: what better way to represent Rome than in its simultaneous love of beauty and brutality?

The few disappointing moments in Hard Night usually occur within the short poems—those that often eschew the concrete in favor of misty concepts like transparence or permeability. Once-grounded objects begin to lose themselves: throughout the book’s first half, not only do “children become their cries,” but “crows become the light”
and “the ball becomes the air” in an alchemy of abstraction that’s fun to
conceptualize but frustratingly difficult to see.

The problem may simply be that Wiman slightly overvalues the
imagistic force that words such as “darkness” or “shadow,” lacking
enough visible context, can truly carry, leaving his readers wondering
what they just read and whether it was showing them anything at all.
The first three stanzas of the title poem show us that Wiman knows he’s
taking this risk and that he’s not entirely sure it works:

What words or harder gift
does the light require of me
carving from the dark
this difficult tree?

What place or farther peace
do I almost see
emerging from the night
and heart of me?

The sky whitens, goes on and on.
Fields wrinkle into rows
of cotton, go on and on.
Night like a fling of crows
disperses and is gone.

That third stanza almost feels like the beginning of a new poem,
one in which the poet has found a way to illustrate his question of
almost-sight without making the illustration self-defeating. Wiman is
already a skilled manipulator of form and meter, and when he applies
his technique to dissecting the prosaic details of our contemporary
world, the narratives are far less prosaic than those gauzy distichs on
darkness. On the contrary: they’re downright illuminating.

V

As its title implies, Brian Barker’s _The Animal Gospels_ is intermittently
concerned with giving voices to animals—most of them four-footed,
though “Mockingbird Gospel” and “Crow Gospel Coming Down
from the Mountain” extend the privilege to birds as well. Barker is not
merely a ventriloquist, though. Nor should his canon of creatures lead
us to believe he’s trying to reinvent paradise; the book opens, after all,
with the long, fragmented poem “Flood.” The farther one reads into *The Animal Gospels* (and it doesn’t take long—the author has culled his debut collection to only seventeen poems in fewer than eighty pages), the more one finds that his anthropomorphism is little more than a “Rosebud”-style gimcrack, behind which he can explore the rural decay of the American South and its twin legacies of hospitality and racism.

The poet’s interest in the lives of small towns is thoroughly reminiscent of Richard Hugo, but the early work of Philip Levine is also here, especially in the oracular voice of “Guinea Pig Gospel”: “Out of mildewed files, out of charts / burnt by the blind god of Indifference and Mistakes, / out of a tainted petri dish and a drawer strewn with syringes, I rise tonight. . . .” The speaker, as it turns out, is entirely human, a black man living in the rural South, and only a guinea pig in the sense that he was subject to unregulated medical testing by the U.S. government. His gospel is news, all right, though it’s anything but good.

The social significance of Barker’s animals seems to grow with each page. “Crow Gospel Coming down from the Mountain,” arguably the most ambitious poem in the collection, pieces together childhood memories of the neighborhood Ku Klux Klan and the more subtle racism of the poet’s own relatives. In it, the crows are the only witnesses to the murder of a local black man. The muskrats of “Muskrat Gospel,” conversely, are trapped at a creek and eaten by a young man left destitute by the closing of local coal mines and lumber mills. Both human and animal are victims, but in the end it is the young man—later revealed to be the poet’s grandfather—whose suffering matters most.

But the compelling thing isn’t that Barker uses his mammals and birds as vehicles of human failure. Rather, it’s that he so often manages to do this without getting sucked into the yawning thematic vortex of the metaphor itself. “Muskrat Gospel” ends, for instance, on a strange but gentle note:

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let me believe it when I see you
fall again, laddering over black branches

into the creek, ocean bound, blood bound,
sliding past where everything
bright-eyed and furred dreams in the dark, and grief
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lifts weightlessly from the backs
of the dying, wafting up like a familiar perfume.

The distinction between human and non-human—furred muskrat, dying grandfather—has dissolved, but it almost seems like the words and sounds themselves are making the dissolution possible. When Barker can make this relationship work, he’s a true delight to read. Interestingly, the lines in which he clearly wants to delight you are those that most often fail to do so. Displays of emotional vulnerability (“I could lie here with you forever”) or nostalgia (“Once, when I was sixteen and death didn’t exist, / When it didn’t follow me as it does now”) tend to crack under the pressure of their own expectations.

This is, in the end, a hopeful book. And Barker, perhaps sensing the weakness of the above lines, is usually subtle enough to disguise that hope behind a veil of disappointment and anger at the way his country treats its rural poor. The jacket flap gushes that the Gospels contain “not a single note of irony,” but that’s not exactly true. It should strike us as profoundly ironic, if it does not already, that the South has historically been either an Eden or a Hell on Earth, depending on what color you were. Hence the ambivalent tribute, in “The Trees of the South,” to “the sweet gum in Selma / battered by shotgun blasts,” and “the cottonwood somewhere outside Charleston / with a foot of rotted rope still dangling / from a branch.” Barker is rightly unwilling to shy away from the South’s demons, but he faces them as a witness and not a judge. Hence his determination, near the end of the book, to “conjure happiness out of spindrift and salt air, / Out of wind, out of blown sand, out of the frail cries of / the sparrows...” It is, perhaps, because of their frailty that non-human animals seem such unblemished sources of comfort.

A purely innocent voice would not recognize our capacity for evil. A purely cynical one would talk of nothing else, and a fearful one would simply be silent. The Animal Gospels falls somewhere between. There is judgment here, but (as in Graham’s Overlord) it is almost always turned inward. To judge one’s past fairly, then, is to first acknowledge that one has already found some sort of redemption as an individual. It is to Barker’s credit that he seeks it in the language of the poem itself.