

Donald Revell, *The Bitter Withy*. Farmington, Maine: Alice James Books, 2009. 61pp. \$15.95

At a recent reading from *The Bitter Withy*, Donald Revell read “Can’t Stand It,” which begins:

I hear the elephant music
Of the playground’s rusted swings, and up,
Up higher, then down again,
Happy children take the sound.

No snakes can read.
Walking across the ocean,
Walking on flowers nowhere to be seen,
I walk on gold.

When he read the line “No snakes can read,” the audience laughed at the non sequitur and Revell smiled winningly. And though it is certainly a non sequitur, the allusion to Eden, following a playground scene, is instructive: *The Bitter Withy* is focused precisely on linking the material to the metaphysical, the quotidian to the eternal. In “Can’t Stand It,” Revell grants, “A diamond is a diamond. / A cloud is a cloud that looks like one,” but insists, too, that Heaven is actual, a place where the rusty swings of the playground are transfigured so that they “make no sound.” In “Lissen,” conversely, there are sounds only the dead can hear:

There is a sound in birdsong
Just before the song,
And you can hear it,
Though only a few,
And those are reflected on lake water
 like beautiful ghosts
Always just at sunrise,
Do.

Tell the truth exactly, it will make
 no sense.

The title’s place name is a pun on “listen,” one that extends to “no sense.” The “truth,” the miraculous, will not square with our senses. Such sentiment is peppered throughout *The Bitter Withy*, sometimes as plainly as in the statement, “What I need / Is not to look at all” (“Little Bees”), and in the strange and fine poem, “Drought”:

Eyesight is nobody.
Perspective dies before it lives,
And it lives a long time after death

Like birdsong.

When I die, I will begin to hear
The higher frequency...

This skepticism of sense data brings Revell, as ever, very close to Blake: “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.” These poems do not deny materiality; they insist that everything transcends materiality, that everything that lives is holy.

To that end, Revell purchases a good deal of stock in backyard flora and fauna. Flowers and trees, bugs, birds, rabbits, dogs, predators and prey are all “parallel animals,” figures of our shared vulnerability to death and of our animal impulse toward destruction, and all holy (as in the poem “Nemesis”). In “Against This Quiet,” a moving elegy for the poet’s mother that includes phrases from John Ashbery’s “Clepsydra,” Revell imagines that a dreaming dog—at once a predator and quite literally holy—is chasing a lizard:

In the long way back out of sadness,
In new dark passages,
He accepts miter and tonsure.
That’s not right.
The dog’s really killed him.

The dog is just as able to accept miter and tonsure as we, and he is as able to kill and be killed. His experience is no different, his blessings and curses no different. This is the argument of *The Bitter Withy*, and if we accept the premise that every animal’s experience on this earth is the same, and add to it a sort of Gnostic insistence that everything contains a soul, the connection between the everyday and the eternal is hard to gainsay.

Visionary logic like this is about as far thematically from the New York School as Revell’s current home, Las Vegas, is from his Bronx birthplace. But the technique—the playfulness with language, the sharp veering, image to image, idea to idea—certainly marks him as an heir to that group of poets. Meanwhile, Revell professes to be a Christian, and his speakers yearn toward a Christian heaven, which makes him one of very few contemporary poets dealing seriously in any way with Christianity. That fact alone makes Revell’s poetry interesting: a heretical New York Schooler who is also a heretical Christian acknowledges his saints thusly (in a poem, “Crickets,” dedicated to the memory of Barbara Guest):

Saint William Blake, pray for me;
Saint Rimbaud, pray for me;
Saint Antonin Artaud, burn
New eyes into my head
With a cigarette end.
Otherwise,
I am toys
Lost on the polar ice.

The prominence of death and Christian iconography in *The Bitter Withy* will not surprise readers familiar with Revell's work. Mortality has been a prime subject of his poems since his first collection, *From the Abandoned Cities* (1983). And his 2002 collection, *Arcady*, is an extended elegy to his sister. But while the impetus behind *The Bitter Withy* is similarly the death of his mother, the poem "The Rabbits" shows a book far more otherworldly in focus. The poem is an extended musing on Titian's "Virgin of the Rabbit." (There is a detail-within-a-detail reproduction of the painting on the cover of *The Bitter Withy*. It is a cover that somehow fails both as illustration of the poem and as a design. The poet deserves better.) It also continues the contrapuntal nature of Revell's composition, as images are repeated and expanded upon throughout the book. The rabbits appear in "Lay of Smoke," for example: "As if we were rabbits / All that's needed for any heaven / Is death and damage and a ditch." In "The Rabbits" itself, a rabbit watches as the speaker washes dishes and makes coffee, "eyes / Meeting at the kitchen window at sunrise."

Something has driven all the predators from the sky.
[...]
"Make the hawk's wings fold forever."
I cannot.
I can only tell you, although you are past hearing,
Christ's embrace of the woodlands hereabouts
Drove God out of the trees.

The poem invites a comparison between God and a predator, and further invites a distinction between the God of the Old Testament and that of the New. Revell comes down clearly on the side of the New. This continues into the sixth and final section of the poem, titled "The Vision of Saint Eustace." Once a Roman general, the story goes, St. Eustace became a Christian after seeing a vision of Jesus crucified between the antlers of the stag he was hunting. A man, once a predator, makes peace with his prey and becomes a Christian. Revell's speaker yearns for such a conversion, but foregrounds his own fallibility in doing so: "Not even drunkenness or prayer / Takes me the very little way / From murder to white clover."

One gets the sense that *The Bitter Withy* attempts a sort of transubstantiation of figures of domestic life into those of death and the afterworld. The prime example of this is in “Long-Legged Bird,” which begins, “I have a sweet house / Halfway to the top of fires....” The poem borrows its title, the image of the halfway house, and many lines in their entirety from Yeats’s “Lapis Lazuli.” In “Long-Legged Bird,” the house becomes both a figure of home, and of a Limbo, a place from which Revell can look below upon the ultimate tragedy, and above see his dead restored to innocence: “My mother as a baby, my father a cowboy, / My sister, finally, after so much heartbreak, / A girl.”

If “Lapis Lazuli” is centered on art’s ability to transcend tragedy, “Long-Legged Bird” identifies the means by which this transcendence is managed on the human level: forgiveness. The ultimate figure of forgiveness is introduced in section IV with the rhetorical: “When did our sweet Jesus / Become the purview and bad pretext of jailers? / How did loving kindness / Come to devastate the world with wars?” Revell knows very well the answers to these questions. Such lines are a gambit: they risk being dismissed as naïve. Yet by enacting naïveté, they acknowledge that it is a prime quality required of innocence, the desire to do no harm, which is itself required if one desires conversion. In *The Bitter Withy*, Revell sincerely grapples with such conversion. Sincerity is risky. In an age that seems averse to that risk, these poems are welcome company.

Tim Erickson

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B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates*. New York: New Directions, 2009. 176pp. \$24.95

Like the work of his idols, Joyce and Beckett, B.S. Johnson’s most notable novel, *The Unfortunates*, first published in England in 1969 and re-released by New Directions in 2009, experiments with form in order to render episodes from daily life. Published as twenty-seven unbound (sometimes stapled, sometimes glued) pamphlets ranging in length between one and twelve pages, *The Unfortunates* is collected in a sturdy, laminated box. The pamphlets, aside from two labeled “First” and “Last,” can be read in any order.

A thinly disguised *roman à clef*, *The Unfortunates*, like *Ulysses*, takes place on a single day. It is comprised of a series of recollections occasioned by the narrator’s trip to Nottingham to cover a rather underwhelming football match; an aspiring writer himself, the narrator is trying to make some extra money as a hack sports journalist. Though the events of his trip are seemingly of little note—a watery bowl of oxtail soup is consumed, a bus is