

John Wilkinson, *Proud Flesh*. 1986. Cambridge: Salt, 2005. 84pp.
\$14.95

John Wilkinson, *Lake Shore Drive*. Cambridge: Salt, 2006. 153pp.
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Over the past three decades John Wilkinson has quietly established himself as one of England's most important poets. These two collections bookend twenty years of Wilkinson's writing, a consistently sardonic—often outrightly acerbic—series of verse interventions delivered with a remarkable angularity of style.

"Proud flesh," the shorter *OED* tells us, is "overgrown flesh arising from excessive granulation upon, or around the edge of, a healing wound." The poems of *Proud Flesh* are, appropriately, organic excrescences, verbal structures in response to physical trauma. The trauma, for the most part, involves one of the oldest lyric *topoi*: love. These are love poems, Wilkinson's strenuous, challenging, and often fruitfully disgusting reimagining of spiritual and erotic affection.

Wilkinson takes as axiomatic that the tradition of the love lyric has reached a point of exhaustion or impasse. He does not hesitate to graphically demonstrate how the tropes of love poetry reduce to metaphors, not of the poet's spirit, but of his body:

Every metaphor sounds the same
in its sepia, dry blood melancholy

but if you cry, it drips blood
onto the quarry tiles

so you hasten for the authentic
rasp of the next & the next

leaving behind you dying homunculae

That blood-dripping cry evokes Blake's "hapless soldier's sigh," which "runs in blood down palace walls," but here each new attempt at metaphor leaves behind it no more or less than a clot of abandoned sperm, "dying homunculae."

Like no other poetic text I know, *Proud Flesh* captures the extent to which romantic love plays itself out through a creaking and leaky labyrinth of plumbing through which flow blood, mucus, sperm, and whatever evanescent chemicals lubricate the brain's CPU and its nervous peripherals:

Under a mantelpiece my heart
horns pinch: & still born I drown in amniotic fluid.

Proud Flesh is a series of love poems and a clinical examination: Wilkinson does not hesitate to deploy the jawbreaking vocabulary of medical diagnosis, and at points his exploration of love's body becomes as savagely indignant as Swift's or Rochester's. Drawing on his experience as psychiatric nurse, Wilkinson is fascinated with the growth and structuring of the psyche itself, both in classic psychoanalytic terms and within the larger context of the subject's society:

Slender pickings fall to the lap of the foster-child
who chides them into their own spheres, the nuclei
of unshockable plasm, home like everything he touches
will be compered by the memories they create before

dust settles, spawn begins to heave. Is he socially
acceptable? Does he use a knife & fork with facility?
Will he boil his underwear, when living in the world
where prompts are few? Do you rate his speech lucid?

does he spill his life-blood over a phrase, & refuse
to clear up? The quills he flurries from his spine
thread these poor facts of life, draw them out & turn
the loops separately to tap his fluid. Any capsule

of love, any midnight pearl, has had him for a unique
sponsor to its quality, concocting in his parietal
lobe a cool romance. There, for this gaunt clarity
its positive was pressed to a dilapidated back-yard.

This, the first poem of *Proud Flesh*, invites us to read the entire collection as a history of the subject's initiation into society. It reveals an almost Yeatsian longing for sensual and aesthetic stasis, figured here as a "pearl" (the beautiful translucent object the oyster creates in response to physical discomfort) and figured through the rest of the collection as the frozen physical gesture of statuary: "Marble stains with the tears shed for it / Sperm spatters on its thighs."

Twenty years after *Proud Flesh*, the poems of Wilkinson's latest collection *Lake Shore Drive* are perhaps a trifle more accessible; but they remain compacted, challenging, and deeply energetic. Where *Proud Flesh* focused upon the damage inflicted by love, desire, and the regimes of human coupling, *Lake Shore Drive* is obsessed with the whole bloody mess of contemporary culture, from the intractable, agonizing violence of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict:

bonds mature
between emplacements
& holy writ,

between the settlers &
inflated psalms
("Multistorey")

to the burnt offerings of capitalist consumerism:

I like it sweet, I like it whipped, I like it salted,
I like it fresh-churned.
Does the rose bush burnt from pure longing
visited with fire rust,
transfigure in the blaze to the same figure?
The same shall furl & pack fire
into its prolific heads,
& does the blood-red garland
decked in thorns like spurs,

manifest the crowning dream of a virgin
wading through blood—Don't fuck with me:
I want the thick cultivar.
The sentence is delayed hunger.
(“Iphigenia”)

Wilkinson's language—notice the formality of “The same shall furl & pack fire” juxtaposed to the immediacy of “Don't fuck with me,” and the gnomic mystery of “The sentence is delayed hunger”—is altogether his own. His vocabulary turns on a dime between blunt Anglo-Saxon profanity and Latinate jargon. He intensely *works* the meaningful possibilities of English, torquing sentences away from the familiar and deadening.

Lake Shore Drive's four sequences, “Cité Sportif,” “Multistorey,” “Iphigenia,” and “Marram...” (“Marram Riff,” “Marram Grass,” etc.) play intense variations on the theme of human damage, whether physical, psychic, or cultural. These poems are at times almost unbearable in the deprivation they portray or imply, but I keep returning to them, marveling at the strenuous energy of Wilkinson's syntax, the lyrical *music* of his lines, the impacted density of his images, and the constantly renewed surprise of his vocabulary. A bleak repugnancy and fascination that draws me to a poetry whose vivid harshness is matched only by its muscular élan:

gull-shrieks of fury, custom-
crammed between
rubbled minarets & domes,
attend the Eucharistic table shit-splattered.
(“Multistorey”)

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