

## Michael Theune

### SHORT REVIEWS\*

From among a series of voices attempting to explain, and a clamor of voices attempting to define, the condition of being at the end of the millennium come three new voices which at once intelligently handle their lateness while leaning forward into the future with intense and extravagant lyrical styles capable of imaginatively evoking whole worlds.

In “[epithalamion],” *Tea*’s penultimate poem which describes the funeral of a lover who died of AIDS, D. A. Powell writes, “say amen somebody. the pews are hickory-hard I’m sick of sitting.” Although in the book’s preface, Powell writes, “This is not a book about AIDS,” *Tea* is about AIDS to the extent that it is Powell’s brilliantly and frighteningly, wittily and heart-rendingly loud “Amen!” Powell is—after writers such as Thom Gunn and Mark Doty—one of a second wave of poets writing about AIDS; his strength is that he knows this, and he summons a great deal of poetic talent to advance work on the subject. Although *Tea* opens with a series of elegies for past lovers who died of AIDS, Powell makes clear in his preface that this decision was made for structural purposes to show how he rises “out of ashes.” However, those elegies themselves soar from the ash heaps of elegies on the wings of that greatest of all conceits: honesty. Powell does not romanticize his elegies’ subjects; however, nor does he revert to humdrum confession. Powell’s elegies—composed as are all his poems of very long lines created out of short, image- and concept-laden phrases—are striking for their material and their musicality. For one past lover, Powell writes, “nicholas the ridiculous: you will always be 27 and impossible. no more expectations . . . you are no angel you are // repeating the same episodes nick at night. tricky nick. nicholas at halloween a giant tampon.” For another, he writes, “leaking from the socket of his anus: cocytus . . . pooped himself . . . of course nobody loves him. except the few who do.”

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\**Tea*, by D. A. Powell. Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England. \$17.95; *The Little Door Slides Back*, by Jeff Clark. Sun and Moon Press. \$10.95; *Of Piscator*, by Martin Corless-Smith. University of Georgia Press. \$15.95.

*Tea* refashions memories not only of episodes with AIDS but also of personal bodily damage, strained familial relations, the gay community, fashion trends, television shows—one poem, comparing a young but world-weary trick-turner to Batman’s Robin, includes the lines: “down every dark corridor of gotham I seek my next guardian . . . he will believe he is the one hero. I must remember to wince when I feel his fangs”—the club scene and its music. Music is central to Powell’s understanding of his poetic task. Music is not only referred to—in references to spirituals, disco, club beats—but it is also enacted. In one poem, Powell looks through the record collection at a “‘lost companion’ sale,” considering the vicissitudes of memory: “any noise might easily be reduced: a matter of fading // the way the past is actively recaptured: . . . just a soundtrack undergoing reconstruction / *he’s a sinner, he’s a saint* [the mix as product of survival.]” Powell knows that to remain powerful and moving for newer audiences the memory’s music must be recombined, fine-tuned, and turned-up, and Powell literally does this. In *Tea*’s final poem, “[first fugue],” Powell enacts the idea of the mix as survival method, mixing lines from poets such as Shakespeare, O’Hara, Crane, Duncan, and Merrill with lines culled from his own poems from earlier in the book. The result is strange and stunning, and, like the book as a whole, is a rare combination of arrangement and range.

If, as its preface claims, *Tea* tries to honor the dead “in the attempt to recapture [and, it must be added, remix] their voices,” then Jeff Clark’s *The Little Door Slides Back* tries to find and maintain its voice, engaging with and fending off outside invaders and influences, most notably voices—Trakl, Desnos, and especially Michaux—which developed in the earlier, tumultuous decades of this century. Clark has a passion for the surreal, but he recognizes that he lives in an era social theorist Jean Baudrillard defines as “after the orgy.” “Lunar Tercets,” the book’s first poem, begins, “Things are not as we would have them be. / The moon is not a yellow sow / hung from a meat hook // on a drab shed wall: it is a moon.” However, after a series of such corrections, the surreal, imaginative possibilities win over the pedantic tautologies. Clark claims his space, and the result is both highly original and highly stylized: a kind of pulp poetry, a poetry noir, built of wharves, opium dens, bordellos, and backrooms and populated with burnt-out lounge-singers, pathetic sadists, and a host of other minor demons. In “My Interior” Clark writes, “A snare drum, a pump, the rubble pile of a palace. / Siamese traps, and pink cocktail umbrellas for the blowsy ones who tramp the boulevards / and blue highways

of my interior, tapping the asphalt / with their parasol-tips . . . tipping their fedoras to show their holes.”

Like Michaux, Clark creates an interior populated with a host of monstrosities to give expressions to inner states; however, Clark clutters—penetrating, compromising, *risking*—his interior with more external stuff—from campy items of secondhand stores to Cold War high-tech (satellites abound). Clark’s interior is very much the product of his exterior engagement with the detritus of (now *very*) late capitalism. As Clark notes in his scary and ironic autobiography, “Some Information about Twenty-Three Years of Existence” (a direct borrowing from Michaux’s “Some Information about Fifty-Nine Years of Existence”), “Autodialogues begin . . . April: receiving, as if in ear-phones, someone else’s thinking.”

Not feeling the pressure to counter a psychoanalytic master-narrative as Michaux’s generally concrete and complete poems did, Clark’s poems are free to be—and are—evasive and allusive, offering only glimpses, but glimpses which are typically glorious. Clark’s language is constantly at the pitch of song and his images have the concision of aphorism; Clark sums up birth with “[t]axied through the rumblechambers” and encapsulates adolescence with “[s]waying outside make-out closets.” Clark’s elusiveness is based on the firm knowledge that the last thing one wants to do at a peepshow is stay too long; his fragmented and elliptical, flashy and crepuscular poems tease and seduce.

The poems of Martin Corless-Smith’s *Of Piscator* reach back further than the twentieth century for their origins. Joining to the common parlance words and structures from Old and Middle English, rhythms from earlier, guardian spirits—John Clare and Christopher Smart are invoked at the beginning of the book’s final section, “To Absent Minister”—shards from Psalters, and images from massive, yellowed bestiaries, Corless-Smith’s poems are aggregates made from the multifarious strata of English language and history, old relics turned up in a field, twisted seashells deposited by some primordial sea far inland. *Of Piscator*’s first section, “Songs,” opens with the fragment: “maundering child / cant hear the ouzel / ou la mavis sweet / who sing the matitudinal.” But these poems are far from outdated; in making simultaneous the insights and tendencies of the history of a language, Corless-Smith’s poems uncover word-formations capable still of making magic or, if held closely to the ear, strange music. The book ends, “A great tree is down / its under hangs a hundred up / rip poked a great root ripped / its dripping atoms bloodied to the satellite / oof oof it is certain.”

Although Corless-Smith's main concern seems to be a testing of the strength of language fused through great strain, his experiment seems anything but merely academic. The ostensible subject of Corless-Smith's poems is the continued connection of the human voice and the natural world. However, because this connection has been worn away by industrialization and idealized away by nature poetry, Corless-Smith's only recourse is to call up the connection through violence. For all our civilization, Corless-Smith reminds us, we still live off the flesh of other animals: "I see them eat the food / they chew the animal / I see them not as geese or ducks / but bled and slaughtering / I see them as a winter feast / inside the steaming hulk of house / outside the white distress of breathless gas. . . ." For all our equality, we still depend on laboring masses, and those masses—soldiers, farmhands, peasants, and prostitutes—are all at risk from physical violence caused by their labor: "as the tractor overturn / near she come to never being so." For all our scientific knowledge, we are still subject to death and dependent upon other subjects: "My love is to a else that is / might cease."

These poems are solid and resistant. Earth still clings to them. But this can only be expected when an author takes on the task of reminding the adult mind of the necessity, even the primacy, of the bodily, the guttural, the cry, the coo, the infant's babble, the prayer-like lullaby. Though the poems in *Of Piscator* are rarely beautiful, almost all smoulder with hidden fire, and when they do shine, they deeply shine:

Sounded along dove dōve  
from ark  
dark cove of grounded boat hull bloated  
on the Sound a whale drowned  
a creosote organ room happening  
on a stake of rock—rag sail flap  
like one wing—oar gone, rudder facing home  
where is no home. We come to grief  
here is one green leaf.

By writing works which know and pay homage to and employ the past, Powell, Clark, and Corless-Smith successfully establish themselves in the present, in a position to refashion—and at moments remaster—language to

match this era, to give different, convincing responses to the postmodern mood, to allow for orientations at once careful and new:

Corless-Smith: “[T]he way to human now is / to the next.”

Clark: “I had fears to write you—*fears*—imagining your address to be empty, or your body.”

Powell: “I set off from the dying place. these presents are my feet.”