

## **Controlled Hallucinations**

John Sibley Williams. FutureCycle Press: Hayesville, North Carolina. 2013.

John Sibley William's poems ruminate. Though they pare away language, you cannot read them quickly. They twist and contradict and surprise, if not on every line, from line to line and stanza to stanza.

As well, Williams developed with colleagues a literary movement called Inflectionism, which he demonstrates in these poems. When you read these verses, you know his poems aren't anything you've seen before. This movement asks to "respect both the poet and the reader, both the words and interpretation."

Take "XXVII" in this collection, which begins with "Consider the sea a skewed mirror / and churning your uncertain limbs through the waves/an attempt to untangle light." The reader is given enough imagery to make sense of moving water, yet to challenge us with whom or what is attempting to untangle light and why. And still it makes poetic sense.

There is a darkness here, a poet's path to get to truth. "The comforting density of bone and future / mean little here. / The world is too light / to trouble with tomorrow, / too buoyant to sink with you."

Then comes a challenge in the next two stanzas: "So bring the background forward. / Kick up ripples and silt through that secret face. / Distort it into accuracy. // Where your faces finally meet/you will float without need for movement, / as in the Dead Sea/but without the need for salt. / Water can be your single taut thread-- / reflecting." Here is Williams forcing the reader to fill in the generous white space he has given in order for the logical contradictions to make sense.

Every word has purpose, yet we must each struggle to find out what the words mean. This is not cleverness for its own sake, it's a comfort, a loving push, as in the last stanza. "Later there will be plenty of time / to learn to walk."

We will no doubt be seeing Williams more on the literary landscape. He has published work in many chapbooks and in literary journals across the country. With a style sleek and spare, he also offers thoughtful, musical, and generous verse to gently challenge the reader to take charge of all of poetry.

*--Mary Jane Ryals*

## **The Button Collector**

ELIZABETH JENNINGS. PAGESPRING PUBLISHING: CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA. 2013.

What's your experience with buttons? I think of shirts. Isn't most clothing these days fastened with velcro or zippers? Buttons in all shapes and sizes paint an image of old-fashion garments. And yet

writer Elizabeth Jennings offers them as a metaphor. Buttons in her book represent the ties that hold members of a family together.

Jennings has authored a collection of short stories. These vignettes tumble out of a container of buttons that her central character, Caroline, inherited from her mother, Emma. The stories are told by individuals in one family and each one reveals insights into that person's strengths and foibles. These traits reveal connections, some happy and some implying regrets and frustrations. Each tale revolves around relationships between Caroline, her mother, brother, Hank, cousin, Gail and other relatives.

The book begins when Caroline visits a flea market. At one booth she discovers a button display with jars and boxes filled with the items: "A jar of ochre orange merged into lemon yellow, forest greens led to blues and purples-- row upon row rising toward the sky, gleaming like a dragon's hoard."

The experience triggers memories of her own button jar hidden in a bookcase at home. When she finds the jar in the study, she tips it and buttons of all types and colors cascade across the desk. Caroline recollects that her favorites belonged to other people.

*The Button Collector* spans a period of nearly three decades beginning in 1966 and moving through the years until 1996. Caroline spies a big turquoise button, which brings back thoughts of a beach trip to outer banks of North Carolina in 1966. This piece is titled "Kitty Hawk."

The protagonist recalls photos of the family at the beach. She was only two years old. Her mother wore a turquoise beach cover up in one of the pictures, so the button came from that wrap. Her mother, Emma, enjoys her niece, Gail, and tries to imagine that her own tomboyish daughter, Caroline, will become more like her cousin as she grows older: "Caroline knocked over the garbage twice and got a knife out of the kitchen drawer...I don't remember Hank being so active or LOUD. It will be nice when she's a little older and wants to play dress-up and have tea parties..."

Through the years in the vignettes we see Gail enjoying Emma's affection. Gradually Caroline finds herself resenting her cousin. She begins to describe her anger and frustrations, as her wolves. These haunt her throughout the book.

"Kitty Hawk" ends with a family tragedy. Jennings uses the same title again at the end of her book. This time she adds a "two," and the year is 1996. A purple button marks the chapter. Again it represents her mother's cover up. It's the first family beach trip in many, many years. Her mother is suffering from cancer, so again we have a tragic note. But this time Emma strives to give something to each family member. She eyes her button collection, contemplates giving it to Caroline, but thinks Gail might care for it more. Caroline has never been the domestic type: "Emma let a handful of buttons pour through her fingers, feeling their coolness caress her skin. Her mind drifted freely in and out of the past, and she felt a strong sense of calm. Here in the daylight, she knew that the answer would come to her in time."

The author takes the reader into the lives of her characters. She writes with clarity, and her descriptive passages are filled with poetic images: "...besides the sound of the ticking clock, is a vague feeling of unease, a restless stirring of feelings—like wolves pawing and scratching at the edge of my mind. I can almost see them lifting their noses, trying to find a scent of weakness, an angle of attack. The

heaviness of night leaves me more vulnerable to them, and I can't help but shiver as I try to shut them out.”

*The Button Collector* doesn't end with a final chapter that pulls all the parts together. It does, however, leave the reader with the prospect that the central character, Caroline, has used the memories inspired by an inherited collection to resolve her feelings of resentment and enhance her understanding of her place within the family structure.

--Margaret Howard Trammell

## **Listen to the Landscape**

LINDA NEMEC FOSTER & DIANNE CARROLL BURDICK . WM. B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING:  
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN. 2006.

*Listen to the Landscape* is a collection of haiku written by Linda Neme Foster and illustrated by the landscape images provided by Dianne Carroll Burdick. The titled haiku are formatted in traditional 5-7-5 lines and are a way to engage with the photographs that accompany them.

If I were to give a one word description of the book, that word would be “muted.” The photographed landscapes are muted because of the artistic process Burdick has chosen: as she explains at the end of the book, Burdick photographed the landscapes using black and white film, printed the images, treated the paper “with an oil-based solvent “(58), then colored the images with colored pencils. The result is gauzy, grayed colors, with an occasional richness in the oranges, yellows, blues, or greens. The effect is dream-like, and in some photos, oddly two dimensional.

The haiku, too, are muted. They are meditative and personal, one woman’s response to the land. Foster generally presents quiet, restful and, yes, dream-like commentary. For example, this haiku accompanies a dimly lit photograph, colored in shades of turquoise, green, violet, and raw sienna, of a lake shore with a view of a tiny island covered with trees:

The Dream of Trees  
To walk like the scarves  
Of clouds, to abandon land  
And never return. (26)

Some of the haiku are a touch sentimental: “Define bare trees—faith, / And the smallest of leaves—hope . . .” (6), and some really need their titles to complete their effect: “The Fence: Necklace of landscape / Charting your destination/Home beyond earth, sky” (14). Mostly, though, the brief commentaries of the haiku combine with the occasionally fey landscapes of the colored photos to create a text that evokes and sustains a meditative mood. This book is one to read during the time of the evening called in English romantic poetry “The gloaming,” when the sun has completely set but all the light has not yet left the sky. It is a good book for making a transition into a quiet mental space.

-- Melanie A. Rawls

## **The Tragedy of Fidel Castro**

JOAO CERQUEIRA. RIVER GROVE BOOKS: AUSTIN, TEXAS. 2013.

After the second ring, God answered the phone and heard a woman's anxious voice. "Master, it's me. The war's about to begin."

"Oh, for God's sake!" exclaimed God in exasperation.

And so author Joao Cerqueira opens the prologue to his novel. Some of the major characters here are Fidel Castro, JFK, God, and Jesus. However, Cerqueira only uses the names to represent the issues that he satirizes in his work. These issues, as characters, obviously include fumbling dictators, grasping capitalists and religious figures, who fail to put a stop to the abounding evils of the world. We obviously recognize the names, but yet these guys are completely fictional, according to the author. If this sounds a bit confusing, I can say frankly that it is.

It's difficult to summarize this novel. Bizarre and comical are words that come to mind. The prologue might be considered blasphemous by some or merely satirical by others. It's kind of like Mel Brooks meets Monty Python, but with occasional serious overtones. For example, after the absurdist humor of the prologue, Chapter One turns serious, as a Cuban spy states to JFK: "In my country, the exploiters and the exploited have given way to a classless society where the state acts for the common good" and "In your world, man is alienated from what he produces, transformed into a mere commodity to be bought and sold."

One never knows whether the next segment is going to be funny or go philosophically serious. As the book continues, the plot wanders and the balance between comedy and tragedy is uneven at best.

Mr. Cerqueira grew up in Portugal, where he was always fascinated by the miracle at Fátima in 1917. The children there, who reported their vision of the Virgin Mary, stated that, when she appeared to them, she promised that Russia would be converted to the Immaculate Heart of Mary and that Communism would end soon. So it is that the author introduces a character named Fátima, who converses with God.

She requests that he get involved and stop the war between JFK and Castro. So the escalation occurs, but, guess what, God sends a wary Jesus to referee the mess. However, being that he has committed to not using his supernatural powers, he becomes an observer. But one who does offer some comfort at times to those involved in the fighting.

In another scene, and this is one of my favorites, Fidel Castro dresses in drag: "Nearby, a well-dressed, middle-aged woman (who was, in fact, Fidel Castro in disguise) was shaking herself frenetically." And the author explains: "There were two reasons for this artifice. One was that he wanted to assess the impact of Capitalist entertainments upon the revolution. The other was that he also wanted to enjoy himself without giving his enemies reasons to scoff."

I'd call it theatre of the absurd. Original, yes, but I had trouble following the author's narrative. Although some readers might describe the novel as a piece of magical realism, I can't say that I'd use that term. While Cerqueria is certainly imaginative in the extreme, I find this work too bizarre and hard to follow. Paragraphs are often long and wordy. Characters aren't just weird. I think silly is a better word. I almost wonder if the book lost something in its translation into English.

However, for the reader who enjoys celestial conversations and quirky philosophy in fiction, this might be a refreshing read.

--Margaret Howard Trammell

### **The Small Blades Hurt**

Erica Dawson, Measure Press: Evansville, Indiana. 2014.

In *The Small Blades Hurt* Erica Dawson's formalism is fresh, striking, and acts as a bulkhead for a collection that is both democratic and personal. This book chronicles an American experience where human nature is filled with collapse and the triumph of sound.

When I read the poems in Dawson's second book, I learn to love rhyme, meter, and form again. These poems are songs and culture, and their power resonates. *Small Blades* exemplifies a formal mastery and a historical and human vulnerability similar to the work of Natasha Trethewey and Elizabeth Alexander.

Dawson's command of formal poetics conducts a book filled with music. The rhyme, form and meter is found in almost every poem. Below is an excerpt from a crown of sonnets about N.A.S.A.'s lunar program:

Where there is space there is no doubt: avoid  
The physics, up the possibilities  
Of failure. Once each atom, so devoid  
Of size, swell with the charging chemistries,  
(And vodka flows) there is no hope. You're screwed:

From space to atoms, the reader is connected, continually, like a loose dog in the woods. Without doubt, our ambitious country is doomed to fail in space as it has on Earth. What lacks in hope has no future.

In *The Small Blades Hurt*, American life is documented through poems that offer a self's quintessential journey through America. The speaker is possessed through music and state-to-state liminality—as Dawson writes about Maryland, Florida, Tennessee, West Virginia, Idaho, Oklahoma, Texas, Tennessee to Ohio.

Specifically, the poem “Speaker's in the Devil's Walking Stick” is illustrative of an index of the contemporary black experience; the singer Al Green's persona and voice permeate all corners of an American shopping mall, but his voice is hidden in the bushes, like the collective voice of blacks in America; it is the silencing that has been all too present in our ignored history. Dawson positions the voice of singer Al Green in what she calls “the bush” to reference slyly the stereotype of the African savage.

Dawson alludes to Langston Hughes in the poems, “I, too, sing America” and the penultimate poem, “Langston Hughes' Grandma Mary Writes a Love Letter to Lewis Leary years after He Dies Fighting at Harper's Ferry.” Like much of Hughes' work, Dawson's work

permeates democracy. “I, Too, sing America” is a subversive re-write of the hanging of Mary Surratt, who was accused of conspiring to assassinate Lincoln, and the first woman executed in the United States. The speaker in the poem relives the experience:

Hanging, doomed men, I’ve got no time for pains,  
Don’t have the ear for her well-known last  
Sentence of *Please, don’t let me fall*. I think  
Hanging will be a death something like classed—  
up auto-asphyxiation: breath, a blink. . . .

This poem, too, revels in the importance of sound and song—the imagery of the hanging joins the words of Surratt becoming skillfully choral.

Additionally, Dawson seems compelled to record a history that has been left without a voice. The epistle poem from Hughes’ grandmother to Lewis Leary, an abolitionist who died at Harper’s Ferry, is a love letter from a woman saddened by death, damning the human condition even as it blends with nature. Dawson also blends poets Hughes and Whitman, as the last two lines read:

Reverie and all the leaves of grass  
So green the small blades hurt.

The epigraph of the book is a quote from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* that prepares the reader for Dawson’s final reevaluation of his lines in this poem.

Consistently, *The Small Blades Hurt* leaves me even more engaged with humanity and nature. Consider these lines:

If I

Could only find the means to watch the world

Implode—its red hot core naked, salt-thick

With blues—and, then, recuperate as if,

Like all of us, it has something to prove.

The small blades *do* hurt. And they sing. Erica Dawson's second book of poetry leads the reader in spirit and memory—traveling with song, rhyme, and meter.

--*Kristine Snodgrass*