

## OUTSIDE AND INSIDE THE CHURCH

Neil Shepard, *This Far From the Source*, Mid-List Press, Minneapolis, 2006  
 Mary Karr, *Sinners Welcome*, Harper-Collins, 2006

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Neil Shepard's *This Far From the Source* is a rare mix of tight lyric immersion and expansive narrative splendor; a blend of edgy meditation and shifting plot points, an acknowledgement of natural endings and of things that don't end yet. Steeped in elemental Vermont, this book is most refreshing for its refusal to offer easy declarations, affirmations or glib assessments of the natural world. Wonder, for example, is undercut by the mortal freight of human passage. Beauty is contained within its own temporary boundaries. Hope is put aside for the luck of harrowing confrontation. Solitude may not lead to salvation, but the poet is bound to the promise of such a quest.

Shepard's style is free verse eloquence and economy that often feels blank verse formal. There's very little that's casual or colloquial about his voice. He aims to win the reader over, not with post-modern non-sequiturs and elliptical diffusion, but rather with pre-modern compression and images wedded to the evidence found in place. As keenly articulate as Shepard is, this poet is drawn to those remote and raw places where language fails to measure, analyze, rearrange or otherwise divide landscape into human parcels. In "Waterfall at Journey's End," the opening poem, he guides us to a time when time is stripped of its power to steer our hunger toward acquisitions:

"This is the place of pre-  
delight, before the light

blinked on in our fore-  
brains and pained us with fore-  
knowing. No, this place

delivers a hiss, a wordless  
rush through gray clefts,  
the high chattering scream

The book's underlying argument is how, as a species, we have radically drifted from any sense of humility and grace toward the planet we inhabit. The price for such evolutionary drift is a exclusionary consciousness, a con-

tinual dis-ease, a sense that, as much as we have failed to shelter the remote places, we've also failed to contact the remote and sustaining places within ourselves. In "My Thesis if Nature's Progress," the poet laments:

"that Rousseau wept and painted  
 scenes of savage greenery,  
 while science praised the progress  
 of our opposable thumb,  
 its blueprints and hammered nails  
 and humans felt afresh the home  
 they'd lost, the one they'd carried  
 on their backs, wherever they wandered,  
 always, everywhere, at home.

People certainly inhabit *This Far From the Source*, but it's the landscape itself that provides the most submerging sense of spiritual renewal and endurance. Not limited to Vermont, Shepard takes us to New Mexico, the Great Plains, Baton Rouge, the Greek islands, Florida, France, Maine and elsewhere. As he gets under the skin of multiple locations, (not as a tourist, but as someone broken from the tour) he offers pleasant echoes of Frost, Whitman and another New England poet, Hayden Carruth. The entire volume is laced with land-based narratives like "Oil Trust," "Sunflower Sutra," and "French Lesson" that make you want to travel, see more, and, while seeing, pry beneath the surface of what we assume to be true.

As an essentially romantic, existential witness to places near and far, Shepard often introduces death just as we might want the sensual adventure of a place to continue. This introduction creates both inward and outward movement in the reader and expands the psychic dimension of several poems including "From the Bridge at Taos," "Corfu," "Teenager:19," and "The Secret Lives of Birds."

"Every Morning" is one of the spacious gems in this collection because it offers a death story that plays like a movie scene with all the elements of suspense, looming danger and unexpected plot twist. The poem gains its startling momentum from a common human collision: A garbage man parks his vehicle beside the poet's north pasture where he cranks the radio. The poet knocks on the cab and tells the driver to turn down his raucous music. Shepard draws down close:

“Well, the guy startled—he was young  
and dark—deeply tanned, black shock  
of hair, well-muscled, and violent  
in his face, his gruff “Excuse me  
for livin’!” before he choked  
the ignition, stomped the gas, and spun  
his tires in a spray of gravel and dust.  
I felt bad but I felt right, too.  
I wasn’t denying him his view  
but was limiting his pleasure,  
the old compromise between one nature  
and another, between a human song  
and the wind’s.”

By coincidence or some design the poet can’t discern, the young garbage man is found dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The poet is left examining the hole left in the early morning by the boy’s death:

“...He lived  
and died in a dark apartment  
shaded by a fire escape, but he liked  
the open air, his father told the local  
news, he liked every morning  
rising early, to take the morning air.

Shepard might have indulged guilt or grief which would have overwhelmed the tenuous circumstances, but instead he gives the boy’s death something of a benediction by anchoring the death in the insufficient joy that the boy gathered in, then let go.

Divided into six sections, *This Far from the Source* might strike some readers as a bit long and indeed, some of the poems could have been pruned. The two weakest sections are three and five. In section three, Shepard travels back over family material that can feel cobbled from old photos, arguments and unchallenged nostalgia. In section five, entitled “Birth Announcements,” the poet runs the risk of writing too many poems about his daughter; poems without enough psychic push and pull to sharpen the edge of something new. Tightly wrought to a poem, they still don’t throw off enough drama to make the reader feel either dislocated or found, cast off or reeled in. When Shepard returns to the land with his daughter in it, as he does “In Fog,” the results are revelatory:

Out there, where two currents become one,  
where bonita and redfish merge with cod and haddock,

where warm infusions of plankton meet the green ice of glaciers,  
 I still hear the foghorn's moan of separation, hear it now  
 touching every lost boat, every misguided spirit at the edge  
 of the fogbank where light dissolves and gives nothing back...

Shepard saves his best work for the book's last section. All nine poems are marked by a lyric intensity and narrative *frisson* that captures the scope of his obsessions: the ever-threatened sweep of the land's pure curve, the vivid reminder that death is a major trump card, the fleeting and often frightened nature of the "human song," the endurance of old stones, the quiet fury of elemental forces. Looking always for that place before time and roads and human measurement took hold, Shepard wins our trust with fever-dream sorties that feel as old and true as Vermont granite itself:

how after walking through chokecherry blossom  
 you come to a mossed stone wall. Where there's a gap  
 in stones you think "gate and cobbled roadway,"  
 and take it back further into forest

Losing the road in dusk, you pocket compass  
 and survey map, go by the land's pure curve –  
 back between those younger trees where pasture  
 was carved, stumps plowed under, and one  
 small-farmer lived after his own way.

"Trusting the Land's Pure Curve"

Neil Shepard is an accomplished poet of place, and some of his most stunning poems such as "Hayden's Writer's Shack's Latest Occupant" are set in Vermont, but he's also a refreshing globalist, at home in the world, seeking everywhere to reduce the distance between the source of the land's original clarity and our experience of it. When Shepard lets the land speak fully through him, then we enter a consequential world where the elements themselves become the characters who dictate the terms of our human drama.



In *Sinners Welcome*, Mary Karr skids between the role of the hard-luck pugilist nursing a three-day bender and the recalcitrant believer who has mended her ways before the lights go out. The difficulty with this dual-faced mythic persona is, on the one hand, an over-reaching sympathy with her own wayward past, and on the other, a secret wish to tidy up loose ends

when just the opposite serves her best. Karr should have started this mixed collection with the uncompromising sizzler, “Waiting for God:

The winter Mother’s ashes came in a Ziploc bag,  
 all skin was scorched from me, and my skull  
 was a hard helmet I wore to pray  
 with my middle finger bone aimed at the light fixture—Come out,  
 You fuck, I’d say, then wait for God to finish me...

The mother who appears regularly in her poems, the ones in this collection and elsewhere, is a cross between a vampish cyclone and a besotted Artemis with the power to goad, seduce, shame, hunt and destroy the poet. In “Waiting for God,” the mother suffers through a drunken washout to reach the threshold of transfiguration and so too does the poet gain higher ground in recognition that such a conversion is finally possible in one who seemed beyond repair. The edgy, unexpected punch of the Ziploc bag and the thrust middle finger make this journey toward mother-daughter redemption both credible and memorable.

In “Pathetic Fallacy,” the opening poem, Karr again summons the dead mother as her muse, but this time the antiphonal response goes (ugh) flat long before it reaches the banal, closing lines:

your features sometimes press toward me  
 all silvery from the afterlife, woven in wind,  
 to whisper a caution. Or your hand on my back

shoves me into my life.

This lame closing is a one step remove from the tepid applause accorded one’s first Girl Scout badge. When Karr allows her self-directed chaos to forgo the easy reach of order, her poems sing with a torrential sexual bravado as in the title poem “Sinners Welcome,” “Reference for Ex-Man’s Next,” and “Miss Flame” and with a hard-fought spiritual toughness and splendor found in “Descending Theology,” “Orders from the Invisible” and “Disgraceland.” It’s hard, for example, not to inch forward in your seat as you enter the dangerous first stanza of “Disgraceland.”

Before my first communion at 40, I clung  
 to doubt as Satan spider-like stalled  
 the orb of dark surrounding Eden  
 for a wormhole into Paradise.

Most poetry books that linger in memory are jazzed with at least one set of internal arguments. In *Sinners Welcome*, Karr is torn between skepticism and belief, between the scream and the prayer, between the kneel and the hell-bent sprint. She manages to throw sparks from primary Psalm-based argument—*God is the stronghold in a time of trouble*—about half the time. Her clunkers all aim for message, uplift, forced epiphany or predictable longing. In “Delinquent Missive,” she reaches for a feel-good conclusion about a character who seems destined to become “the zillionth winner of the Texas Death Penalty sweepstakes.” In “A Major,” she turns a dread-locked pianist into a saint with the power to free the audience from death. In “Requiem: Professor Walt Mink (1927-1996), she settles for an idle worry and wish:

And I worry the form I'll finally take (death  
lesson) and whether I can be made to leave  
on anyone some mark worth bearing.

By contrast, in “The Choice,” Karr creates a compelling, coming-of-age poet’s tale in a sprawling set of quatrains that highlight her gifts for combining vernacular observation with eloquent insight. Re-telling the story of visiting William Wordsworth’s house, she weaves failed love, failed attempts at writing and failed recognition from her teachers with her soul’s decision to make sense of the “intricate world” through poetry. With its staccato, Bishop-like flourishes including pub drunks, scarlet lipstick, and Euclidean solitude, “The Choice” is a poem Karr might use to fuel her ambitions in the narrative vein. Having said that, Karr is at her best when the ghost of a narrative, rather than linear plotting, inhabits her lyric drive. Here’s what she can do in “Descending Theology: The Resurrection” when she interrupts story and simply jumps in:

From the far star points of his pinned extremities,  
cold inched in—black ice and blood ink—  
till the hung flesh was empty.

When Karr abandons the scaffolding of the beginning, middle and end, the dislocation forces the reader to enter into the nerve-tingling smack of her verbs rather than track the shambling flow of her routinely home-movie based stories. There’s no throat-clearing, no waiting for the engine to rev in “Orphanage” which would have been the best closing poem for this collection:

Now you’ve joined the mist specters we once

peered into the night waves  
to make out—the sparks from driftwood fire  
whooshing up the black sky.

The long essay “Facing Alters: Poetry and Prayer” that concludes *Sinners Welcome* is a richly anecdotal ramble that may trump even some of the stronger poems. It’s become her signature to include an afterword, but the essay begs the question: Why not make of this material more deep plunging poetic explorations? Why not rough up her new spiritual view with a dozen other nuanced contentions besides human fragility and godly strength? Why not break the lyric/narrative mold now and then with some form she hasn’t yet attempted? Why not take us into the belly of New York where she lives and introduce us to sinners who refuse to be saved?

There are many qualities to admire in Mary Karr’s latest book, not the least are her many raw collisions of skin and spirit which may appeal equally to male and female readers. She has demonstrated enough nimble talent with her obsessions to suggest the staying power of a major voice, but this reader would like to see her push harder to create poems that live well outside the boundaries of predictable spirit/flesh duality and in so doing earn their tough and tender conclusions with even greater originality.