

Review of *Blue Rust*
by Tim McBride
Prarie Schooner, Fall 2012

Like Conrad's Marlow, Joseph Millar speaks with fierce compassion and the authority of hard-won experience. In his remarkable third collection, *Blue Rust*, he lays down "the shield of irony" without taking up the consolations of easy sentiment or posturing despair. The result is an unstrained originality: lyrics that avoid the metronome, leaps of imagination in which the associative logic never trails off into self-indulgent incoherence. Joe Millar looks hard at a world that is doomed and beautiful. What sets *Blue Rust* apart is his ability to honor both those terms.

The book's expansive arc—opening with "Nativity" and ending with "The Day of the Dead"—suggests something of Millar's fearless and omnivorous imagination. No subjects are off limits. He begins in the "birth blood" of his own delivery, an "insatiable mammal" aware that his mother "loved me and hated me / through those early months." "I saw ... I heard ... I wanted" he intones, in the manner of Whitman, but the poem ends on an ominous note, not an ecstatic one—alyricless of arrival than of farewell. His unholy, unprosperous family is on the road—but the movement is not west into expanding possibility, but back through the rust belt of a land where freedom and innocence have been sundered by the threat of nuclear war:

In August the Japanese surrendered
and [my father] mustered out in Wisconsin.
We headed east in in a '38 Studebaker,
its big engine swallowing the miles
of America, wheat fields and highway,
Chicago and Cleveland and they named me So Long
It's Been Good To Know You."

If he can't with Whitman sing the praises of progress and technology (no "Passage to India" here), Millar retains an eye for the damaged beauty of individuals, communities, and machines. In the sonnet-like Donut Shop Jukebox, he conjures a poem of redemption and rebirth out of what may be the most unpromising materials ever assembled. Crystal meth, junk food, ditch water, a dead battery, jumper cables, noxious weeds, people late for work—these details coexist with a sudden irrepressible sense of joy:

I like the engine roaring to life, a savage
red dogwood shedding its flowers
over the sidewalk, over the fence.
I like your hat with its purple feather,
cheap as a melody, cheap as a wish.

This kind of unexpected turn occurs again and again in *Blue Rust*. At once a child of the '60s and working man, Millar casts a cold but compassionate eye on the platitudes of both the hippie and the hardhat. In his remarkable "Ginsberg," for example, he moves easily among the peace demonstrators without sentimentalizing the mob mentality of the "huge angry

crowds.” Millar’s Ginsberg sounds his “guttural *aum*” across the White House lawn, but when the speeches end, he also tells the unruly protesters “to pick up their trash.” This is the distinctive Millar touch, refusing to simplify, always working, in Martin Amis’s phrase, “against cliché.” How many poets could present Ginsberg as a voice of order, without distorting his essential spirit, or expose the naiveté and violent potential of the peace protestors, without deriding the ideals they profess? “When the sun went down / the trouble started,” he tells us:

Someone set fire to a squad car outside
and we roamed the streets
half drunk with the night air
and the moon overhead
which we thought we could swallow,
its pale rocks and electric dust,
the shadowy lakes on its dark side,
though it was daylight in Vietnam,
land of rice paddies and ancient poetry,
land of the lotus pond hidden from sight,
its presence so hard to know.

Unlike the second and third books of many writers, Millar’s work has grown progressively stronger, the emotional range wider; the risks more dangerous and heartfelt; the eye for beauty more encompassing, haunted and nuanced; the convictions more troubled; the forms more varied (here more experimental, there more traditional); the self-exposures more revealing, the poems more compassionate, uplifting, and assured even (paradoxically) as they offer us less and less in the way of assurance.

Section two of the book consists of a six-page free verse poem “Ocean,” which draws, in part, on Millar’s experiences as a fisherman in Alaska. The poem has a kind of tidal structure in which past and present intermingle to Proustian effect: “Each night lying down / in our sea-wrack, each day waking into our skin:

Come close and whisper the names
of the living, names of the dead returning,
sleepwalkers holding their hands out,
litter of sea-straw and sand like dark metal,
song of arriving and going away.

Elsewhere Millar uses rhyme and meter to equally compelling effect, as in the emotionally charged “Kiski Flats,” in memory of his father. The poem deserves to be quoted in full:

Soon we’ll be driving the black road
I left by, shining with mica
blistered with tar, the back porch
collapsed where we ate the charred onion rings
watching the Steelers on channel four,
the hatchet sunk deep in the workbench he left

to die in his bed behind the closed door.
It's no crime to be tired of the sun,
to be secretive, hiding your pain.
We peer now into the choppy rooms,
the windows wavy with age and rain.
Let the phone ring forever, let the mail
pile up. Let the dry nest fall apart,
stuck together with last year's mud
jammed in the eves and shaped like a heart.

The range of subject matter is equally ambitious: juxtaposed poems titled "Romance" and "Divorce"; poems about marriage, children, and work; a dramatic monologue "Lorca in California"; a meditation on the sorrows of Judas's mother ("Judas of loneliness, Judas of pain, / Judas of misery and silent farewell"); a poem addressed, rather sternly, to Weldon Kees ("Nobody thinks you really died"); a Christmas poem in which "plutonium shutters and platinum fins" cast a "calamitous holy light"; a lyric in the voice of the poet as coyote, shoving his nose "into the garbage pile," swallowing (with an avidity that might have given Louis Simpson pause) "cellophane, ... cat hair, ... butcher paper stained dark with fish blood": and a wonderful *ars poetica*, "Sentimental," in which the speaker converses with James Wright on Li Po, Vallejo, a football tackling dummy, and the policeman at Tolstoy's funeral, "who took off their hats / and knelt down in the leaves."

The book repeatedly comes to us as a solitary voice from the sleepless dark. Though the style is all his own, Millar, like Frost, is one "acquainted with the night" or like MacNeice's "watchers on the wall/ "awake all night who know/the pity of it all." "Nothing to hear or see or hold onto," says the speaker in "Nightbound," "blue rust floating away from your touch." As the title phrase suggests, Millar's vision is of a world at once hopeless and beautiful. *Blue Rust* is the mature work of a brave poet with a hard-earned and inimitable voice. It's also the best book I've read all year.