

Review of *Blue Rust*
by J. Scott Brownlee
Rattle

What have I lost
in the sea's wide pastures
watching for whales headed south?

-from "Leaving Coos County"

You may have never heard about Joseph Millar's poetry, but after reading *Blue Rust*, you will probably end up reading all of it, at least if you are a young poet like me looking to learn a thing or two from a master of the form. A gentle, unassuming, soft-spoken teacher and mentor to wunderkinds like Coos Bay native Mike McGriff and Portland twins Matthew and Michael Dickman, much of the attention deservedly due Millar tends to shine more directly on his students—many of whom have published wonderful books and chapbooks of their own. While it is easy to forget about the existence of behind-the-scenes teachers like Millar, they are often some of the best (if not most well-known) poets of their generation. *Blue Rust*, Millar's third and most recent book, provides compelling evidence of this. It is an expansive, thought-provoking, beautifully rendered collection containing some of the poet's finest work to date.

The book's ability to strike a successful balance between narration and image is perhaps its greatest strength. Considering Millar's previous collections, it is not difficult to see why. *Overtime* and *Fortune* both contain poems that are successful at creating aesthetic resonance by interweaving narration and an Eastern-influenced emphasis on image Millar shares with his stylistic forebears Williams and Pound. Millar's voice is ultimately, however, his own—and very convincingly so. As poet Yusef Komunyakaa once said, Millar, who takes his subject matter from an intrigue-riddled, rust-crusting working-class background, is "a poet we can believe," particularly when he writes about the land- and seascapes of the American Northwest in poems like "Year of the Ox":

I can hear the sea calling out
from beyond the jetty, smell the pines
near the flooded-out bridge where today
someone tried to winch an old Volkswagen
up from the swirling waters.
Far down the coast the same west wind
blows through the marshes and river mouth
where my brother's boat rocks on its mooring.
He's the only one awake, modest and reliable,
replacing a frayed hose, tightening the clamps.
He doesn't trust the government
shining his trouble-light into the darkness,
his radio tuned to a satellite
broadcasting through the blue dust of space.

Millar has a wonderful eye for detail, in part, because he is much more interested in seeing than being seen. His gaze is that of the speaker in search of a transient, extrinsic beauty. Whether he is describing “a sunset turning dim like a weld over the Bering Sea,” “torches and welding tanks rinsed in blue light,” or the “plutonium shutters and platinum fins” of spacecraft hovering over North Carolina back-country, Millar’s gaze is always turned outward rather than inward. In keeping with the tenets of the Eastern poetics that informs much of his work, this strategy allows Millar to broaden the scope of his own gaze—lending his observations a sense of greater cosmic importance than they would otherwise have, even as he describes something as seemingly mundane as the light thrown on a shadowy wall by a welding torch.

During several stints as a commercial fisherman, Millar gained a profound affinity for and appreciation of the ocean that plays heavily into the themes and conceits of many poems in *Blue Rust*—so much so that the ocean itself often eclipses Millar the speaker in interesting thematic ways. One of my favorite things about the poems in this book is the tendency their speakers have to slip into the thematic background, giving way to a situation, natural phenomenon, or metaphysical context that can stand on its own without a bulky poetic ego holding it up. Another way of saying this is that Millar’s poems really start to sing when he is a spectator, rather than a participant, in them. “Romance,” a piece in which the speaker’s voice and intentions fade so that the feelings and memories of his friend can be more closely explored, provides a great example of this:

One more month coming up
watching the moon in its changes
hoping the salmon will finally arrive,
one more month listening
to seabirds and wind,
listening to you dreaming out loud
about the waitress in Naknek
who called you Honey
when she brought the eggs
thinking because of your red moustache
you might be one of the Russians
with their slick fiberglass Wegley boats
we never understood how they could afford.

You could have made a life with her, you said
as we watched the cork line
straighten and drift.
You could settle down by her woodstove
turning your back to the road outside,
hidden away in her kitchen,
smelling the spaghetti sauce
like a child or an old man. You could
live easy and die happy, a candle burning
in every window, the blue compass needle
and hands of the clock pointing north

through the field's wavy grass.
You could make your grave in her.

When Millar is not tweaking the emotional sensibility of his reader, he attempts to draw the reader in with imagery that exists for its own sake—without any need for logic, or even a skewed, New-York-School inspired anti-logic, for that matter. Crickets, in a poem like “Divorce,” for example, provide all the introductory friction Millar’s poem needs in order to move successfully down the page. Without any complex, confounding language games or other postmodern whistles and bells, the image of crickets singing is enough:

Now the crickets are throbbing
the ancient psalm of tall grass.
You clasp both hands over your heart
with its pawnshop guitar and fake fur jacket,
its cloth roses sewn end to end,
the turquoise necklace you traded for money
so far from home and too late for autumn,
frozen star lilies bent to the ground.

The really interesting thing about Millar’s poetic skill is how adept he is at placing the seemingly mundane imagery of everyday life within a larger framework of resonant, ear-pleasing syntax. References to the Steelers and charred onion rings appear alongside vivid descriptions of nature in poems like “Kiski Flats,” combining sound and image in complex matrices of meaning that hum and whirl like well-oiled machines:

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 eaves and shaped like a heart.

Millar’s favorite images, the ones he tends to repeat throughout the book, relate most often to mechanization, tooling, and the hard-luck lexicon of the sweat-stained, working-class man. Grease, gears, and other “implements for joining and rending” are used as rhetorical tools by Millar time and again—serving as stand-ins for more plainly-stated emotions. This

naming of mechanical parts, the intentional act of listing of them, is one of the most important poetic tools Millar uses to help give poems like “Marriage” momentum, emotional variation, and music.

We could be standing inside an airship
laughing and jostling each other
or inside a dead star
surrounded by metal, the whetstone’s
fine oil, chisels and knives,
torches and welding tanks
rinsed in blue light, threaded light,
bridal light helplessly shining
over the spools of new copper,
over the pocked green lunar cement.

Other points of prosodic interest aside, perhaps the most significant evolution of Millar’s work in *Blue Rust* is a tendency for him to paint in broad, sweeping strokes what it means to be an American. Millar’s experience and age lend him a rare historical perch from which to critique, explore, and reckon with our nation’s past—particularly with respect to its gradual, decades-long transition from an industrial to a post-industrial power. His, I would argue, is the voice of a working-class prophet who does not intend to prophesy, but nevertheless does. Reading a poem like “Fire,” for example, it is hard for Millar’s reader to not quite literally feel the nation “slouching towards Bethlehem,” as Yeats so eloquently put it, “to be born.”

America raises its iron voice
over the coal fields of Pennsylvania:
backyard engine blocks, chain hoists,
bell housings, toothed gears
resting in pans of oil—stammering out
the poem of combustion,
bright tongues and wings, white-hot ingots
glimpsed in the huge mills by the river,
coke ovens, strip mines, brick stacks burning
over the spine of the Appalachians.

Elegiac snap-shots of 1960’s-1970’s industrial America like this one can be found throughout *Blue Rust* and make the collection’s title, given the ongoing economic downturn of the United States, seem particularly apt. I found them all very arresting and emotionally compelling—what with their distinctly grim, albeit beautiful ability to encapsulate the past 40-50 years of American economic decline in only a few short, hard-to-forget lines. Even so, this is definitely not a book that pushes its reader in any one emotional, social, historical, or ideological direction. Millar has written for far too long and with far too much care to succumb to any prophetic temptation other than the soul-searching desire to fashion the language hammered steel-solid in him and present it to us on its on rust-clad, blue-collar terms—for its own sacred sake.

