
Eliza Griswold
If Men, Then
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 84 pages, $24.00
Maurice Manning

Railsplitter: Reflections on the Art of Poetry Composed in the Posthumous Voice of Honest Abe Lincoln

Copper Canyon Press, 92 pages, $17.00
Maria Dahvana Headley
Beowulf: A New Translation
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 140 pages, $15.00
Jorie Graham

Runaway

Ecco, 86 pages, $26.99
The devastating poems in If Men, Then approach their subjects at a cautious angle. Eliza Griswold braves out scenes difficult to see, difficult to have seen—the poems don’t have suspensions so much as conclusions of disbelief. In this most immodest of immodest times, Griswold is careful not to say too much. Her taxing intimacies live on the remembered edge of wars abroad, wars of politics and wars of war.

In eastern Congo years ago on a road logged into a hill

we drove or were driven one evening to meet pygmies

who claimed they were being eaten, which was possible.

A woman with my name had watched the fire

on which her arm was cooked and then devoured.
The pygmies turned out to be lying and this isn’t about pygmies.

This modulation from flat reporting to shock, then with a flick of the wrist overturning all expectation, is reminiscent of James Fenton’s war poems of forty years ago—especially “Dead Soldiers,” written with the Cambodian civil war in the background. Like Fenton, Griswold has been a highly respected foreign correspondent. Her only previous book of poetry was well received a dozen years back, and since then she has won the Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction.

Saying too much is the default mode of political poetry—the default fault, too. The best political poets work in subtleties, not the shouts and finger-pointing that have long been the stump work of politics. Think of Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” or Heaney’s “The Toome Road” rather than the grandstanding grand guignol of Carolyn Forché’s “The Colonel.” Griswold has seen the nightmares of Afghanistan, Nigeria, the Congo; her hesitation is that of a reporter who treats the rules of the trade like the Ten Commandments. Unlike Ryszard Kapuściński, in whose pages the reader could never be sure where reportage stopped and outright fiction kicked in, Griswold’s wars are fragmented, glimpsed, tormenting, though a few scenes suffer from the whipped-cream topping of poetry: “Hating ourselves, we pick at what swells till the larvae/ embedded in our backs hatch out of the skin,/ till moths escape, subcutaneous angels.” Despair still lies around every corner.

Griswold remains wary around the certainties of faith even while flinching from the certainties of truth. She comes by her trust obliquely. The three pages of Libyan proverbs she includes whisper the lessons of alien culture; but the occasional insights from ancient empires and lost city-states are too modestly proposed to tell us much. The fate of the people of Melos, in a famous incident from Thucydides, would have shone a harsh light on our times had she taken the idea further. Anthony Hecht’s “The Cost,” by contrast, despite the historical mistake about the Dacian Wars, darkly contemplates the present’s wrestling with the past—or, crucially, failure to wrestle.

If Men, Then is also weakened by a long sequence of poems cast in what might be called the third-person “I” (which often seems to mean the reportorial “I”). The calculated dissociation is not helped by the ambiguities of syntax created—the poor reader can take “I understands” or “I is sorry” only a few times before suffering a fatal brain bleed. Even where the third-person “I” doesn’t matter, the inner furies slip into clumsy metaphor or steel-plate rhetoric:

I shouldered her hobo sorrow and soldiered on.

She was warden of an angry garden,

guarding against what hoped to grow.

The bitter bud that never opens hardens.
Despite the extraordinary calm and nuance of the best poems here, others have been pieced like quilts or patched like tires, poems too desperate to be meaningful. Indeed, the poems suffer whenever Griswold strays too far into reflection—or, worse, pontification. Revelation isn’t her mode, not because she has nothing to reveal, but because her best work is anchored by scenes observed, not confessional maundering. She throws in too many scraps of wisdom any California guru could have dispensed (“Hurt people hurt people,” “Our minds,/ it turns out, are also terrible country”). Her half-hearted editorials—on the Gaia hypothesis, for instance—would be more embarrassing if they weren’t so slight.

Griswold’s welcome cynicism displays, even so, a view common among reporters but almost absent in movies. (His Girl Friday and Under Fire are rare antidotes to tales of noble news-hacks.) It takes cast-iron resistance to survive forced encounters with suffering. Had she brought that fatalistic temper to the poems on the home front, to the difficulties of living after seeing too much, the survivor’s guilt would be overshadowed by everything that haunts her still.

If America has a secular saint, it must be Honest Abe. Lincoln was not a man without flaws; but his presidency during the country’s most perilous crisis, his political bravery in issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, and his mastery of a rhetoric that rose above politics made him the model against which all later presidents have been measured. No American is embarrassed to love Lincoln, one of the few early presidents never to own a slave. Maurice Manning has resurrected the great man, letting him speak to our times.

The premise of Railsplitter isn’t any more peculiar than the gossipy graveyard in Spoon River Anthology, which is peculiar enough already. Whatever the weaknesses of Edgar Lee Masters as a poet, he managed a cunning irony that makes the schlock nearly bearable. Manning constructs poems like a zig-zag fence—they wander drunkenly all over the lot. Such poems must depend, not on the way this revenant Lincoln tells a tale, but on its fidelity to the voice of the original. Here’s a fragment from a speech in 1848 where Uncle Abraham slagged General Cass, the Democratic presidential candidate:

[Cass’s expense accounts] show that he not only did the labor of several men at the same time; but that he often did it at several places, many hundreds of miles apart, at the same time. And, at eating too, his capacities are shown to be quite as wonderful. From October 1821 to May 1822, he ate ten rations a day in Michigan, ten rations a day here in Washington, and near five dollars worth a day on the road between the two places!

This is Manning’s version of the Ancient One, as those in the White House called him:

I liked to fiddle with the Latin words

and imagine how they arrived in English.
Awkwardly, because the Mother Tongue
was dead and her survivors came
as immigrants plucked from the boats of books
to be re-rendered by Shakespeare,
to overdecorate a suspicious speech,
persuasion as gold leaf to gild
the convolutions of a mind driven
by greed or revenge or banality.

These lines have as much relation to Lincoln’s manner as deep hollow to mountain ridge. His prose had more drive, more hog-tight barn-door plainness, and more malarial humor than anything Manning can conjure up. I’m not quite clear how those immigrant Latin words, in this fancy of linguistic change, landed in England after the fall of Rome. Can they all have arrived on metaphorical “boats of books”? Or should that be triremes of papyrus scrolls? Some Latin came with Anglo-Saxons, some with early Christian monks, and some with Anglo-Normans, long before books were common. (In any case, the Mother Tongue was alive for centuries after the fall.)

Too many of these poems sound as if they were composed by congressmen, arranged by carpetbaggers, and versified by devils.

A life exempt from public haunt,
decries my present circumstance,
here tapping, in this nothingness,
the prosody of my Address
or second inaugural speech, a dance
of death, though malice not to flaunt,
composed by me, whose face was gaunt.
The lines are merely prose squeezed into a rhymed tetrameter inaudible unless you beat time with a sledge hammer. The poet takes his subject seriously (the little humor left is as clumsy as a newborn shoat), but the invented manner and ludicrous ending have learned nothing from the Biblical syntax and resonance of the Gettysburg Address. (Manning did no better with his impersonation of Daniel Boone in *A Companion for Owls*, 2004).

The sad part of these laborious constructions—logs hand-hewn and notched at the corners—is what they could have been had Manning possessed the gift of imitation. One or two touches show a glimmer of the original Tycoon (another insider nickname), the simile “duller than a butter knife,” say, or a passage on John Wilkes Booth, noting wryly that, when the actor leapt from the balcony in Ford’s Theatre and broke his leg, the audience laughed, “The great tragedian . . . / hopping across/ the interrupted stage to exit.” Alas, despite such moments, the book is an infernal machine where Lincoln goes in and hog fat comes out. The poet’s creative bump is confined almost entirely to titles of which even Frost would have been jealous—“Three Cheers for the Know-Nothings,” “To a Chigger,” “A Barrel Full of Pickled Pigs’ Feet.” Few poems could measure up to those. Manning’s Lincoln is a pale ghost of the deeper and more convincing figure in George Saunders’s *Lincoln in the Bardo*, published three years ago.

*Railsplitter* is soaked in Lincoln lore, with a preface that might be mistaken for an apologia. The poet justifies traipsing on the grave by explaining, unconvincingly, that he was raised near Lincoln’s birthplace in Hodgenville, Kentucky; lives in the city where Lincoln’s parents were married; and can claim Kentuckian ancestors, one of whom bragged that he voted for Lincoln twice. Manning doesn’t say whether that was in the same election. As a boy, I collected Lincoln pennies and chewed on Lincoln Logs, but I’d never use them as a license to foist some fifty poems upon the bones of our sixteenth president.

From the book’s subtitle, an unwary reader might imagine Abe’s own “reflections on the art of poetry” will be on offer. Lincoln’s posthumous obsession with poetry, alas, reflects Maurice Manning’s taste, not the practice of the Grand Wrestler, who had trouble writing even doggerel. This manufactured Lincoln says virtually nothing interesting about the art, though he does utter banalities by the score. Had the president been this obsessed with verse when alive, he might have embraced Whitman as one of his own—for a time during the war, the Good Gray Poet lived just a few blocks from the White House.

Maria Dahvana Headley’s new translation of Beowulf starts off like an exploding beer keg: “Bro! Tell me we still know how to speak of kings!” Generations of scholars have limped along, translating Hwaet! as “Listen!” or “Yes!” or “Lo!” or “Hail!” (Why not “Belay that!” or “Tut! Tut! I say!”?) Headley has had the wicked idea that what we’ve needed all along is Beowulf: The Frat-Boy Chronicles. If she had continued in this cheeky vein, Headley might have altered Beowulf Studies forever.

That venerable crust of Anglo-Saxon hoarfrost stands at the beginning of all English poetry, as
well as—I’m not exaggerating much—every monster movie (Frankenstein’s monster is no match for Grendel), every ten-little-Indians tale, and every elevator pitch of Gothic manse or spooky motel where psychopaths lurk. Mary Shelley probably wrote Frankenstein without ever hearing of Grendel (the first translation of extracts had been published only in 1805), but the Anglo-Saxon forebear still stands at the head of every genre of literature and film except romantic comedy. Westerns? Check. Detective Thrillers and Police Procedurals? Check. Check. Superheroes? Samurai? Sword and Sorcery? Sci-Fi? Check. Check. Check. Check. Hollywood is full of wannabe scriptwriters who keep by their side a battered copy of Frederick Klaeber’s 1922 edition of the text, still in print a century later. Four generations of Beowulf scholars have gone to their graves clutching it.

The sole manuscript of this ur-epic of English verse was rescued from the flames that destroyed a quarter of Robert Cotton’s library in 1731. (Had Beowulf burnt up, we’d possess only the forty lines copied out a quarter-century before the fire.) There were probably other epics—“The Battle of Maldon” and the fragment of “The Fight at Finnsburg” suggest the crucial place of martial poetry during and after the Migration Period of Germanic tribes following the fall of Rome. Beowulf has been translated many times, but rarely with more than the musty odor of the original’s harsh hemistichs and drumbeat alliteration.

The standard for Beowulf translations was set by Seamus Heaney two decades ago. His version, a surprise bestseller, has held up well, though some passages lie too cozily near prose. The Old English hemistich is difficult to translate—the heavy-handed alliteration tiresome and the spatchcocked compounds looking in modern English like damaged machine-parts. Such poetry was recited—the writing down on vellum came generations later—as two half lines, alliterating within each hemistich or each with its companion. The result is a poetry that progresses more by fits than starts, juddering along probably to the pluck or strum of lyre (that would be the Anglo-Saxon harp). Heaney’s version, most striking to the ear when using Irish-English vernacular, adhered nearly line by line to the original (as does Headley’s, more or less).
Headley apparently knows little Old English, and it shows. In preparation, she read all the translations by women she could find. Since apart from Grendel’s mother there are passingly few women in the epic, and those in walk-on, walk-off parts, it’s unclear what these translations by women have provided, except perhaps the “bro-story,” as Headley calls it. Though here and there she forces in the feminine, not always persuasively, she does make a case for reconsidering Grendel’s mother—perhaps she was not a monster at all, just a fierce woman warrior who, as Headley says, “seemed to give precisely zero fucks.” (Grendel’s absentee father might, in this reading, have been the real monster. The idea comes largely from Kevin Kiernan’s article “Grendel’s Heroic Mother,” which has not gained traction with most scholars.) There’s still room for a version of Bro-Wulf where the hero’s a lout, his gang of Geats a bunch of dickheads, and the Shielding clan whose mead hall has for twelve years been ravaged by Grendel, well, cowards and creeps. In other words, Headley has not yet gone all bro all the time.

The classics deserve a good shaking up once in a while, so those who love a short sharp shock should turn to her battling, ball-busting Dark-Agers, an unruly mob of frat brothers suffering from testosterone poisoning, Heorot as Animal House—you feel me? (There’s a Dartmouth frat called Heorot, it turns out.) In this mash-up of Aliens and Romeo + Juliet, Beowulf and his battle-buds have become a gang of slang-slingers packing swords instead of pulse rifles or Taurus 9mms. (Their language is Anglo-Saxon, but of course the Danes and Geats lived across the North Sea.) Headley owes great if unacknowledged debts to Ezra Pound’s translation of “The Seafarer” and Christopher Logue’s versions of the Iliad, the latter offering new wine in old factory bottles. Logue perhaps went a little far by dragging a rhinoceros, bread trucks, and the odd Uzi into Homer—and using as metaphors lipstick, a Porsche, and an aircraft carrier.

Just two years ago, Headley published The Mere Wife, a hyped-up novelization of Beowulf, full of raging clichés and a protagonist named Ben Woolf—get it? (Grendel’s Mother becomes a “ptsd-stricken veteran of the United States’ wars in the Middle East.”) Her steampunk translation of Beowulf, an in-your-face, fists-cocked performance preposterous and irritating by turns, should not be trusted as an accurate rendering of what scops sang in mead halls. Headley’s loosey-goosey style, slightly rattletrap in the expression, never quite rivals Heaney in richness or effect. He emerges from this battle royale unscathed. Even so, compare Headley:

Hidden by fog, Grendel roved the moors, God-cursed,
grudge worsening. He knew who [sic] he hunted:

wine-drunk, mead-met men, and he pined

for his prey. Under storm clouds, he stalked them,
in his usual anguish, feeling a forbidden hearth,
that gilded hall atop the hill.

And Heaney:

In off the moors, down through the mist bands

God-cursed Grendel came greedily loping.
The bane of the race of men roamed forth,
hunting for a prey in the high hall.

Under the cloud-murk he moved towards it

until it shone above him, a sheer keep

of fortified gold.

Heaney’s superb gift for the dramatic creates a stronger medium for command of rhythm, and his fluency stays within sight of the scop’s version. Though Headley’s “wine-drunk, mead-met men,” like many another phrase, is a clumsy invention not in the original (“mead-met” remains cryptic), her version still bears some of the gloaming spirit of the ancient text.

What cripples the reinvigoration of this hoary ancestor of English verse is her frantic voguishness. The translation is so stuffed with market-fresh slang that after “blinged-out,” “no worries,” “smoking gun,” “threw shade,” “main man,” and “Hashtag: blessed,” you might think Beowulf was composed by underfed fan-boys still playing Dungeons & Dragons. It’s sad, but “fab” and “gear” are never coming back; and in about five years these gobbets of slang, most of them, will be just as stone cold. My informants tell me that “bro” is already on its deathbed.

Worse, Headley has been paid by lobbyists for Global Idiom Corp. to pack in every cliché in the catalog: “that shit/ couldn’t stand,” “went global,” “got down to business,” “ready to roll,” “kiss it all goodbye,” and “Death has his number” just begin the long list. Headley loves sports metaphors (“knew the score,” “never punching down,” “ready to rumble,” “the third round sounded”) without always understanding them. When she writes, “The Lord . . ./ had no trouble leveling the playing field/ when Beowulf beat the count and stood,” we can’t be sure whether we’re concussed on a soccer field or in a boxing ring. It’s not surprising to find a few allusions—Hamlet’s “slings
and arrows” might be passable if there were any slings among the Geats (at Grendel’s mere, Beowulf does fire an arrow into a sea-snake); but allusions to “America the Beautiful” (“from sea to shining sea”) and Gilbert O’Sullivan’s “Alone Again, Naturally” (that very phrase, of course) savagely undermine the tone. She deserves credit, however, for having the author photo taken by Beowulf Sheehan.

There are so many silly lines in Headley’s *Beowulf*, I’d have trouble choosing the worst, though the main contenders are “roosting like roasting chickens,” “the Life-lord, that Almighty Big Boss, birthed them/ an Earth-shaker,” “gift-quarters had been appointed him like rings,” “beer-sounding soldiers,” “scrawling red rsvps in the sky,” “he’d been ghost-throned by the skyborne gold-holder,” and the lines where Beowulf faces Grendel, which I’m still trying to comprehend: “His own men/ stood to as the unarmed enemies swung/ heirloom blades willy-nilly.” If they’re unarmed, what are they swinging?

Even this might be exceeded by Beowulf’s early brag, “There’re no guns of note on anyone but me and my Geats.” *Of note!* Firearms are never mentioned again—but, Hell, why didn’t they jerk their .50 cal. Smith & Wessons when they needed them? Beowulf, dude, when you had that trouble with the dragon, you should have whipped out your cellphone and called for backup! Headley’s epic concludes after lines shaken loose from a Harlequin romance: “Bro, no man knows, not me, not you,/ how to get to goodbye.” Just say the damn word.

Jorie Graham’s new poems lounge across the page, the words split, scarred, filleted from their sentences, if there were sentences to begin with. Graham has always been an aficionado of daredevil risk-taking, yet her work, no longer grounded in art and literature, has become a pleasure garden of shiftless dilly-dallying. Her bravery is tattooed with hubris; and each new book seems cursed like Milton’s Satan, every abyss concealing a deeper abyss.

Still, you can’t resist the élan of *Runaway*. Her poems have all the old sprezzatura, that of Seurat first dabbling at a canvas. Graham’s pointillism, however, seems increasingly pointless as the poems go fluttering into the misty reaches of Nowheresville. Things began to go awry decades ago with *Materialism* (1993), where she interspersed her poems with page-long passages from Wittgenstein, da Vinci, Brecht, Plato, and other heavy hitters. Her work became more self-conscious and experimental, to deleterious effect. With her verbal gifts less and less in evidence, the poor reader was instead given jittery representations of thinking, and thinking about thinking, laundry baskets full. The triggering events were often trivial, but she’s solved that problem mostly by giving up events.

The corpse at the heart of our theorization of us. That turn back to look. Once again.

Ignoring the mirror. Baroque turn. *Who are* you. Non-alive. Being’s obsession. I’ll take your photograph. Are you on holiday. I need a servant. No, I need to be a
servant. That is the [only] source of pleasure now. Pleasure now. Neither one thing nor another. Between two fixed states. Decomposing. Pleasure now.

There’s a dash of physics here, a pinch of Lot’s wife there, and a lot of blather in between. She’s living purely in language, but the language is unforgiving.

Graham has for years been the great contortionist of the poetic line. There’s hardly a length to which she won’t go, and hardly a way of coiling up or spinning out a line to which she won’t stoop. A few poems in *Runaway* arrive with lines so truncated they can’t catch a breath; but most are so long they’d test the patience of a saint, going on for twenty or thirty syllables and printed in a type so small even a mouse would need a magnifying glass to read them.

One of the greatest modern novels is full of such guff, and it’s riveting. Graham’s no Joyce, unfortunately, her staccato ruminations no more attractive if you hold them upside-down and try to parse them in a looking glass. The poems pretend to skim off thought like scum off a pond, but manner alone rarely makes brain work gripping, just as conversation transcribed never achieves the crisp attention of speech purveyed by novelist or scriptwriter. Realism has its point, a point reached when the reader runs screaming from the room. Holiday snaps, anyone?

Of Graham’s two strategies these days, one is to light on some contemporary disaster—an earthquake or climate change, perhaps—and capture her frenetic meditations about what it means, no, really *means*, forcing us to sit at close quarters with a preening intelligence that delights in making slightly fatuous remarks. Alas, too many poems descend into wild-eyed ranting:

```
mayday—
no more alphabet—the skins we wear no longer sensate—the circuit of our days shut—the sensation of wings as the screen shuts down right there on the screen—the wings shells flames wavelengths interventions the revolution the counter where everyone denied everything and it all began again this was the latest news it stayed the latest news.
```

The politics aren’t deep—they’re more of the *o tempora, o mores* variety, and the final glance at Pound’s definition of literature ("news that stays news") is little help. Graham makes you wish stream of consciousness had never been invented.

The other strategy is, in good Wordsworthian fashion, to pluck a moment from an afternoon walk, say, and yammer it to death. She’ll encounter a crow, a “tall thing in a nest” and then, drawn far away by airy lucubrations, take ninety lines to get back to Mr. Crow and friends. By the time she’s
done, you never want to see a bird again, even at Thanksgiving. “Look,” she’ll shout at you, “there is still majesty, increase,/ sacrifice”:

Night in the flat pond. Moon in it/on it disposing entirely of mind. No.

Look there is desert where there was grassland there is sun-inundation like a scrupulous meditation no message just mutter of immensity where it leaks into partiality. Into you/me. Our boundaries now in the epic see-through, how they elude wholeness, let in illusion, pastness, whole years in a flash.

The poems so often suffer from terminal rambling (“One day there is no day because there is no day/ before, no yesterday, then a now, & time, & a cell/ divides and you, you are in time, time is in you, as/ multiplying now u slip into our stream”) that even if you decipher her intention (here, a conversation with a fetus) the method’s so hectoring that after a few lines you feel oxygen deprived. Her quirkiness extends to texting shorthand: “u,” “yr,” “t,” “w/”; yet in another poem, or even the same poem, we find you, your, are, and with.

Graham won the Pulitzer Prize nearly a quarter-century ago and has stacked up awards since then, but the few good lines here (“even the ruins look like they might be fake—important but fake,” “the sheep in the near field braying into day’s seeping end”) make you long for her early work. Not a poem in Runaway would have been worse had it ended after a single page.

Henri Cole’s early poems were full of swashes, galloons, and furbelows—they’d have looked great in a bridal-shop window. After three books, he retreated into a haunting, claustrophobic style, one that exchanged the designer’s fancies for the dark splendor of loneliness, sorrow, and unabated misery. Since The Visible Man two decades ago, his work has explored a world painful in its restrictions:

Bodies grow old and fester.

History is like an Impressionist painting, a variegated landscape of emotional colors. As night falls, owls, bats, and hedgehogs come out to hunt.

I take joy in considering my generation. I rewrite to be read, though I feel shame acknowledging it.

The writing is gorgeously soiled by shame. (It’s not clear whether thoughts about his generation
have been licked with schadenfreude.) The poets he has come to resemble are Larkin without the savage wit and Plath without the verbal skyrockets. Cole’s poems inch along, inch along, often making a sudden swerve at the end, a swerve both unexpected and just. He’s a poet always lurking in wait—you don’t know where the poem will go; when you find out, it’s hard to trace the breadcrumbs back to the source. I suspect he doesn’t know the ending himself until he writes it. Most of the poems in *Blizzard* choose the convenience of sonnet length—though he’s abandoned rhyme and meter, when writing he can measure exactly how long until the space runs out.5

Cole was in his late twenties when aids struck, and memories remain of the ghastly devastations of that earlier epidemic.

*Now I have seen the sun god:*

this is what I thought when I first saw you—the face,

the bearing—but perfection of form meant nothing

to you, and we were all just souls carrying around

a corpse.

These new poems are tormented by long griefs and briefer joys. So many depend on homely experience, on the “dailiness” of which Randall Jarrell once wrote, it’s hard not to be surprised when Cole starts a poem by looking at a peony and ends apologizing to a half-frozen bee for “metabolizing/ life into language, like nectar sipped/ up and regurgitated into gold.” Even in an *ars poetica,* how often is poetry described as puked-up nectar? Besides, American poetry has for more than a century advanced through gloom—since the religious devastations of Eliot if not the pinched nerves of Dickinson.

Bruised, partial, partially repressed, the emotions that surface in *Blizzard* are the more eloquent for being so rare in current American poetry, where being outspoken, making every dilemma a drama, or, worse, scattering joy like confetti claims to be our national manner. Whitman, as usual, is at fault. The poem from which Cole takes his title starkly draws the effects of depression (“As soon as I am doing nothing,/ I am not able to do anything,” “memory of feeling is not feeling,/ a parasite is not the meat it lived on”). That, in good Larkin fashion, only emphasizes the harsh metaphor of this emotional winter.

Cole’s style has grown plainer, even plain. The new poems are not so deliciously impacted as his poems in the last few books, but there are still secrets kept and dreads merely whispered. A few poems require talking animals or talking to animals, the sort that made *Blackbird and Wolf* (2007) the weakest book of his maturity (one poem here features a talking dead horse), but Cole usually ignores the impulse toward Disneyfication. His relation to the world of animals and plants is possessed by numb curiosity:
The entire fungus world is wild and unnatural.

In cottony growths on the forest floor, a few spores alight,
and, if moisture and food are available, swell and grow
into protuberances, with elongating stems and raised
caps, gills, and veils. It is not always possible to identify them—
white, black, or tan; torn, bruised, or crushed—
some with squat fruit-bodies, others lacelike.

All this Marianne Moore-ish attention to the usually unattended has a point—and Cole always has a point: “I experience/ desire creating desire, and then some milder version/ of a love that is temporary and guiltless, as if twigs/ and bark were giving my life back its own flavor.” This reinforces the terrifying loneliness revealed sometimes by accident, sometimes by design, sometimes not revealed at all.

Such a poet maintains properties of organization and proprieties of manner that allow his poems to exist, with few exceptions, in the closely regulated routine of domestic space with hints but not evidence of a life. We can draw little information (a grand jury would find nothing worth indicting) from the appeal to the daily rounds of fractured incident. He’ll even borrow from Apollinaire to maintain the illusion:

I lived in a rooming house then
and tried to be good but was a real
disappointment. A man without cunning
is like an empty matchbox. I can’t remember
now the sad, slow procession of words
between us.

Cole is able to work his transformations of the everyday almost without effort—it’s remarkable what he can do with nothing more than peeling potatoes, addressing a few dandelions, waiting for a cat to die. If not all the new poems are fully successful, most are better than almost anything I’ve read this year. Cole is on the very short list of poets who long ago should have won the Pulitzer.
1 *If Men, Then*, by Eliza Griswold; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 84 pages, $24.


3 *Beowulf: A New Translation*, by Maria Dahvana Headley; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 140 pages, $15 (paper).


5 *Blizzard*, by Henri Cole; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 64 pages, $24.


This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 39 Number 4, on page 66.

Copyright © 2021 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com
https://newcriterion.com/issues/2020/12/cartes-de-visite