

into a depth
you cannot be sure of
toward a source
you cannot see?

Gregor's earnestness, his work's hard-won transcendence and his conscious abandonment of irony to achieve these, are born of terrifying historical events. The Polish poet Adam Zagajewski, a dissident in the 1970s, whose work, as a result, was barely published, and who immigrated to Paris following the attack on Solidarity and implementation of martial law, also pleads for poetry that is a solid path toward an imperceptible essence. To this end, he observes that irony is an inadequate "gaze" that sees but doesn't penetrate." Other necessary contemporary poets who largely relinquish irony in search of an immanent ineffable reality and spiritual consciousness are Charles Wright, Jorie Graham, Kathleen Peirce and Carl Phillips.

Gregor's meditations in "Retrieval" are risky in a wholly original way that does not comply with literary imperatives for irony. Poems radiate outward and recede as if along a painting's vanishing point. Language and form have the hypnotic effect of music, sound-waves present and evanescent reverberating around what they mean but cannot name. Indeed, art and music provide more than tropes; they become what the work is translated into, just as spiritual journey structures the individual poems and the collection itself.

Gregor's refrains and repeated images emphasize his poems' determined questioning and awe; crescendos and decrescendos build toward awareness and silence, or plummet with despair when essence seems not present. Irregular rhyme schemes add to the work's music as does the pressured syntax, by which accretions of subordinate clauses are sustained like held breath before arriving at a main clause. His diction alternates between the conversational and mandarin, becoming more direct in the newest work as if to make more room for epiphany. As in Celan's later work, Gregor's most recent poems grow less imagistic, although crystal images still appear throughout.

It is Arthur Gregor's genius as a poet to make of abstraction and of the spiritual something solid that simultaneously remains atmospheric, like light and shadow windblown on rock, or like *chiaroscuro* through which figures emerge mysteriously from darkness to illumination.

—Yerra Sugarman

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FACTS FOR VISITORS. Srikanth Reddy. University of California Press, 2004.

Is there such a thing as a perfect first book? We should hope not. Such a phenomenon is not to be wished on any young poet. Instead, we might hope for debuts like Srikanth Reddy's. Here are poems that explore and transform traditional and experimental forms, discover over and over what a line is, and seek out all sorts of registers. Here are instruction manuals, declarations, spare and startling images, and aphoristic epiphanies. Taking off from Dante, St. Augustine, and Sebald, among others, Reddy leads us through an underworld of his own making filled with dubious and mythic tales of burials, lovers, a man in a bear suit, gryphons, scarecrows, and speakers whose musings and directives are at once unreliable and necessary.

It is difficult not to come away impressed with the sonic pleasures of these poems, which are often made possible by bits of narrative and surprising forms. Reddy shows a particular gift for the aphoristic. Statements like, "[A]ll it takes is a meadow and nerve" and "Some men will make a grave out of anything" and "A finger upraised is the firmament. The hand extended palm forward means blessing or stop," appear enough times to demand the reader's attention.

Perhaps most impressive though is Reddy's ability to move between traditional and experimental forms and to do so in a way that seems entirely necessary to the poem at hand. For example, in "First Circle," the first of his poems after Dante's circles of hell, Reddy deftly manages to address us from limbo in terza rima, Dante's form. At the end of the third tercet, the speaker tells us:

...We have done no wrong,

my friends, & yet we find ourselves soiled,
sold, carbonized teeth in a moss-riven jaw.
Once I sat on a stool as my grandmother told

me of heaven. She cleaned fish for our living. I saw
how her rusty black knife unseamed the sunset
in each belly—coral, ochre, carmine, raw,

lice-infested sunsets in a pail...

Whether slant or full, the rhymes here score the speaker's memories of his grandmother and the world above, while still allowing for leaps of thought and language. The poem later breaks its form, however, and

ends with an image just as striking as the fish guts-sunset connection above, of a "lone cricket / raving in the lawn." This last half-line seems completely unbidden, until one realizes that "lawn" completes the only previously unrhymed line-ending, "We have done no wrong," not to mention the echo of the raw/saw/jaw rhymes. In a poem that harkens back to the world from limbo, the final half-line both satisfies and unsettles, and reveals both a formal maturity and a willingness to turn form on its head.

Several other "circle" poems veer from terza rima into villanelles, prose and even a brief take on greed and prodigality in syllabics. For a poem that obliquely addresses lust, "Second Circle" utilizes the obsessive-nature of the villanelle, while varying its repeating lines just enough each time to startle us. It ends provocatively, "...Strap me back on that wheel. / I'm on my knees at last. I've learned how to kneel."

In other poems, Reddy also shows his formal and linguistic dexterity. In one of two eclogues that use loose stanzas and a lighter tone, after putting a poem in the hand of a scarecrow, the speaker notes, "The oxen snorted nearby / & there was a sense of publication / but not much else was different." In "Everything," Reddy's couplets play against the title by providing the narrative fragments of a story we do not know. In "Palinode," one of the last poems in the book, prose supplies the means to negate and retract images, facts, and narrative threads—both those from earlier poems and those only tangentially related to them.

Being a first collection, there are weak moments here—moments when Reddy perhaps falls prey to his own lyric gifts and influences. While several of the prose poems, including the two "Corruption" poems and "Palinode," are among his strongest, he leans heavily on the supposed formlessness of prose. Almost a third of the poems here are in prose, and at times the use of this and other more experimental forms seems forced. One reads "Raven & Eclipse" and cannot help but wonder if line breaks would provide the pacing it needs to highlight and set up its often startling leaps. A sentence like, "As usual the X-rays were inconclusive though beautiful & made a fine sunshade for viewing the next day's eclipse," is not as engaging or as easily read and comprehended when left in prose. Similarly, Reddy is so fluid that when he eschews punctuation and messes with his syntax in "Centaur," it comes off feeling like more of an exercise than a poem.

Nevertheless, these moments are relatively few, and, as Hardy once noted in a preface to his *Late Lyrics*, it is not fair "to judge the landscape by a nocturnal exploration with a flash-lantern." There are enough jaw-dropping images and turns of phrase to make *Facts for*

Visitors a first book worth reading and rereading.

In "Jungle Book," Reddy takes a more narrative path, less-filled with verbal fireworks, yet still manages to surprise and affect us. He begins, "Once as we scavenged in the jungle I asked my friend / about sadness." The friend replies "First learn about jackfruit," before giving instructions on opening the small seeds inside the fruit. At the end of the poem, Reddy toes the line between the concrete and the surreal: he closes with an epiphany—a traditional place to end, for sure—but he also undercuts the epiphany, just a little:

... There was a very small tree

folded up inside, with one pale leaf on a stem
the length of an eyelash. It sprang to life
& put out hundreds of jackfruit blossoms all at once

but when I started to speak they blew everywhere.

—Gibson Fay-LeBlanc

A BED OF NAILS. Ron Tanner. BkMk Press, 2003.

This is not an especially bold collection of stories, but there is, in the first story, one moment of breathtaking courage. Cooper, an artist, struggles to come to terms with his wife's afflictions—first Bell's palsy, then cancer—and his own ambitions. Early in the story, we learn that Cooper labors under the weight of a very specific form of self-doubt: "Although he was a good craftsman, good at the technicalities, it seemed to him that his work, taken as a whole, articulated nothing in particular—there was no center of gravity, no unifying theme" (11).

Because Cooper is an artist (the writer's reliable stand-in), and because his assessment so presciently anticipates the collection itself, this reads not as a minor plot point but as a brave—almost reckless—admission. It's as if Tanner is playing his weakest card as his trump. I know what's missing, he seems to say. So don't go looking for it.

Sure enough, if you want thematic coherence, you won't find it here. *A Bed of Nails* is guided by a number of concerns, and you can, if you want, divide the stories into neat little groups. Four of the stories form a set of dystopian episodes narrated by different members of a family. Two of the stories—the collection's bookends—are about male artists whose wives suffer from Bell's palsy. Three stories concern