

Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry

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***The Hamlet of Stittville* by Alan Berecka. John Klossner, illustrator. (Tale Feathers Press, 2017)**

In August of 2017, I received an envelope with *The Hamlet of Stittville* inside. It was the time Hurricane Harvey hit Corpus Christi, Texas. The poet works in Corpus Christi as a librarian at Del Mar College. Berecka's poems are a good antidote for pain and loss in disasters, both personal and natural. His poems are frequently very funny.

This reviewer remembers first meeting Alan in Belton, Texas, at the University of Mary Hardin Baylor over seventeen years ago. We were both attending a writers' fest sponsored by *The Windhover*, a now semi-annual journal of Christian literature. At the time we spoke of how many writers published in *The Windhover* were Roman Catholic. Times change. *The Windhover* now appears twice a year, and the Windhover Writers' Fest is at a different time. Alan no longer goes to Mass in a Catholic Church.

Some things have not changed in Berecka's poetry. There is still a lot of humor. He still shares poems about his mother and father. He still wrestles with his Faith. In the "The Perils of Harold Bloom," Berecka begins with a reflection of Jorge Borges, blind Argentine writer, who the poem says wanted to believe all literature was inspired by the Holy Spirit, before wondering aloud why a deity would write so many bad books. His poem concludes:

If the Spirit has written this poem, it's the critic
who risks his soul by blaspheming the holiest
of Ghosts writers, an occupational hazard
not worth the risk for most of us non-atheists.

Berecka's poems continue, even though he is a "fallen-away" Catholic, to echo Catholic teachings. He grew up in a Polish Catholic family in upstate New York., then earned a degree from The University of Dallas, a Catholic school. His poems in this volume are informed by his studies, his readings of scripture, Old and New Testaments, and by Church doctrine.

In "Beatification" he writes about what it means to be a saint, revealed in exchanges between an elderly parishioner and a missionary talking down to her. In "Invested" he grapples with the concept of purgatory, while showing how another "lapsed Catholic" like him "bitched / about the Anglican brotherhood not believing / in purgatory, how that seemed like a blown / chance for a couple of guys who had crossed / a line or two during our time." But the two poets still cheered for Notre Dame football. His tone is frequently irreverent, but the subjects are stone cold, serious.

Respect for his parents is a hallmark of his poetry. His father, a welder, is always good for a laugh. His dad was a veteran of the Merchant Marines. In "Bon Voyage" Berecka recounts how his sister asked her father on his death bed what country he would most like to see again: "*Brazil*. [. . .] Why?" Honest, as always, he replied, "*Da Broads!*"

Two other poems delve into the deep emotions of his love for his mother. In "Remission" he documents her pain, and her drugs for her pain, after a botched operation. Once she spoke: "*Jesus take me*." He expresses how her "Gaudy jewelry / Rosaries, medals, / brown scapulars / adorn but do not comfort / her foreign shape" and "for one moment" conflates the image of his nephew "nesting by her side" with a memory of his mother nursing him to health during a childhood fever: "I stare at my mother's / apparition nursing / my childlike ghost."

In another poem, "Fueling Desperation," he honors his long-suffering mother. This poem describes her eating with groans as she labors to feed herself, not comfort. As her son he cannot comfort her much either:

I signaled her, my paper napkin a semaphore.
She rested her fork to unsoil her face. Unsated
and exhausted, each night she returned to isolation
leaving me to deal with the guilt of my relief.

This is a powerful homage. A beautiful poem of son to Mother.

"Form As Metaphor or An Apology to Randomness" is a poem central to the idea behind John Klossner's monkey cartoons in the book. The lines of the poem replicate what a monkey might write if given a typewriter, but what Berecka always writes about emerges in larger font among the lines: "I need to believe [. . .] I doubt [. . .] I want to understand." The central conceit in these poems is how monkeys—if allowed to type on endless machines—could replicate the work of Shakespeare. Hamlet is not just a village, but an allusion to the play.

This collection will advance Alan Berecka as a poet of his region and as a writer of Faith, nevertheless with irreverence and a sense of pathos. The illustrations by his friend from childhood reinforce the role that humor has always played in Berecka's faith.

Michael Hugh Lythgoe is a contributing editor for *The Windhover*. He has been nominated for a Pushcart prize. Mike has published in *Blue Streak*, *Francis and Clare in Poetry*, *A Gradual Twilight*, *Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry*, *Nights of Horseplay*, *Caribbean Writer*, *The Petigru Review*, *Kakalak*, *Sixfold*, *New Mexico Review*, *Catfish Stew*, *Innisfree*, *Christianity and Literature*, *Cairn*. He has an MFA from Bennington College, and degrees from St. Louis University and The University of Notre Dame. Born in Evansville, Indiana, he currently lives in Aiken, South Carolina, where he attends St. Mary Help of Christians Catholic Church.

***The Paraclete Poetry Anthology: 2005-2016
Selected and New Poems***, edited by Mark S.
Burrows (Paraclete Press, 2016)

This collection of new and selected work of thirteen poets, all of whom have had books published by Paraclete, is a treasure trove of some of the finest spiritual poetry being written and translated today. The poets are as familiar as Rilke, Scott Cairns, Paul Mariani, and Thomas Lynch, and as new to most readers as Rabbi Rami Shapiro, SAID, Bonnie Thurston, and Father John-Julian. The editor, Mark S. Burrows, who is also Paraclete's Series Editor for poetry and poetry editor of the journal *Spiritus*, is the translator of the poems of Rilke and those of SAID, an Iranian who settled in Germany (where Burrows teaches) and one of that country's most renowned poets. Additional poets Burrows has edited in the Paraclete series and that appear here are Paul Quenon, William Woolfitt, Greg Miller, Phyllis Tickle, and Anna Kamieńska.

Burrows provides an introduction to the collection which actually is as delightful a "way in" to poetry (which he calls "wholespeak," after Les Murray) as I have read in some time. "We are made for poems," Burrows says. "They animate our soul, that part of the self beyond the reach of worldly ambition and outward achievement. They hold before us the dimension