

Greg Johnson

an excerpt from

*White Heat**

“Dare you see a Soul *at the White Heat?*” asked Emily Dickinson in one of her most arresting poems, and one might reasonably respond that, when reading poetry, one doesn’t want to see anything else. Poetry, Dickinson felt, must arise from a white-hot urgency expressed through what she liked to call, in another image of whiteness, the “pearl” of literary achievement. In *Sexual Personae*, Camille Paglia’s brilliant discussion of Dickinson’s work notes that the poet’s sense of urgency stems from “a stupefying energy. Words are rammed into lines with such force that syntax shatters and collapses into itself.” Dickinson’s own definition of poetic achievement was similarly violent, and highly subjective—“If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off,” she told her friend T. W. Higginson, “I know that is poetry.”

In the sometimes humdrum world of contemporary poetry, that feeling is rare enough; what we see too often today is writing that is skillful, but careful and ultimately forgettable. Perhaps what we value most in our great nineteenth-century forebears—Dickinson, Whitman, Poe—is the unashamed *intensity* of their best work, their willingness to take risks. Although it is surely unfair to hold any contemporary poet, including those reviewed here, to the standards of these great geniuses, one does hope to find in today’s writers a willingness to adopt a similar approach, to allow themselves both to feel and to write with as much passionate energy as possible.

Confronted with the five new volumes of poetry considered here, this reviewer found much to admire, and not only in terms of such energy; some of the individual poems display enough originality and artistic excellence that they could stand credibly alongside the work of the above-named classic poets in an anthology of American verse. One of these volumes did, to this reader’s ear, suffer from a general laxness and

*An essay-review of

A LITTLE SALVATION: POEMS OLD AND NEW. By Judson Mitcham. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. 159 pp. \$18.95, paper.

OUTLAW STYLE. By R. T. Smith. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007. 109 pp. \$16.00, paper.

FOILED AGAIN. By J. Allyn Rosser. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007. 83 pp. \$22.50.

CLEANING A RAINBOW. By Gary Gildner. Kansas City: BkMk Press, 2007. 77 pp. \$13.95, paper.

A NEW HUNGER. By Laure-Anne Bosselaar. Keene, NY: Ausable Press, 2007. 69 pp. \$16.00, paper.

tendency toward cliché, but otherwise these books collectively invite the reader to experience the “white heat” of creativity in distinctively contemporary terms.