

Jeff Gundy

an excerpt of

*Hard Books**

Unlike many people in our online world, I still spend half an hour with a newspaper every morning. But I also spend a goodly part of most days gazing at a computer screen—some of it working at my teaching and writing, some browsing politics and sports, gossip and Facebook narcissism. This latter material is sometimes absorbing, but I know that almost none of it is serious or lasting, and most of it is trivial by design. How different, then, to open a box full of hard-bound books of poems: to lift out the glossy, heavy volumes two or three at a time, place them in small piles on the table, crack open the creamy pages between those solid covers one by one.

Even in the era of the Kindle and YouTube and Twitter, the aura of the hardback book has not been entirely destroyed. The tangible costliness and physicality of such artifacts, their solidity and implied permanence, run against the tide of ephemeral electrons that washes over the planet. Even the names of authors and publishers—often with literary histories that go back for decades, sometimes for generations—suggest that persistence over time is still real, and that being of the moment is not the only value.

Sturdy cloth covers, it is true, rarely house the most daring experiments or frontal assaults on literary norms. The poets and books under review here are, by the very material conditions of their publication, part of the establishment—though of course the poetry establishment itself is far less monochromatic and monovocal than it was fifty years ago. Still, literary experimentation and poverty tend to be close companions, and other forms of publication, especially online, are far less costly, and often less competitive. One very good younger poet told me recently that these days he mostly

*An essay-review of

THE DANCE MOST OF ALL. By Jack Gilbert. New York: Albert A. Knopf, 2009. 60 pp. \$25.00.

ROMANTICISM. By April Bernard. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2009. 70 pp. \$23.95.

THE SHADOW OF SIRIUS. By W. S. Merwin. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2009. 117 pp. \$22.00.

IN SEARCH OF SMALL GODS. By Jim Harrison. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2009. 87 pp. \$22.00.

CONTINUUM. By Nina Cassian. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2009. 104 pp. \$23.95.

THE BORDER KINGDOM: POEMS. By D. Nurkse. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. 98 pp. \$26.00.

INSEMINATING THE ELEPHANT. By Lucia Perillo. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2009. 93 pp. \$22.00.

publishes his poems on his own blog. True, at least one of the youngest poets reviewed here was featured on the “Harriet” blog of the Poetry Foundation recently—but that location itself is surely as representative of the poetry establishment as anyplace else online.

Even so, as I explored the contents of my treasure box and set aside a number of volumes, some quickly and some with great reluctance—even this magazine’s generous editors would never have found enough pages for all the books I would have liked to review—I found considerable variety between those hard covers. In particular, the books create, inhabit, and explore quite diverse landscapes and scenes. To some extent this is a matter of lexicon and vocabulary, to some extent a question of “voice,” but even more it has to do with these texts’ relation to the popular culture and technology of our time. Some of the collections are jam-packed with references to the things of their moment; some poets have clearly, deliberately avoided topical and popular references. All published within a year or two of each other, sometimes the books I examined seem to inhabit different centuries, if not different worlds entirely. They resemble each other more than they do blog entries or Renaissance sonnets or the lyrics of Sappho—but some are much more like blog entries, and others more like Renaissance sonnets, and others more like the lyrics of Sappho.

What does it mean, then, to select not only a particular way of *representing* the world, but a particular *world* as well? For some writers—Jack Gilbert and W. S. Merwin, for instance—these choices seem to stem from a restraint that is deliberate, conscious, and part of a broad sense of what sort of life is worth living. For others, such as Jim Harrison and Lucia Perillo, the poetry seems to emerge almost without censorship, from a life lived with less sense of control and greater immersion in the contemporary welter. Surely both of these senses are at least partly illusory on my part, but they suggest a continuum between control and abandon (literary, linguistic, and no doubt related to particular life choices as well) that helps us to locate where the authors of these hard-backed, hard books begin. There is much *more* to say about where they go.