

"EVERYTHING SEEN IN A HALO OF MEANING":

CHRISTOPHER BUCKLEY'S *FALL FROM GRACE*

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I am here to talk about Christopher Buckley's latest collection of poetry, *Fall From Grace* from BkMk Press. But before I do, please indulge me. I'd like to talk about some of my favorite poets. Charles Wright says (I'm paraphrasing) that he's got three obsessions in his poetry—landscape, language, and God. Being Catholic, I nod, accept it, and for no real good reason feel a little guilty about it. Elizabeth Bishop is obsessed with maybe two of these three, but we don't mark her down, do we? She pulls it off with maps and in waiting rooms, among others. James Wright, same thing. Two for three. You might be able to argue that he's only going one for three, affectionately and invectively located in Ohio most of the time. He doesn't lose any points with me, though. Larry Levis is my favorite of the bunch. But I read somewhere that his project was creating a palpable *absence* of landscape. That makes him 0 for 3. Or does it?

Christopher Buckley's obsessions revise and extend this list. *Fall From Grace* is the latest installment of Buckley's eloquent synthesis of language, landscape, memory, and the soul. *Fall From Grace* shows us once more, as Philip Levine puts it in the forward, that Buckley has "the gifts—a fine gift for the music of language, a sharp eye for physical detail, a large and rich vocabulary, and a deep concern for the earth and all of us who inhabit it."

The opening line of the book, "We want things.// Right now,..." is inclusive in its urgency. The dilemma of desire is the book's thread and it sings here because of its

directness in phrasing. But listen to this later passage from the same poem, “The Poverty of Clouds:”

By the bear-shaped lake of Oso Flaco  
  
stars rose yellow as the coreopsis,  
  
I collected whale bone, seal spine and sand dollars  
  
that turned quickly back to sand.

These lines, like much of the book, are suffused with alliteration and assonance that we’re almost swept away from the matter at hand. This carefully arranged music, however, does not deflect Buckley’s take on the world—that there is poverty in all our lives, which is not a wholly original idea. What poet worth reading neglects this? It’s where the poet finds it and how the poet says it that individualizes the work—immigrant fry cooks, grade school recess, Wittgenstein, carvings in a park bench, in the memory of himself,

Where there is only the fading moon  
  
its burden of ash and borrowed light  
  
as if he feels the world blowing right through him,  
  
as if he wasn't there...

A poem about death, among other things, with a moon in it is risky business. But Buckley's voice—unique in its frequent calm and sagacious longing—carries him, and us, into these closing lines that perhaps bring us as close as we can get to visualizing our own passing. It's a lovely moment nevertheless.

There is something beautiful about our passing, Buckley insists, perhaps because we all must do it. His poems are Whitmanic in this way, with their long, inclusive embrace. And unlike poets who take Death as their muse, Buckley prefers Beauty. If Death is part and parcel of that Beauty, then so be it. In "Opera," an elegy for William Matthews, Buckley manages to simultaneously rejoice and lament his own mortality:

...this is serious, I keep hearing, we are all going to die,

hopelessly though, and at last in love with the world.

By now, most my aspirations let go, blown by me like litter

along the road, I'm just happy to be breathing, to be soaring...

Certainly, what Buckley says has import. But, I am more engaged with his ability to weave the metaphysical and Keatsian notion of acquiring the soul into the poem while, of all things, driving down the highway in "a silver, full-size sedan." Negative Capability, as Keats put it, is at work here. There's no reach for reason, but rather an

acceptance, a kind of ecstatic lament, as one critic called it, that we see in the work of Gerald Stern, and more slyly at times with William Matthews. Such weighty topics worked into a rather mundane setting ring true for me. Buckley is wise to leave the melodrama to "Carreras, Domingo, and Pavarotti. A chorus of blue above..." him. The longer lines, too, sustain the music and rhythm of longing:

...I want some singing  
about that—all the red and blue bright threads spun out  
from our hearts, spooled above the gilt-edged clouds,  
above the scraps of flesh and diminuendos of ordinary time.  
I want this feeling of atoms falling out of the crystal orbits  
of the earth...

The elastic accents rise and fall line to line, and always are controlled by the timbres of Buckley's lush vocabulary. The last line, in contrast, is stark and just as powerful: "But this is serious, we are all going to die." It resonates in its minimalism.

Epiphanies like these, universal yet jarring, appear more than once throughout the book and never feel forced. Other times Buckley arrives at it interrogatively: "... how many days// left between the blue and the blue?" or "Where// does it all blow through to, and where does it stop?" Here, in the book's second to last poem "Against

the Blue," Buckley merges the musicality of his language with platitudinous questions most of us would rather not ask. The poem is ultimately concerned with the soul—Buckley's, our own—and how, if at all, the soul is energized through existing in the patiently violent, yet beautiful, physical world:

Isn't it enough  
  
that you were here in the yellow evening,  
  
glistening in your own salt, and the wind  
  
moved one way or the other, and the days held  
  
on long enough for you to breathe the light  
  
worn off the sandstone walls and call  
  
your life your own over the sea kelps  
  
and the fish content in the tides, as if the eyes  
  
that God sees us with demanded any more  
  
than this distracted love.

The answer must be yes. Buckley answers himself through his acute observation of the landscape. In the penultimate line Buckley makes that critical and inevitable leap

to the supernatural, a move that risks the unattainable. Beauty sometimes is enough, and he has it in this poem.

There is perseverance behind these poems. There is a forceful, lyrical eloquence in these poems. We are better off with his poetry because, as the book's final lines remind us, it does matter "how the grass turns brown, how its yellow tips// burn, provisional as the stars."