

# BOOK REVIEWS

*U.P.*

by R.A. Riecki

Ghost Road Press, 2008

There are two ways a reader coming to R.A. Riecki's harsh and hilarious debut novel *U.P.* might say its title. The temptation is "Up," as in skyward, with its suggestion of ambition and upward movement. Or: "You pee," as in piss," which is how Craig, one of the novel's four teenage narrators, puts it in his introductory chapter. The latter is the preferred pronunciation of Craig and his friends—and fellow narrators—Hollow, Antony, and J. But the irony of the former is lost on no one. "This is about that undiscovered treasure," Hollow tells us, "the U.P. 'Someplace special,' as TV6 reminds. But, as Craig says, 'special' is a term reserved for the retarded."

It is 1989, and Craig, Hollow, Antony, and J. are all cousins, all best friends—"if best friends can be family members"—and they're all Yoopers. "Yoopers," Hollow explains, "are people from the U.P. It stands for Upper Peninsula, which is the top part of Michigan. Occasionally it is omitted from maps... Antony says the U.P. looks like a gun. Craig says it looks like a turd." For the rest of us, however, it usually looks like part of Wisconsin since it is not part of the hand shape that most people picture when they think of Michigan. In chapters that switch perspectives between these four, Riecki gives us a startlingly vivid and visceral tour of the U.P., a place that is, as its geography suggests, undefined by a larger cultural identity. In the novel's opening paragraph, Hollow defines it

more by what it lacks. He writes, "A cousin of mine, Craig, says nothing good has ever come out of the U.P. No one from the U.P. would ever get interviewed by Johnny Carson. No actors or comedians or pro athletes (skiers are not athletes) come from the U.P..."

Craig, the youngest, lifts weights and keeps a long list of all the girls he's slept with, and a considerably shorter list of his favorite metal albums (he ranks Slayer's *Reign in Blood* below Queensrÿche's *Operation: Mindcrime*, but we can take that as further evidence of his naïveté). "Queensrÿche inspired me to change my name from Craig to Cräig," he tells us. Antony wants to be a rapper and waxes philosophical about Dr. Dre and Ice Cube. J. has cerebral palsy and listens to punk. Hollow sees his escape in joining the military. Their voices are frenetic and exhilarating. They hate everything; they are passionately apathetic; and they have a thing or two to tell you about how the world works. They are the kind of Angry Young Men who contemporary authors have struggled to free from post-Holden Caulfield anxiety. But Riecki carries none of that baggage into the novel. He hands his narrative over to his characters completely, and in doing so he gives us narrators who are at once intimately familiar and entirely new.

Good prose is pretty. But great prose is schizophrenic; it is a sentence that fights against itself, language that exists in a state of contradiction. Riecki pushes the vulgar into a state of ecstatic poetry, and the more inarticulate his characters seem to think they are—the greater the smokescreen they put up in front of the reader—the more revealing their prose

becomes. Comedy and pathos play tug-of-war with every word of this novel. The characters are both charming and offensive at the same time, as when Craig tells us, “My favorite thing about people is when you get to have sex with them. That rules, especially if they don’t have AIDS. That makes it even more special, and romantic.”

Hollow’s opening chapter ends with, “But let’s begin at the beginning of the end, which, really, was a year ago, eleven months, an eleven months that whizzed by like trees through a car window,” which gives us the ominous sense of impending doom, of a series of events that will lead inexorably to tragedy, but after that Riecki seems less concerned with “hooking” the reader with a runaway-train plot and more concerned with giving it over to four runaway-train narrators. Riecki points to the dark horizon but is in no rush to get there. He cedes control to the narrators, letting all sense of plot disappear into their profane, tangential, recursive stories. We learn about another Yooper hitting Antony with a baseball bat, about J. getting his first tattoo with his dad and wanting to go to college, about Craig working at a graveyard selling plots when what he really wants to do is dig them. The reader is pulled through by voice, not plot, only to discover in the final chapters that what might have seemed haphazard or discursive has really been elliptical; this whole time Riecki has been quietly circling, in ever-tightening loops, the novel’s tragic and inevitable climax.

—Kevin Allardice

*Biogeography*

by Sandra Meek

Tupelo Press, 2008

Even as we are made fearful by talk of tsunamis, global warming, or phenomena on a smaller scale—ice formations on the wings of airplanes, for instance—it is refreshing to read poet Sandra Meek’s *Biogeography*, an examination of our uncertain relationship with Earth. *Biogeography*, the 2006 winner of Tupelo Press’s Dorset Prize, is concerned with materials, with blood, bone, rock, and steel. As Meek travels between landscapes, she dissolves our notion of the separateness of nature and humanity, of physicality and time. “Quaternary,” the title of the book’s first section, refers to the geologic time period in which humans have existed. By using the name of a time scale defined through stratigraphy, the study of rock layers, Meek establishes the book’s concern with the interconnectivity of time and space. The title of the book’s first poem, “Chronographia,” means a description of time, but the poem starts spatially: “Begin at mile zero.” By her first line, Meek has introduced us to the tension at the heart of *Biogeography*: the human’s difficult navigation of an unpredictable, ever-changing earth in the context of unyielding time.

Meek writes, “the body’s adrift / in *when*, saturated with *since*.” By looking at the rings of a tree, a “fan of veins/ purpling” an ankle, the darker layers of soil that reveal oceans that once covered the continent, Meek shows us that the earth and the human body can act as natural clocks. Her poems have a knowing but never didactic tone as she explores the relationship between nature and the human form. She reminds us of the body’s earthly beauty: a woman’s exploding heart “spill[s] her room // to a startling ruby.” The body is “a clay vase

thrown / around an absent fist." She asks, Are the earth and the human at odds, or are they part of each other? How do they shape each other, imitate each other? Of weather, she writes, "We are its children." And yet, there is danger in this relationship. Meek envisions an earth that is blindly powerful and a human race that cannot help but be its mirror. Manmade objects imitate those from the sky: "wooden cross / starring the roadside; silver jet trail / expanding as it fades, underscoring then canceling the clouds' / inscrutable calligraphy." And this calligraphy, writing, is also key; language is a code. Words are "landscape, and climatology, the theory / of our eminent end." The "eminent"/"imminent" pun is crucial. Meek depicts nature's temperament as both majestic and threatening.

*Biogeography's* poems place us on the precipice of disaster even as they celebrate the world. In "Event One," our violent human history is seen in soil sections: "138 feet, Atlanta / is burning; 2500 feet down, Socrates sips hemlock." But the buried past isn't past alone—it's warning. Meek writes, "What calmed / six thousand years ago stopped // the wandering; cities were born, and alphabets," but the physical evidence of an instant ice age shows "that lost theory of doom, not global warming's / slow slippage, but *what can calm / can craze again.*" Meek believes that nature may owe us nothing.

A loose hierarchy is established: earth, human, technology. Still, all are connected, all spring from the same origin and have power. As Meek describes the mechanics of these relationships, she is concerned with the body's fragility, how technology can keep us breathing, kill us, become us. A car crash disfigures a woman; doctors "carved the crushed leg // away from her stalled body, which felt its leaving // as an expansion of light." But in

"Coma," she asks, "What sound does the soul make / leaving the body? And how distinguish it / from the machine's pump and sigh / from steel / crashing against steel?"

Meek's language is bold and crashing even as it acknowledges its smallness against infinite time, infinite biological and geologic shifts. She masterfully places the personal against the global, making monumental jumps. In "*Om, with Kelp and Crows*" the contrast of images is staggering: "A shrimp caught above tide / spirals between rocks, one small // margin of terror. A mountain boils / to the south, readying // to blow." Amazingly, these disparate images can inhabit the same space. In the world of *Biogeography*, it isn't presumptuous to assume that when a skater crushes her wrist by falling on hard ice, that same ice will almost drown a woman who "drags her rescuer /... climbing his body / mid-lake," or that that ice has a more global power, is the first sign of a climatological shift.

Meek's exercises in contrast and spatial definition are flat at times (a hummingbird "[dives] into the bay window // demonstrating *not sky*") but ultimately forgivable in light of other successes: "What weather taught: milk breath / on the pane meant *self.*" Meek is at her best when she shows us how to define ourselves through nature. In the book's third section, she explores the near tectonic force of political and religious violence. "Fort Zeelandia" concerns the December Murders that took place in Suriname, 1982, in which fifteen people were executed for opposing the country's military regime. As the poet imagines the victims "cut down to symbols of dissent," she notes how the distance of time and space can appear to erase catastrophe: "Twenty-one years, and no one has answered / for those knocks in the night....What can't be seen from space:

the Great Wall // crumbling, coral reefs / boiling to oblivion.”

The language of *Biogeography* seamlessly moves between hope and quiet apprehension. In “Chronographia” the poet writes, “the forest floor / littered with possibility, pine needles knit / like wishbones’ twinned arms. / Break one: luck’s what remains / most whole.” A cross section of these packed lines might resemble layers of sediment: the conflicting emotions of these revelations are stacked upon each other, not so that we read pleasure on one line and pain on the next, but pleasure and pain together. These moments of tension are so fragile, so based in that beautiful and subtle doubleness of words, that they risk invisibility. How easily we might miss the dark undercurrent and blame of the phrase “littered with possibility,” but Meek takes the risk. Eventually these tricks of language build to form a thunderous, collective power. The result is a book so deeply textured that it is nearly felt on the skin.

—Jazzy Danziger

*Ms. Hempel Chronicles*

by Sarah Shun-lien Bynum  
Harcourt, Inc., 2008

The second novel from National Book Award finalist Sarah Shun-lien Bynum, *Ms. Hempel Chronicles*, is the story of Beatrice Hempel, a seventh-grade teacher navigating, alongside her students, the difficulties of growing up. The novel is structured as a series of eight linked stories—most of which were previously published in literary journals and magazines, such as *TriQuarterly*, *Tin House*, and *The New Yorker*—that comprise nearly a decade of

Ms. Hempel’s life. Anyone who has survived the seventh grade will likely appreciate this slim book and its earnest portrayal of a teacher’s coming of age both inside and outside the classroom.

Beatrice Hempel is immediately rendered as a woman aware of the ever-watchful eyes of students, parents, and colleagues. She is a teacher who, before the school’s talent show, applies lipstick in the faculty lounge in preparation for meeting and greeting parents. She is exhausted by self-consciousness, worried about “getting chalk dust in her hair or, less frequently, on the tips of her breasts when she would stretch up on her toes and write the homework assignments across the top of the blackboard.” She is young and uncertain, engaged to a man whose sexual requests alarm her, and still freshly grieving her father’s death one year after the fact.

Although Bynum plunges into territory that could be—and, in other teacher novels, is—predictable, she manages to avoid drawing precious parallels between the teacher’s and students’ psychological and emotional growth. This is not a novel about Ms. Hempel’s seventh grade class, nor is it one about the perils of teaching young people in a public school system. This novel is about Beatrice Hempel, a woman who happens to be a teacher, among other things. Although the stories are separate enough to be taken out of order, reading them as they are arranged by Bynum will likely prove to be the best experience. While some are set in the classroom, others draw us back into Ms. Hempel’s punk-rock adolescence: a time when she maintained an anonymous affair over the phone, mourned her parents’ separation, and “practiced sticking her [invisible] cigarette between the tuning pegs of her guitar, which was also, at this point, invisible.”

By using each story to showcase Ms. Hempel's past or present, Bynum constantly presents new dimensions of her character, thus pushing the reader to understand that this woman is a dynamic and complicated person, as much student as she is teacher.

The school environment is not the singular setting in *Ms. Hempel Chronicles*, but it is a formative one in this sliver of Ms. Hempel's life. The reader is introduced to student Jonathan Hamish, the Holden Caulfield of the classroom—a comparison that Ms. Hempel herself draws before learning of Jonathan's disdain for that character: "Ms. Hempel was surprised; she had hoped Jonathan would like Holden, might see in him a kindred spirit. How stupid, she realized later, bent over in the faculty bathroom, sobbing, the faucet turned as far as it could go: that is precisely the reason he hates Holden Caulfield." The reader meets Mr. Polidori, "whom the yearbook had voted the sexiest teacher for three years in a row," physics instructor and wearer of Converse sneakers. And, of course, Ms. Duffy of the fifth-grade: the teacher who lost her sanity and escaped to Yemen; returns for visit, pregnant and happy; and convinces Ms. Hempel that there is a life waiting for her, perhaps a scary and exciting one, beyond the teachers' lounge.

At times, *Ms. Hempel Chronicles* echoes Muriel Spark's 1961 novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, mainly in its rendering of a young teacher's camaraderie with her students. Both novelists seem to refuse to follow chronology. Just as Spark withholds nothing, telling the reader from the first page what will happen in the end, so does Bynum reveal her novel in an unconventional way: separate stories, varying in subject matter and life era, provide the reader with multiple perspectives on the title character. Bynum

skips the foreboding epithets and flash-forwards that Spark used to suggest futures both tragic and inevitable for the teacher and pupils. Instead, *Ms. Hempel Chronicles* maintains a kind of devastating humor, never sparing the reader Ms. Hempel's judgment of herself—she "was not, she knew, a very good teacher"—or her struggle to be the adult in the room, "actively developing her sensitivity to the appropriate and inappropriate. She still had difficulty distinguishing between the two." Bynum allows us frequent dips into comedy, which ultimately strengthen the impact of the more staid, even sorrowful, moments in the novel. When Ms. Hempel decides to eliminate homework assignments to lighten her load, she introduces her students to the concept of debate: "It had the air of intellectual rigor, but you never had to bring piles of it home with you to correct. You just listened carefully and pretended that you were writing copious and detailed notes in your grade book."

We are at once tickled to have an honest, albeit fictional, admission from a school-teacher, letting us in on her ploy to find short-cuts in the curriculum. Bynum lets us bask in that humor for only a beat. Funny though her laziness may be, Ms. Hempel is capable of self-reflection, and she does not go easy on herself in that arena. We catch her considering how "teaching had rendered her unfit for everything else: She was not a good friend (she didn't return phone calls), nor a good lover (a student's smiling face would suddenly materialize before her, mid-coitus), nor a good citizen (she didn't have time to read up on the propositions before she went to vote)." We are both amused by Beatrice Hempel and moved to empathize with her in the struggle to become self-actualized.

With her second novel serving as both testament to and inspiration for young people who may or may not one day find themselves back in the classroom, standing in front of the blackboard instead of facing it, Sarah Shun-lien Bynum has created an honest and glorious chronicle of what it is to learn and be learned.

—Helen McLaughlin

*Netherland*

by Joseph O'Neill

Pantheon Books, 2008

While I might remember *The Great Gatsby* for its characters and the events it chronicles, I cherish it for different reasons: the candid but dazzling quality of Fitzgerald's prose and the way that prose always hovers around but fails to come into contact with the novel's elusive epicenter—"the green light at the end of Daisy's dock." In his new novel, *Netherland*, Joseph O'Neill has written a work that is truly comparable to *The Great Gatsby*. In prose that is equally candid and remarkable, the novel hovers around another New York epicenter—the Ground Zero of post 9/11 New York.

After the events of 9/11 force them to vacate their Tribeca loft, Dutch banker Hans van den Broek and his wife, Rachel, relocate to the Chelsea Hotel, "staying on in a kind of paralysis" after the attack ruptures their livelihood, their sense of personal security, and their marriage. Then Rachel decides to return to London with their young son, leaving Hans to fend for himself. In the two years that Hans spends in exile, adapting to his status as another lonely vagrant holed up at the Chelsea Hotel, he discovers the thriving New York subculture that has developed around the

sport of cricket. A cricketer in his youth, Hans's reconnection with the sport and his unlikely friendship with Trinidadian umpire Chuck Ramkissoon gradually breaks him out of the "unbearable" isolation that has overcome his everyday life.

Chuck, an avid, aggressive entrepreneur who is equal parts captivating and naïve, reveals to Hans his big dreams for the future of cricket in the United States. With his ambitions and easy confidence, Chuck recalls the glittery rags-to-riches ideal that we associate with Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*. Hans finds himself transfixed by Chuck's dogged belief in the improbable American dream.

Perhaps what is most compelling in O'Neill's novel is his treatment of cricket, a sport played with wickets and flat bats, which, like tea and toast, I have a hard time disassociating from its colonial past. O'Neill takes this sport and administers to it the piercing discernment that I came to expect from the simple, metaphorical acuity of his prose:

the American adaptation is devoid of the beauty of cricket played on a lawn of appropriate dimensions, where the white-clad ring of infielders, swanning figures on the vast oval, again and again converge in unison toward the batsman and again and again scatter back to their starting points, a repetition of pulmonary rhythm, as if the field breathed through its luminous visitors. (9)

Hans makes this observation early on in the novel, and as the story develops—in the face of the strict dimensional, emotional and psychological constraints that are the result of the attacks of September 11, 2001—Hans learns that his is a human heart that can adapt to these constraints. By the novel's conclusion, he's been made to appreciate the pulsing, hybrid quality of New York's cricket, where

men of different nationalities come together to play a sport. And, by reuniting with this sport, Hans—taking the reader back to the Netherlands of his childhood, the London of his adulthood and the haunted New York of his stasis—is made to appreciate the vast hybrid quality of his own experience.

This appreciation and awareness extends to any reader who values prose that is itself a celebration of hybridity: O'Neill portrays cricket in America and elsewhere; he hilariously depicts the inane misadventure that results when Hans, a non-citizen Dutchman, tries to get an American driver's license; and, in a most basic sentence, he reinvents ways for his readers to see: "I noticed for the first time a couple of large gold rings on his fingers and, running in the dark hair beneath his throat, a necklace's gold drool."

Like *The Great Gatsby*, *Netherland* works retrospectively, and we follow Hans as he grapples along, trying to articulate to himself and to the reader what it means to have lived in not just New York, but post-9/11 New York. The novel opens when Hans is packing his London office in preparation for his move to the city. When a senior vice president stops by to express his envy, he says, "New York's a very hard place to leave. And once you do leave..." The S.V.P., smiling, said, "I still miss it, and I left twelve years ago."

In the retrospective narrative that follows Hans attempts to articulate what the anonymous S.V.P. surrenders to an ellipsis: *what happens once you do leave New York?*

Now that I, too, have left that city I find it hard to rid myself of the feeling that life carries with it a taint of aftermath. This last-mentioned word, somebody once told me, refers literally to a second mowing of grass in the same season. You might say, if you're the

type prone to general observations, that New York City insists on memory's repetitive mower—on the sort of purposeful post-mortem that has the effect, so one is told and forlornly hopes, of cutting the grassy past to manageable proportions. For it keeps growing back, of course.

The metaphor is artful and instructive on its own, but it takes on new meaning when, a few pages later, the reader realizes this is also a novel about cricket. The novel's attention to cricket and Chuck's lofty ambitions for the game provide a wonderful resurrection of the vague but endearing Great Gatsbyian designation: "Old Sport."

I read the novel as a celebration of culture and cross-culture and subculture, and while the prose sings for 250 pages, there is a moment in the novel where I find myself stepping back from the song. Hans recollects a trip his family took to southern India for Christmas 2004. He describes the location with perfect recall: "We flew to Colombo and thence, as travelers used to say, to the Keralan city of Trivandrum, which on the map can be found almost at the very tip of India." Hans describes the church service he and his son attend on Christmas day, a storm that washes in "coconut shells, a comb, a rotting flip-flop," and then his expedition with his son to the mountains on New Year's Day.

There is no mention of the 2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake, the second largest earthquake ever recorded on a seismograph, which caused a tsunami that took 225,000 lives in eleven different countries. I could forgive the novel this omission if I didn't feel that the novel's premise and composition wasn't dependent on the notion of "aftermath." Or, I might forgive the novel, had it not been made so apparently clear that Hans and his family are vacationing in southern, coastal India.

Hans is present in New York on 9/11 and his presence in the city, in some ways, serves as an epicenter for the novel. Three years later, he is present in India to witness a natural disaster that wiped out the equivalent of about half the population of The Hague, but he leaves the catastrophe unacknowledged.

The final image the novel lends to its readers is that of Hans with his family aboard the London Eye, Europe's largest Ferris wheel, erected on the South Bank of the Thames River in celebration of the year 2000, the new millennium. O'Neill accomplishes so much with his depiction of this structure: its capsules of Londoners and tourists going around and around, hovering out in the great blue sky, held up by the core of something unreachable. It's a moment that is best summarized by borrowing from Robert Frost: "We dance round in a ring and suppose / But the Secret sits in the middle and knows."

*Netherland* is an exceptional novel about a man trying to get to the heart of something, and O'Neill's elusive embodiment of Hans's endeavor is rare and praiseworthy and consoling. But, I would have been better able to appreciate this image of the London Eye at the novel's conclusion if I had not been more aware of a major blind spot in the text: the omission of the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami. As omissions go it is bewildering because it implies that the many who lost their lives—especially the people of Sri Lanka and southern India, the fellow countrymen of some of the cricketers in Hans's association—not only cannot be seen but cannot be spared a single sentence in someone else's story.

—Memory Peebles

*Bad River Road*  
by Debra Nystrom  
Sarabande Books, 2009

Readers familiar with Debra Nystrom's previous books will likely remember their "stories" first and foremost: domestic dramas played out on the great plains of South Dakota along with narratives concerned with the region's Native American population and enduring racial tensions. Those sources, and their specific intersections with the poet's life, constitute much of the dramatic material in *Bad River Road* as well. The chief goal of these poems then, and in all of Nystrom's work to date, is to chronicle the lives of individuals in a place still largely untamed, both literally and figuratively. To this end her characters, at times, narrate their own poems; elsewhere we're guided by the intimate voice of the poet as sister, daughter, wife, mother; and in some poems the "I" dissolves to such an extent that the language seems generated by the landscape itself. Nystrom often displays a giftedness at the subtle manipulation of time, and in her new collection the implications of seemingly innocuous events (like a brother's theft of soda from a vending machine) can resonate across a lifetime. By combining that variety of perspectives with an expansive chronology, *Bad River Road* achieves the narrative complexity and depth of character we find in great fiction.

It is interesting to learn then, from the publisher's insert, that Nystrom thinks of herself as a primarily lyric poet, and indeed, technically, the poems in *Bad River Road* often center on a discrete moment, image, or theme. Much of their success, however, lies in their ability to imply a host of narrative extensions. In a poem

like “Lyle: Concentration” the abuse of Lakota children, under the banner of “assimilation,” comes to us in flashes, images only half-understood by the boy, Lyle, who compares them to the card game he’s taught by Father Joseph:

The trick was knowing  
what had turned up before, like secrets you’d  
glimpsed but didn’t remember where—a scar  
on  
someone’s shin, but from what yardstick...  
...Bitter  
lye soap in your sister’s mouth—when did  
they catch her  
speaking Lakota? Stained bloody shorts,  
bloody paddle.

That pairing, of the physical signs of maltreatment and their disembodied sources, keeps our attention on the metaphor at the heart of the poem (and, by extension, its speaker) even as we’re permitted traces of other stories just beneath the surface. The book gains narrative force between poems too, as when, in the opening lines of “Observatory at the Prison” the “chips and pop / from the vending machines” remind us of that earlier childhood misconduct, and mention of the county jail recalls the violence and threat of “Every Night”:

Now they throw in a fish, kidnapped  
his own kid or something HOW  
CAN THEY TAKE HER slamming  
his arms at the bars till they’re bleeding,  
...till Fuzzy pulls a shank and shuts him up.

When we reread “Every Night” after “Observatory at the Prison” we do so with the brother, Brad, now somewhere in the background. Each poem stands on its own, but it is the conversations between poems that allow characters to develop in such comprehensive detail.

That, and a ruthless precision of language. We find ourselves convinced in equal measure by the images themselves and the rhythms they’re presented in, the way Nystrom distills emotion in syntax, sound. While her genius for “lyric storytelling” was already something of a known quantity, *Bad River Road* showcases the poet’s ear to an extent that previous collections have not. A series of faux-sonnets punctuate the book, driven by rhymes so subtle that they continue to surprise even after a dozen readings. Nystrom subverts strict meter for a variable rhythm that mirrors the poem’s affect. It’s a strategy exhibited in this beautiful passage from “Ash”, in which a boy accidentally sets fire to a field with an errant bottle-rock-*et*.

...Quick  
as cloud shadow, this change: beetles  
fused, hay and fenceposts blazing back  
to what they started as, like the molecules  
of the unburned boy who never meant  
any damage, who got away but won’t  
be the same.

Notice the relaxation of stress when we reach the simile, the way sound reinforces the relative safety of psychic and physical distance from the scene.

Even in the absence of structured end-rhyme, this poet’s keen eye finds its complement in a voice that’s musically plush. She notices “root-craze, carrot-frond, tumbleweed racked / by wind, bloodshot eyes awake after days of / dust storm, or after nights of hard-stilled gin” and, in “Day’s End,” captures the approach of night from inside “lockup” with similar felicity:

Slow play the racket,  
bar-banging choir of rage

and threat, white-lit panic—  
narrow it, narrow to

the one slit of dusk, window  
and beyond, honey-locust

leaves shivering, then  
falling still, gust by gust...

Ultimately each of these pleasures serves the poet's seemingly infinite compassion for her characters (men and women who have the feel of family even when they are not). In lesser hands these materials (and Nystrom's interest in charting emotional experience) could easily lead such poems into sentimentality, but the insight here is never easy. We might think of the family in "Old Picture" fleeing a dust storm on foot, swimming "through some opposite / of water." The situation warrants our interest and the detail with which these people are rendered cements our empathy. That there is no helicopter in the offing, no near promise of safety, "nothing behind to answer [the reader/viewer's] / wish" strikes us as unflinchingly honest. This is not to say that *Bad River Road* despairs, only that Nystrom's characters must be content with an interpersonal rescue, hope for restored relationships, gestures like that of the mother reaching back for her daughter in the storm, moments that resemble these poems themselves.

—George David Clark