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Part of the Bargain (poems)
By Scott Hightower
Reviewed by Joanna Pearson

The words that surround us daily are not always those of poetry—the blinking slogans, sound bits, and hackneyed sayings, the maxims and ad phrases in neon. It is a saturated, quotation-heavy world, with story piled upon story, and not immediately poetic. Unless you are poet Scott Hightower. Hightower's newest collection, *Part of the Bargain*, revels in these linguistic conventions, exploding aphorisms and detonating familiar phrase, finding a paradoxical expansiveness within what would be, in less skilled hands, confining or cliché. After reading this book, winner of Copper Canyons 2004 Hayden Carruth Award, I think of Hightower as a sort of poetic quilter—patching together brilliant poems from worn scraps and thus creating something beautiful, practical, and true.

One might start with a representative poem like *Envy-In-Law*. The title itself shows the kind of playful tweaking of familiar phrase that Hightower seems to relish. The final two stanzas go further:

This is where I learned there can
be harshness without malice.
My mother, down on her knees,
is containing her hands in the beds,
a seething queen raking through ruined
finery. She paws at a weed.
Well not have any
in *this* family. That's *not*
how *you* kids were raised!

Her forehead and neck glisten with sweat.
Branches shadow. No gloves or basket.
Her voice is an aphorism. I recognize
First Corinthians. Mother tiger.
Love-of-the-bride be damned.
No green-eyed monster
will be tolerated in this hen's house.
(*Envy-In-Law* l. 11-26.)

Here is the righteous, angry mother, her very voice an aphorism and of course we have Hightower's final lines, purposefully mixed. He is interested throughout this book both in subverting the commonplace expression and yet never denying it its power. Take a poem like *But at the Church* in which describing a decorated paternal death he declares himself not from a military family but also confesses that he does not mind the draping of the flag, can understand it, and that, Who can deny Taps/ its force? Throughout many of the poems, much like this, we find the phrases like, *Fish or cut bait*, *dead presidents*, and *Industrious, honest, frugal/but never miserly*. Much like the voice of the angry mother, the entire book has a highly deliberate dose of aphorism. Hightower seems constantly aware of what the world will say, and this gives every poem a sort of knowing self-consciousness. This knowingness upholds the phrase at hand, acknowledging its

currency, but at the same time invites us to consider what it actually means.

When he's not milking the commonplace phrase, Hightower and his characters have a way of coining new expressions that are at first strange but then ring with truth, as if we should have heard them before. The lovely poem *Polio and Counting* ends as follows:

On my mother's legs
Her reclining on a raked
Sit-up board her father

Had gerry-rigged. Every
Morning she cried brushing
Her hair. The pain was simple.

Her perfume bottles glimmered:
There will be pains that will not
Leave you with a kiss. (*Polio and Counting* l. 16-24)

Or take the poem *Goods*, in which Hightower says, *Man is a wing. Love/ is the sun that melts everything.* What a bleakly gorgeous two-sentence reworking of myth! and wholly true or not, there is truth to it. As it is in this coinage, Hightower's writing is often highly referential, mixing myth and mentions of the Umayyad Dynasty with Coco Chanel and small children yelling the word *dildo*. How, then, do Hightower's poems resist becoming mere strings of saying? His descriptions are precise. His quilting is sure-handed. The very subjects about which he writes seem to open up within the very space they are contained. Hightower is like a formal poet in this sense; but whereas gifted formalists find freedom within poetic form, Hightower finds new freedoms with the formalism of phrase.

And thematically, it works. Hightower writes of the first romantic awarenesses of a young gay man growing up in rural Texas; he writes of a mother constrained by polio; he excels at ekphrasis. In other words, he is very much focused on the boundaries set by convention and restraint. His poetry is pressure-formed. It is within these conventions that he is able to so subtly and subversively work. And all this is not meant to diminish Hightower's sheer force as a lyricist. Almost any poem will exemplify that, but one I particularly like is below, in its entirety:

After *Polio*
washboard muscles
were an impossibility.

Mother sat at a mangle,
controlled the pedals with her knees;
navigated the wrinkled
pillowcases and blue jeans
with her free hands. Sprinkled
and bagged the laundry one afternoon,
stored its balance in the refrigerator
till she could get it out the next.

Each afternoon, she read
to the three of us
while we nestled like piglets
at her belly and fantasized

oblivious of the evil
that had blown
against our front door.

This poem is grotesque and gorgeous, enveloped in the safety of maternal love and yet aware, in hindsight, that this safety is nothing to disease. Clearly, Hightower has an attuned eye and tremendous lyric

capacities, but in all these quotation-laden and allusive poems, I think
hes up to something moresomething that I can approximate in prose
much less well than he can himself in his own verse. It is something
that I think he hints at the end of his poem Footnote in the Catalog of
Weapons when he describes the mesmerizing power of the mythic
Sirens: What resides (the question inevitable in any aftermath/ in the
nature of the Sirens?/ Sound and silence, body and spirit,/ escape and
inescape? Escape and inescape: this is, in essence, what Hightower
finds in poetry, indeed in all languageits limitedness and
limitlessnessand he holds in tender balance in *Part of the Bargain*.

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