

Greg Stidham

Appalachian Gold

Jesse Graves. *Merciful Days*. Mercer University Press, 2020.

Merciful Days is Jesse Graves' fourth collection of poetry, and the most recent I have read since being hooked, like a catfish in the murky Tennessee River waters, by his second, *Basin Ghosts*. While reading that earlier book, I felt I'd encountered a prodigious talent, and perhaps even a kindred spirit. As much as I loved that and his other two collections, *Merciful Days* brings together all the promise of the early ones. It may not be the apex of his poetry vocation—and I hope it is not—but it is certainly a leap from the major leagues to all-star status.

Graves is a Professor of English and Poet-in-Residence at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City. After receiving his MFA from Cornell University, he was awarded his doctorate in English from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. His academic credentials and his numerous literary awards are impressive, but they are not the subject of this review.

Graves is, among many things, a “geographic” poet. He writes with personal knowledge of and affection for the Appalachia of eastern Tennessee. His roots are firmly planted in that soil, along with those of many generations of his ancestors. Those ancestors provide the fodder for many of the poems in *Merciful Days*.

The poems in this collection are clearly “free verse,” but free verse fully informed by image and metaphor, making use of meter and cadence to guide the reading along the way. In some ways, I would consider Graves to be, perhaps, a third-generation imagist. By this I mean that he can take in his hands a seemingly insignificant artifact, or a moment, or a passing dialogue, and transform it into something magical, something which transcends whatever preconceptions we'd been imagining. He reminds me of Ted Kooser's similar and magical gift. (I can think of no higher compliment.)

The poems in *Merciful Days* seem collectively, as well as individually, to be elegiac in tone. They are deeply reflective of persons who have been important connections to Graves over his life. Some were closely connected, in a “family-tree” sort of way. These include his father, his brother, who died an untimely death at a young age, and his daughter Chloe. But they also include family many generations past, with whom the poet clearly feels a connection. (Graves' ancestors include many original settlers in the 1780s of the area he still calls

home, the area around Sharp's Chapel, in the hills an hour northeast of Knoxville.)

While the poems in *Merciful Days* can be seen as elegiac, they are not merely mournful laments of those who have passed, for they are also celebratory of the lives they commemorate. Graves has said that this collection is "the book of my mother's voice" (personal communication), and he describes her as a masterful storyteller who has influenced his own poetic voice. In the title poem of the collection, he writes,

My mother and I walk the cattle trail
alongside the family cemetery fence.
Mid-February feels like May
with grass in the fields turning green . . .

We make another round, circling
the ones we love and have lost,
separated by the breath we breathe
and the dirt that covers them.
She sighs, almost a word emerging
through the air she pushes out, almost
saying she is tired of it, the way it keeps
moving through her. "Merciful days,"
she says, meaning something I feel,
but cannot begin to shape into words.

Elsewhere, Graves paints a vivid portrait of his grandfather ("Old Man Wandering the Roads"). He describes the man in his youth as a farmer, a hard worker, man of little means, but like his daughter, a convivial storyteller.

"Old man wandering the roads," my mother said,
clearing plates and cups once he was gone.
And each time my father went outside with him
when he left, walked him slowly to his truck,

but never came straight back into the house,
finding something always to do in the fields,
new ground ever to break, a stump to haul away,
some old animal dying and needing burying.

While this poem is primarily about Graves' grandfather, he also presents us with the gift of coming to know his mother and father more intimately as well. The same is true of all of the poems in this

Kestrel

collection. They are shared moments of intimacy, provided to us by Graves' mastery not only of his craft, but his mastery of marrying that craft with his own heart and soul.

Merciful Days is a collection that belongs in the library of any serious and perceptive reader of contemporary verse. It is one to read many times over. I am certain that I will.

I will conclude this review by letting Graves speak in his own words:

Raft

Life there never seemed to change,
except around the edges of the yard
where leaves sprouted, turned colors,
fell carelessly away and started over again.

Then my grandfather died, who drove
his shaky truck around, selling orchard trees.
Then my uncle Cotton died, who taught
me lonely old songs on his homemade guitar.

I watched my parents carry the sodden
weight of their sadness for a time,
finally returning to their regular lives,
without a father, without a favorite uncle.

And then I was different, sitting alone
on the raft of being twelve years old,
wanting something but not knowing what,
floating away from the unchanging life.

Tiny metal cars left in boxes, plastic soldiers
untouched for weeks, then for months,
childhood becoming a song I had forgotten
the words to—a tune I could no longer carry.

