

Max Heinegg

The Common Thread of Humanity

Adam Tavel. *Green Regalia*. Stephen F. Austin State University Press.

Green Regalia, what poet Adam Tavel reverentially calls the grass, begins with an epigraph from Ted Hughes: “We are both in a world / Where the dirt is God.” The exceptional collection that follows is rooted in that transcendental sense of the world as the spiritual made manifest, and in poem after poem, he goes looking for the ineffable in the contextual dirt of his life and the lives of others.

As a child whose alcoholic father died when he was only twelve, Tavel trains his eyes on damaged, vulnerable things and writes sympathetically about their suffering, often from the perspective of one who cannot help. Whether writing about the painful memories of his relationship with his father, the Vietnam war, young Mennonite victims of a farmhouse fire, visiting Gettysburg with his sons, or the one-sided violence inherent in nature (from wolves vs. bison, owls vs. lemmings, vixen vs. goslings, mosquitoes vs. humans and dragonflies vs. closed car hoods), his approach to subjects on every ring of the great chain of being shows a poet who has heeded Mary Oliver’s advice, “Pay attention. / Be astonished. / Tell about it.”

Tavel’s wide range of interests introduces the reader to intriguing historical figures that he admires for their ability to suffer and flourish, or in some cases, simply survive. From Jesse Owens, who endures racist taunts but still runs so hard he retches, to a Roman harlot who tolerates her patrons but finds dignity and sensual beauty in her own sweat, the common thread of humanity is always there. The book’s main theme of the father and son, or perhaps of dominance, wend their way into surprising historical connections. In “The Boy Lincoln,” the father disapproves of his son’s reading: “How / unmanly, he sighs, this son / who wastes his huge hands borrowing / books that swallow moonlight.” Or, in the poem “An Assyrian Eunuch in the Service of Ashurnasirpal II,” the drunk king “dribbles / commands into his beard. My silk / wipes them and I nod. I nod / and swat away the summer flies.” Lincoln’s father misses his son’s intellectual gift, and the eunuch has to tolerate his drunken ruler.

Tavel’s unflinching look at the past, whether it is a dead lover or a fleeting picture of himself in college, moves from descriptions of pleasure to regret. Substances and their abuse are central to the book, and to his own, often self-lacerating memories. He describes himself in “Fugitive Silence” as “fledgling, little beak-chirp, / cloud shadow,

fool.” The kennings, which are playful, suggest an acceptance of his youthful, melancholic egocentrism, e.g., “his petty / jealousies and gloom.” It’s the opposite coin of the pathetic fallacy, where instead of nature echoing the poet (as young poets often feel), he wears the clothing of nature and even makes its juvenescent sounds.

Like “Patter,” which begins, “The only sound my father loved was rain / at night.” The poem explores his father’s drinking and the way that it “entranced” him to let the bottles “clink / their glass against my teeth to drain their dregs / like drops from dead canteens.” Tavel’s control of meter and rhyme is so exceptional that the form disappears and I find myself in the bleak rooms of his childhood. The rain the father loves is a “dark cascade” and though, as an adult, he realizes what his father’s addiction did to him, he also sees how he tried to excuse it: “A boy, I drowned / inside it too and let it charm the count / of empties.” His elegant use of enjambment and his subtle use of alliteration make the poem entirely affecting. He pivots at the volta with a rhetorical question: “What did I dredge / beside the muffled coughs that burned inside / my fist?” and the sonnet ends with him falling asleep “between my football sheets / where men erased the earth beneath their cleats.” The echoes of male damage call to mind James Wright’s “Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio,” as well as Roethke’s “My Papa’s Waltz.”

But more often, Tavel returns to the man looking back at the boy. In “1987” he puts away the Christmas ornaments with his father: “I clutch the empty plastic tray for globes / my father paws.” The boy tries to become the parent, who makes little effort at creating the ceremony, allowing the ornaments to “warp” in “the attic heat.” The child is left to “try to hide their chipping flakes facedown.” Tavel captures how the child of an addicted parent lies to create a safer, happier narrative. But as an adult, he knows. The poem ends with the father taking down the top of the tree: “He reaves the heirloom star. I clasp the set. / This is as old as we will ever get.”