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“a shining coil of syllables”: Justin Wymer’s *Deed*

Justin Wymer. *Deed*. Denver, CO: Elixir Press, 2019.

“Edge Habitat,” the opening poem of Justin Wymer’s *Deed*, orients the book in a shared, unnamed condition that threatens the speaker and binds the “I” and “someone[s]” into an “us”: “Something hates us to the root.” Bonding formed by enmity offers no solidarity, just judgments about which the natural world presents varied riddles. Sensory impressions of topography and its inhabitants combine in startling ways throughout *Deed* to erode binding, simplifying narratives enveloping Appalachia, like those in which suffering marks endurance and promises unity. “Edge Habitat” initiates this dismantling in miniature:

> . . . —limp
> switches leaping in place, suspended
> above a pot someone tossed that could be
> a starling beautiful in white
> disease, it is so sun-blanched, cured, flaking off
> patches of itself—till a single rain could fell
> the lot. What to make of it then.

The winter landscape, centered on human debris, recalls Williams’ in “Spring and All” and “To Elsie” and shares an undercurrent of dread that spring will begin only another cycle of wasted potential for the “pure products of America.” “Come spring, there will be new / dead, and the ground softer to swallow up,” Wymer’s poem predicts. Where Williams’ roadsides carve into the “stark dignity” of nature regaining strength as it “grip[s] down and begins to awaken,” Wymer’s territory releases as it thaws, swallowing and shifting graves out of the way of its “cutting flower-shapes.” The heaving and dissolving ground, chronically disturbed by West Virginia’s gas and coal industries, echoes the shedding, starling-like pot. Disintegrated by forces of time and heat, the pot becomes inscrutably birdlike. Easily destroyed by “a single rain,” the manufactured pot feathering into layers of enamel seems organic; the imagined starling, lacquered in disease, appears more ornamental than animal. Such synesthetic spiraling throughout *Deed* converts the human-nature binary into a Mobius strip relationship along which the givens of identity slide.

Alternative figurations of identity often appear in difficult

to imagine loopings and collisions of metaphorical materials, but the poetry's pressure on the imagination is its strength. Revising subjectivity, after all, requires alterations of consciousness, and changing consciousness is work. Fluctuating earth, diseased bird, and sun-cured pot, discarded into the brush or hurled in anger, initiate Wymer's repurposing of the edge habitat trope, but it grows more complex. Even within the same poem, the concept of an environmental threshold varies to express multiplicities of human-nature intermingling. In "A Hawthorne, Rooted Close to Other Guests," for example, limbs wave

> a wing of
> their broken flutter,
>
> that desiccated
> battle-din, is
> hooked by a frosty
> steam . . .

Motion morphs into tactile and aural images, then threads through olfactoral, "the hollowed-out / scent of cold rain" before shifting into the proprioceptive-architectural:

> . . . —a corridor
> of ropy light
> twines round
> the stems and
>
> fills those absent
> bodies with steamy
> voices they cannot
> share . . .

The integrity of "ropy light" that forms a passageway between two spaces invites simultaneous contemplation of surface and solid, of light both penetrating and reflected, filling only to evaporate in sound. This seeming paradox, mimicking the combination of solid and hollow organs in the human body, recurs throughout *Deed* as a primary strategy for reconceiving both body and voice. "This is not / nature—" the poem begins, like a disclaimer or admonition, and ends with the speaker's entry, asserting the "I" only once before refracting the first-person glimpsed in images of mirrored light, forest, ocean, and shipwreck, "fathering / the dusk into them." Linear and descending tropes of genealogy and paternity, too, break and wave as self becomes

less discrete.

As identity scatters and multiplies distinctions among human and natural realms, the means of regulating identity destabilize, particularly one's nativity and home. In "Genius Loci," the speaker describes the body as an extension of West Virginia's state flower, which seems to emerge and to bloom from the rocky sides of mountains: "My hand grown intricate with blight—the jointed outline / of a rhododendron loosened and laid on the surface—" This strange merger of dimensions, textures, and vocabulary requires imaginative adjustment and aesthetic flexibility. The movement in only two lines from intricacy to outline, growth to blight, a hand to globed blossoms to surfaces disturbs separations among flesh, place, tactile and spatial location, and representation. Wymer's many images of shedding, flaking, molting, stripping, and unravelling reminded me of Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* in which meanings of sexuality and identity are redistributed in defiance of western binaries. The queer poetics of *Deed* similarly complicates—and in complicating, diffuses—the binary implied in "anthropomorphism," often by threading natural elements through a synesthetic chain, then into the mechanics of human experience, particularly the experience of the flesh. This torqued anthropomorphism, sometimes washing over the beach of anthropomorphism to dissolve its idioms, operates like Wallace Stevens' borrowing of Simone Weil's "decreation," a process wherein the material world passes into uncreation, rather than destruction. Wymer's poetry decreates the projection of self into natural world by remapping the body with nature's variation, itself already altered by human presence.

With this decreation comes radical revision of the poetic voice and its relation to language. Wymer's lyrics, often with great difficulty, peel away Romantic and modernist anti-Romantic concepts of human relationships to nature, particularly as they impinge on manhood and paternity. In some poems, like "Genius Loci," the speaker appears secondary to the place inhabited, like a disembodied spirit (as the title indicates) or, as in "Locus," sinks into language, appearing to be the will of utterance itself more than an individual:

> I will needle my eyes into afterstars. I will
> make light trip and sift off sandstone
> in the quarries. We have witnessed
> too many rutilant past tenses.
> Now I shall be the saver of pauses.
> We will need breath later.

Other poems pose a more direct, tangible speaker, like in the prose

poem “Man,” which confesses, “For the self is felt. I think to call myself a man but must stay close to what I feel.” “Methods of Belonging” dismantles by putting on the Romantic role of worshipper of and speaker for nature. In this poem, a regretful speaker, who, like the speaker of Wordsworth’s “Nutting,” turns to the woods to escape his identity, then turns on nature for its refusal to affirm his right to it:

> I should have exited
> the flesh but the woods
> wouldn’t answer. Instead
>
> I denuded it, all of it,
> ripped off the lilac stems,
> the alyssum, the charred
> Appalachian sky, its lesions . . .

At once personified and dehumanized, Wymer’s woods are punished for the speaker’s own inability to defoliate, and for its failure to “answer.” The speaker is “penitent,” but violence pervades the poem beyond the explicit destruction. “Exit” suggests exit wounds; “answer” connotes criminal (and moral) liability, judgment, and a gun’s report; the sky is lashed, burned, and diseased by wrathful, punishing pollution. The exploitation of nature (used as a trash heap for old pots, drained by corporations of lumber, coal, and gas) in the more conventional, capitalist sense merges with its use as the site of boyhood freedom, sexual (and other forms of) experimentation, concealment of forbidden materials and acts, even suicide. The poem’s final image of “children / racing barefoot / over dried cicadas” indicates that the most Romantic version of the human—the child who fathers the man—still destroys nature, and innocence to be a mere fantasy of impunity.

Wymer’s poetry is rarely what one could call “graphic,” but there’s a current of violence that runs through the anatomy of self, body, place, and of course, religion. Conservative Christianity is an enormous part of many West Virginians’ lives, often the most important part of identity. These poems are implicitly religious throughout in their struggle to see and to understand, as in “[An Absence Needs Very Few Attendants],” which binds its memory of oblique eroticism to the intimacy of religious practices. The injuries and transgressions are figured as exile through allusions to the Tower of Babel, where language itself is punishment. The poem ends with a confession of self-injury incurred by silencing, and concludes with a gorgeous vision of language freed from oppressive commandments:

> I can honestly say I know what it feels like
> to have lain claim to but smothered a seraph
> that lay crouching inside me before it leapt out into
> a shining coil of syllables. And that affection must be
> synthesized. It needs only the smallest of bodies.

Like the "corridor / of ropy light," the "shining coil of syllables" is at once tenor and vehicle, umbilical cord and double helix, a way out and a way to see.

In the third and final section of *Deed,* the religious dimensions are the most explicit. The long poem "Litany: Lord I Strove But Could Not Change" turns the book's labors to detangling narratives of God, the ultimate and ultimately contradictory father, from which and to which all meanings run. "Litany" begins in the middle of a sentence, "and looked to the moon-washed / river" which emphasizes the urgency and emotion of its long, long address and invocation. The river's "raving hollowness / a twin to the pocket watery // between my lungs," while hardly straightforward, exhibits the book's preoccupations with dents, dimples, hollows, emptied-out things (pots, cicadas, corridors, skins) through which Wymer turns identity inside out. This image begins in anthropomorphism (we say rivers "rage" but not "rave," which seems more intensely personified), then affinity (a twin), then arrives at this very hard to imagine place inside the body. "Lungs" is a charged word for West Virginians; coal miners risk essential organ function, and the cases and varieties of lung diseases have skyrocketed in recent years. Later in this poem, the Lord is named as the God of the coal industry's exploitation of the land,

> Lord
>
> of the behavior
> of the dying, of blasted
> mountaintops, shallowing
>
> estuaries, of totaled
> grain stocks tallied by plump men
> after-hours in dark offices, of
>
> tacit abuse, practiced suffering, Lord of
> mum confusion . . .

The webbing of West Virginia/n identity, the physicality of West Virginia, the physicality of West Virginians, the physicality of "sexual identity" that dominates any queer subjectivity in the mind

of our culture, the identification with and love for place, the land West Virginia has (ironically? sacrificially?) historically given to any corporation promising money or jobs—Wymer's poems, intensely so in this poem, follow from strand to strand while at the same time unwinding the cultural and private traps they form. This is the God of "loving a place deeply where one could not feel at home," as Jennifer Franklin says in her introduction to *Deed*; this is the "Lord of fruit so soft I eat the spine / accidentally." Wymer's "Litany" indicts in its praise. It is both canticle and admission of collusion, for creating such a creator: "Lord / when I make you I make you / act . . ." For a queer Appalachian poet—a tautological trifecta if there ever was one— the Lord's word, which is all the words, is the primary weapon of erasure and exile. Wymer's poetry strives not to escape the Lord in the word/s but to release "a shining coil of syllables" through which affection takes root.