

Jeff Gundy, *Somewhere Near Defiance*. Tallahassee, Florida: Anhing Press, 2014. Pp.108. Softcover, \$20.00.

Jeff Gundy, *Songs from an Empty Cage: Poetry, Mystery, Anabaptism, and Peace*. Telford, Pennsylvania: Cascadia Publishing House, 2013. Pp.294. Softcover, \$23.95.

It's rare to find both a new collection of poems and a path-breaking book of essays that clarifies and complicates the poems, published within a year of each other, by the same author. Jeff Gundy's *Somewhere Near Defiance* and *Songs from an Empty Cage* will appeal differently to an overlapping readership, but are fruitfully read in conversation.

Somewhere Near Defiance, Gundy's sixth book of poetry and his first since *Spoken Among the Trees* (2007), is a substantial collection of over a hundred pages. Fans of Gundy's poetry will recognize his signature play of spiritual inquiry set against the backbeat of literary and pop culture references, his musings on the natural world and the human place in it, the details of everyday life laced with speculations on meaning and language, the flow of consciousness back and forth in time. Gundy's humor – delight in the absurd, and a tendency to satire – is present in this volume, but overall, the tone is more deliberately theological.

For instance, in "Meditation with Wallet, Eyeglasses, and Little Riley Creek," the poet ponders the relative powers of credit cards, anti-reflective coating on lenses, and the rising creek and their relationship to human ideas about the power of God. Into this reverie he inserts a phrase from a postmodern philosopher: "God is a weak force, says Caputo, a call, an event, a voice. All the rest is/rouged and painted theology, the invention of men wishing to be strong." After dropping this challenging line, the poet wonders whether scratching at the peeling anti-reflective coating on his glasses will enable him to see the world differently. Then he turns

his gaze to “a wren in the pine tree . . . visible only when it moves” that leaves the branch trembling and the reader’s mind vibrating with questions.

Evoking the “weak force of God” is only one of many acts “somewhere near Defiance” in this volume. Punning on a place name – Defiance is an Ohio city not too far from Gundy’s hometown, Bluffton – Gundy suggests both an attitude of provocation and the ways in which our relationship to language shifts depending on context. Defiance, the author reminds us in the title poem, is “a white name pressed on an old place.” Defiance is also an act of passionate engagement, resisting what has been handed down to us in the way of custom and convention. “Creeds and schools in abeyance” wrote Whitman, one of Gundy’s poetic forbearers; Gundy’s challenge to our habits of seeing and believing invites readers into a more “original” relationship with their moment in time, without entirely unsettling them. He is after all, only somewhere *near* defiance.

The fifty-six poems in the book are divided into five sections. The first section, which begins with the title poem, ends with “No Path,” a tribute to the late theologian, Gordon Kaufman:

Give up all that father stuff, said Gordon. Look where it’s got us.
And the warrior – even worse.

In his challenge to traditional theology, with its heavily gendered metaphors, Gundy suggests a radical and much-needed alternative, especially in the aftermath of the post-mortem investigations of John Howard Yoder’s egregious treatment of women. What would it mean, Gundy asks, to experience a God that is everywhere and permeates everything, rather than an objectified, anthropomorphic God whose power is consolidated in his masculinity? He follows up on this train of thought in *Songs from an Empty Cage*, where he both critiques Yoder and explores the thought of feminist philosopher of religion Grace Jantzen.

One of Gundy’s achievements as a poet is his expansive, open lyricism that allows for such theological quotation and juxtaposition without sacrificing the musical quality of the language. The most prevalent form in this volume is the unrhymed unmetred couplet, perhaps inspired by the Persian ghazal form, that invites seemingly random juxtapositions that accumulate into a tonal, non-narrative whole – pairs of lines separated by spatial silences. In “No Path” it serves to offer a succession of thoughts without an irritable reaching after narrative connection, the kind of thoughts one might have paddling in a canoe with a partner:

God might be the Father and the Warrior and the lost leaves,
 and the water and bleached trunk, motion and stone,
 lush twists of cloud and barking dog and wind,
 star upon star alert and visible in every direction . . .

The second section of the book opens with a long poem, "Having It All Four Ways," a sort of hymn to the four elements, or perhaps a lyrical essay, introduced by epigraphs from Heidegger and Blake. This rather heady beginning gives way to a prologue, playful lists of "inexact examples of the four elements" – "Sweat, chocolate, lust, and fire" – a lyrical catechism, and a section of "Further Remarks." Gundy's innovative form here creates an expansive but elegant vehicle for humor, whimsy, mystical speculation, and delicious language.

The third, central section of the book is something like a still, quiet pond arrived at in the middle of a hike – a series of seven "Contemplations," in which Gundy comes closest to a sustained meditation on nature. Thankfully, he does not entirely abandon his richly layered imagination: "All day I've been an old parchment written on/ too many times ... "he writes in "Contemplation with Distant Scenes and Loon."

The final two sections include a variety of meditations on place, poetry, and the quotidian. By continually juxtaposing unlikely objects and emotional states, he asks us to reconsider categorical assumptions in our multi-layered lives. This sometimes moves toward cultural critique and at other times results in hilarious commentary. The academically inclined reader will particularly relish "Notes from the Faculty Meeting." In this poem, a series of one-line stanzas points the reader in the direction of the poet's wandering mind:

So far every page of this yellow pad has torn ragged.
 This bothers me more than it should.
 I vowed to hold my breath until I heard a concrete noun.
 Does "thing" count? "Students?" "Projections?"

The poem's conclusion will resonate with all those who work at small denominational institutions of higher learning:

After a national search, we hired Randy's brother

Some readers may wish to purchase this volume solely on the basis of this poem.

Not long into *Somewhere Near Defiance*, I began wondering – just what else does John Caputo say about the weakness of God? Where does Gordon Kaufman eschew the image of the warrior God? How can Grace Jantzen enlarge our view of the Divine? When I opened *Songs from an Empty Cage*, I found these names, along with those of poets – Blake, Stafford, Stevens and, of course, Whitman. The book is dedicated to a trinity of American poets of Mennonite pedigree – Keith Ratzlaff, Jean Janzen, and Julia Spicher Kasdorf – suggesting a community of writers who share Gundy’s passion for the intersection of poetry, mystery, Anabaptism, and peace. Gundy, whose creative nonfiction has appeared in various literary quarterlies as well as in several previous books, turns his focus to a particularly Mennonite audience in this book, the 10th volume in the C. Henry Smith series, which is something of a companion to his *Walker in the Fog: On Mennonite Writing*, the 5th volume in the series, and winner of the 2006 Dale W. Brown Award.

“What might it mean to pursue a poet’s vocation and attempt to be loyal to such a tradition, itself born of rebellion and renewal?” Gundy asks in the introduction. (18) This book of sixteen essays explores possible answers to this question. With engaging titles – such as “The Marriage of the Martyr’s Mirror and the Open Road, or, Why I Love Poetry Despite the Suspicion That It Won’t Save Anybody” and “Notes Toward the Heretical Sublime” – Gundy entices the reader into a conversation that demonstrates his own vision for Mennonite writing, and by extension, theology, “as diverse and polyphonic as possible, holding in abeyance our urge to rectify, unify, organize, rationalize.” (*Songs*, 78)

Gundy defines theo-poetics as happening “where poetry and theology cross paths, and especially when poetic methods of exploration are brought to theological questions.” (4) As with his poetry, Gundy’s approach to theology is conversational and relational, open to the possibilities of faith as well as doubt, but dedicated to the proposition that “language must constantly be refreshed, renewed, and re-examined – even terms as familiar as ‘Christian.’” (26) The first two essays, in a section entitled “Prolegomena,” are Gundy’s manifesto-like list of thirty-three items in his first chapter, “Notes Towards and Anabaptist Theo-poetics,” followed by “Declining to Be in Charge,” a friendly rejoinder to John D. Roth’s critique of Mennonite writers in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, in which he questions the role of poetic arbiter with the title phrase, borrowed from John Howard Yoder.

Authority is, indeed, a subtext of this essay collection, which deals not only with many authors, but also with the human

tendency to rank and categorize them, and to hold a few of them up on a pedestal. It is Gundy's intent to dismantle at least some of these hierarchies while nonetheless speaking out in favour of his alternate view that "the aesthetic and ideological pluralism of Mennonite literature" is "its greatest strength" (50), and that Mennonite theologians could learn something from this dialogic model. Seven of sixteen essays in this collection have evolved from conference presentations or appeared in various versions in Mennonite periodicals and nine are original to this book. In some of them we overhear Gundy's arguments with other Mennonite thinkers. In some we gain new perspectives on interpreting the meta-narratives of Mennonite identity, and new ways of thinking about poetry and peace.

Among the most the most significant essays in the book is Gundy's critique of Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. In "The Rule of God and the Ruby," Gundy discerns an authoritarian strain in Yoder's thought, which is distrustful of language and the authority of the teacher (*didaskalos*), as well as of the poet. Yoder, like Plato, would banish the poets from any serious consideration in his ideal community, perhaps because a poet like Gundy notices that Yoder's "language betrays a lack of attention to the world, and a lamentably pinched dualism." (190) For Gundy, Yoder's prioritizing of "abstract belief systems" over "the human and cosmic relations they maintain" (194) is a shortcoming of his theology. Gundy cites the thought of religious philosopher Grace Jantzen, and her vision of "natals...flourishing" as a corrective to Yoder's more authoritarian view of community. (194) This now seems a prescient critique, given the recent expose of Yoder's failings in human relations. Gundy ends the essay with a discussion of Jelaluddin Rumi, the 13th century Sufi poet, whose views of language offer an alternative to Yoder's. "Far from mistrusting those who use language and seeking to limit their numbers in community, he [Rumi] views language . . . as the very ground of identity." (197). As Gundy illustrates in his own fanciful list of books he would take to a desert Island – Whitman and Blake before Menno and Marpeck – "the great world is *inside* of us as well as outside." (197)

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