

Jeff Gundy, *Abandoned Homeland*. Huron, Ohio: Bottom Dog Press, 2015. Pp. 89. Softcover, \$16.00.

In his latest book of poetry, Jeff Gundy leads us – sometimes by bicycle, sometimes by foot, sometimes at an atomic level – through a rich Midwestern landscape. *Abandoned Homeland* pauses to consider everything from how many chicken coops his grandpa’s Ford

panel truck could hold (the answer is six) to his “poor sinful earth[’s]” place among the “fifty billion earthlike planets in the Milky Way.” Gundy’s world is alive with birdsong, and it smells of woodsmoke, damp earth, and both wild and cultivated flowers and vegetables. There are human traces too: voices of friends, colleagues, and neighbours mingle with the sounds of violins and guitars. Still, these sensuous images exist in meaningful tension with reports of senseless violence, worn out bodies, and crumbling houses, all part of the “absurd, lovely world” that Gundy explores. This tension builds throughout the collection, and ultimately seems to extend to the reader as a question, or challenge. “How will you spend your small, strange, unrepeatable life?” asks a character, filled with wonder at the vastness of a galaxy.

Abandoned Homeland is divided into four sections, but these are not easily thematically summarized, nor do they follow an obvious narrative trajectory. A general theme of faith in the face of imperfection holds throughout, but there is no single narrative arc leading to firm resolution. Similarly, though many of the poems read like brief short stories—they are generally no longer than a page—they are less concerned with extended philosophising than they are with meditative moments of passing contemplation. This resistance to a single grand narrative is consistent with Gundy’s understanding of how most readers experience a collection of poems, as he argues in *Songs From an Empty Cage*: “[t]hey will browse, skip around, start in the middle or at the end, and it might even be *better* that way.”

Instead, the collection is held together thematically as an episodic exploration of the hidden significance of the commonplace. Many of its scenes and moments appear intentionally familiar, inviting readers to share in the questions Gundy offers about the relationships in which we find ourselves: neighbours, colleagues, the sideroad ecosystems just outside of town, and the regional and seasonal animals with which we share patches of earth and sections of universe. He brings these routine scenes to life by revelling in the particular, as in “Thread,” where he writes,

the rain is cool and the shirt is wet already with your hot sweat,
too late to slow down, too soon to think of home, cross

the steel bridge and take the little rise up Spring Street, pass
the small familiar homes like a silent crowd, like people sleeping

in the pews, left on Elm to the Catholic church. . .

In observing a walk through the woods in “Contemplation With Doors, Nests, and Music,” Gundy’s attention to the particular is even more focused:

Deer trails thread off all ways, and I think
 of the white footed mice sleeping in their burrows,
 damp but content after the morning shower.
 Cicadas in the red oak, dragonflies flirt and fight
 above the pond, frogs twang their single notes

Gundy’s writing style merges nicely with the meditative quality of the collection. Most poems are written in stanzas of free-verse couplets, many concluding with a single poignant line reminiscent of the concluding rhyming couplet of a sonnet. The couplets pair well with the general length of the poems, as short meditative pulses that invite reflection and imagination. They also provide a sense of balance, a subtle stability, to the paradoxes Gundy enjoys examining.

Although Gundy is an active contributor to the broader “theopolitical” conversation about Mennonite literature, readers that come to this collection looking for themes that address or affirm familiar markers of Midwestern Mennonite culture will be disappointed, as will those anticipating a theopoetics affirming familiar Anabaptist and Mennonite tenets. There are references to recognizably Mennonite concerns such as tongue screws, pacifism, conscientious objection, and Ukraine, but these are rare. Indeed, there are moments that are likely to make the most conservative readers uncomfortable, such as the question “What did I know, six or seven lives back?” For Gundy, however, such challenges are the proper work of theopoetics. “[C]ommunity, discipleship, peace, those worthy and essential aims, take on a new aspect under the spell of the theopoetic voice,” he writes in *Songs*. “They do not vanish, but the poem will not be bound to them; it insists on its freedom to say anything, to imagine anything, to question anything, if only for the sake of testing, tasting, discovering.”

The strength of this collection is indeed the joy of testing, tasting, and discovering, and its invitation to reconsider the beauty and delight of the quotidian. The most lovely and consistent theme throughout is to be found in the plurality of voices and sounds, which Gundy calls “shreds of the great song” – a unifying gesture that exists in productive tension with his larger resistance to master narratives.

Gundy's disciplined ability to apply imagination and careful perception to the everyday stuff of life, not making it strange so much as making it exquisite, make this a riveting collection that warrants attention and rewards exploration. *Abandoned Homeland* asks us to shake off our easy assumptions and unexamined conclusions and listen in to the rich sounds of the earth around us. What might we learn of God if we tune our ears and eyes to the landscape around us? How might our mortal attention to and participation in the particulars of what Gundy describes as this "mutilated planet" inform our attitude and approach towards the divine?

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Works Cited

Gundy, Jeff. *Songs from an Empty Cage*. Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2013. Print.