

Literary Reviews

Jesse Nathan, *Eggtooth*. Atlanta: Unbound Edition Press, 2023. Pp. 104. Hardcover, \$24 US.

Eggtooth, Jesse Nathan's first full-length collection of poetry (he has previously published two chapbooks), begins with a glowing twelve-page introduction by Robert Hass. Among other things, Hass lists some canonical authors whose work resonates in Nathan's: Hart Crane, William Wordsworth, John Donne, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound—all men, which immediately makes me suspicious. Hass also gives us a page-long description of Mennonites that is accurate except for his use of an apostrophe in the title of *Martyrs Mirror* (x–xi). It is significant that Hass feels the collection requires such an explanation, similar to what Julia Spicher Kasdorf calls an “autoethnographic announcement,” except that it is not by the author himself. Instead, we have a non-Mennonite declaring the book a piece of Mennonite literature. An entire review could be written about this heartfelt introduction, not least because Hass is one of the giants of the last half-century of US poetry, so it sets high expectations for readers. *Eggtooth* doesn't quite live up to them.

The book is broken into five sections plus an introductory poem and a closing one. Hass's introduction conveys the assumption that their speakers are generally Nathan himself, or a close approximation thereof, which seems accurate.

One of *Eggtooth*'s strengths is that it is a queer book, both in the sense of dedicating a few poems to same-sex encounters and in the sense of including some arresting weird elements. The poems that lean most into this weirdness are the most successful. For instance, “In a Churchyard After Dark, with Ruth” uses the figure of a medium and her encounters with literal ghosts to explore the way the speaker is haunted by his ancestors (20–21). The collection's longest poem, “Between States,” which spans an entire section, is its best. It begins with the memory of a childhood house fire that works as a symbol for the destruction of the Kansas landscape present in many of the book's poems. The poem laments the toxic masculinity of farming culture while also celebrating the comfort the speaker finds from “that unroomed vertigo, a sky that swallows you” (36). “Between States” also acknowledges Mennonites' role in the colonization of the land as they invade with “their book full of martyrs, dear as a mirror” (30–31). Form is of the utmost significance in *Eggtooth*, and the poem's self-consciously Whitmanic sprawl (“my lines run

on / like creeks across pastures" [38]) succeeds because the speaker's voice is unfettered.

Eggtooth's depictions of bisexuality occur throughout the collection. "Scouts" is a heartbreaking poem that describes the pleasure of mutual masturbation alongside the anguish of internalized queerphobia (13–14). "Love and Ink" recounts the dissolution of a relationship with a woman after she and the speaker have moved to California together that is so painful the speaker must use second person to describe it (63). "What Ruth May Have Wondered" moves from the suddenness of "necking [with another man] against a tree" right after they have met to the comfort of attending a family reunion together (65). Then, a few pages later, another poem about a relationship with a woman, "genitals still sticky, still flush" (68), and near the book's end a return to kissing with "Justin" in a cemetery (85). The collection's expansion of queer Mennonite literature's corpus is welcome because there is a notable shortage of queer Mennonite poetry.

Eggtooth is an iconoclastic response to the current poetry landscape because of its frequent use of rhyming, which occurs in at least a third of the poems. Although these poems have clearly been crafted very carefully, which is a laudable act, by midway through the book the rhyming just feels gimmicky, feels purely ornamental, and it distracts from the easy diction that makes a poem such as "Between States" so successful. In one of the collection's blurbs, Major Jackson writes "Here is the Gerard Manley Hopkins of the 21st-century." Jackson means it as a compliment, and it does feel like an accurate description, but my immediate reaction is "Do we need a new Hopkins?" This hewing to tradition—all those men Hass mentions—mutes Nathan's otherwise strong voice, which I want more exploration of.

It is difficult to like every single poem in any collection of *Eggtooth's* length. There is so much I love about it, but a lot that I am frustrated by because it excavates a poetic past that I'm not sure needs to be revisited. The collection's overemphasis on form makes it feel like a book written solely for other poets, which in these terrible times is not something that I'm sure I can fully appreciate anymore. It surprises me to type those words, so I guess this is something the book taught me, even if it is not what it meant to teach. I want poetry that does something, that moves me, and *Eggtooth* mostly doesn't, even as I can see how it might move others. Overall, *Eggtooth* shows great potential for Nathan's future work, but in and of itself is a flawed endeavour.

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