

Fire Stations / review by MARCIA MENTER
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A.B. Jackson casts a cold eye in his book, *Fire Stations*, but it's a cold and glittering eye, like the Ancient Mariner's (though Jackson is only thirty-eight), and when he transfixes you with it, you have to stand there and listen. His unflinching vision of human life is not pretty, but it is beautiful. "This is the world I recreate," he writes in 'Schopenhauer's Porcupines',

... your teeth
weakened by cane sugar or stomach acid,
the ripe avocado-garlic of your breath —
whatever tottering truth our kisses hold,
nine hours down in drink, or body warmth
brought slowly to overspill in this bed ...

This is actually a love poem, albeit about a one-night stand, and it's squarely in Jackson's home territory, the realm where spirit and body are jammed together for better and worse:

look: our bloody life line, the palm's crease
punctured as we come and freeze and gasp
the tongue-tip Christian name of Jesus.

The two intense pentameter sestets that open the poem are followed by three lighter, almost humorous quatrains:

Porcupines amble through midwinter,
disturbing fern-leaf and fallen pine cone.
Topsoil turned permafrost, a ground zero,
survival hangs on huddling together.

And suddenly — it's hellish, being close ...

That's Jackson: glorying in the body and all its messiness while simultaneously maintaining a wry philosophical distance from it. 'Journey' is one of several poems that find him somewhat the worse for drink: "me, worn ragged with Guinness, 3 a.m. / on the last bus reserved for the head-broken." His only fellow passenger raves loudly and incomprehensibly, but even this triggers a meditation on incarnation: "... I wished him grievous bodily harm, // all sympathy with my bearings gone / until — looking out — *there* was Orion, / disabled into stars, who was born a man ..."

'Disabled' is a key word. The human spirit is disabled by being made flesh; we're limited by what our bodies can do, feel, comprehend. In the poem 'Stratheden', the disability is Alzheimer's disease, dispassionately (yet compassionately) observed: "James has wet his pants, and frowns. / He sniffs his fingers, looks at me, grins, / accepting the smell as a gold prize." In 'Stammer', Jackson describes his own impeded speech: "Dear Larynx, Venus / fly-trap of a throat, / spit it out — // ... My sound is pure / howler-monkey ..." (It's startling to come upon this poem, since Jackson's poetic voice is so rich and sure and fluent one can't imagine his speaking voice being anything else.)

In 'Beast of Burden', the disabling factor is man's inescapable animal nature: "Whatever's riding my spine I see only / as it lolls or as I stumble; its nature, / always in flux, a constant mockery. // At my ear, its breath is cut grass or silage, / gardenias during summer thunder, / the scent of breast milk at room temperature // ... I pray for myself / or pray to it, depending on the hour ..."

By the time we encounter this poem, late in the volume, we're already familiar with that grassy breath. Bulls and Minotaurs are signature images for Jackson. He brings a bull into his home in the surreal poem 'The Christmas Pet'. He locates love at the centre of a Labyrinth in 'Parting on Henry Street': "*You're close, you're very close. / So say the Minotaurs of love, / oiling our vanity. // Dublin's a maze, the sea / its only solution. // ... You and I / lock horns in the dust cloud, / unharmed, unholy, // staggered by tenderness.*"

For Jackson, it's clear, these kine are kith. They show up again in 'Ten Studies for the Christ Figure' ['X'], an extraordinary set of short poems about Christ as seen through the eyes of artists, mystics, and the poet himself. These are not dogmatic poems; they don't try to convince the reader (or the poet) of any religious truth. Rather they are explorations of spirit as experienced from the (skewed, disabled) perspective of flesh. One poem in the set, 'The Slaughtered Ox', describes a painting by Rembrandt: "The church road / lined with blood-pails, / butchers' blocks. // ... My god / rotating on a spit. / The tough inedibles // ground down, / my credo: *feed / the living with the dead.*" Another poem offers a wonderfully unexpected image of Bela Lugosi:

Who, in his Hungarian youth, was Christ,
leading some backwater Passion Play.

The photographs are uncanny: his hair
in ringlets, immaculate centre-parting,

the Scourging, the garden's Agony. Later,
Hollywood's black pantomime, his Dracula:

garlic-shy, flinching from the Cross:
eternal life contracted with a bite.

'Ten Studies for the Christ Figure' is more than the sum of its well-executed parts; the assembled fragments hold greater meaning than the images themselves can carry. The same can be said of 'The Temptation of Saint Anthony', a difficult but deeply rewarding poem about physical and spiritual hunger. In the tradition of the best metaphysical poets, Jackson uses concrete physical imagery to convey inexpressible truths. Not comforting truths, mind you, but bracing, necessary ones.