

SUMMER EXEMPLARS: A ROUNDUP OF GOOD POETRY

Reviewed by Grace Cavalieri

Let Us Now Praise Summer Reading. These books are the result of summer reading and a residency at Toad Hall Writer's Retreat. The books are listed in no particular order.

A Night In Brooklyn by **D. Nurkse**, Alfred A. Knopf, 82pgs.

No matter how many books I read, when Nurkse pops up all the lights in the world go on and I know what poetry is about. Somehow he describes experience beyond possibilities. His solitude is not loneliness but a lens to the world without canned laughter—a stark brilliant surveillance camera connecting the unconnected into images we can understand. He often centers in Brooklyn but that's just the bones of memory covered in the cloth of a city. It is Nurkse's meditative naturalism which transforms the everyday with photogenic memoir—like an avenging angel of truth.



D. Nurkse

Return to the Capital

They imagined they would sleep together,
then they slept together –
they thought to rest afterwards,

arm in arm, listening to rain,
so they rested, but it snowed,
they woke in silence
(the silence woke them),
they had not imagined the pain
of dressing, sorting clothes
back into male and female –
in the mirror, instead of a face,
they saw two reflections:

if this is happiness,
how shall we leave it,
if this is grief, how to enter it,
if this is just a rented room,
where are the doors, the stairs,
the streets the endless city.

The Alphabet Not Unlike the World by **Katrina Vandenberg**, Milkweed , 86pgs.

Thanks to Katrina's clear crystalline poems, all women will remember adolescence as it moves through family, and all men will have something new to understand. Vandenberg 's calm observations create a harmony of thought in this lyrical and resonant collection. Each poem is a story with a stunning purpose.



Katrina Vandenberg

Handwriting Analysis

On the first day of fourth grade, Mrs. Hunter
collected our penmanship samples to save

until June; by then, she said, we'd write
in the handwriting we would have all our lives.

Though she probably read that in a book
on child development, I was so excited

I could hardly stand it. in nine months
my adult self would be born, she would

send me a letter; in the ways she swooped,
careened, and crossed her *t*'s, I could

read everything I would need to know.

We were writing ourselves into the future.

We came closer each time we turned

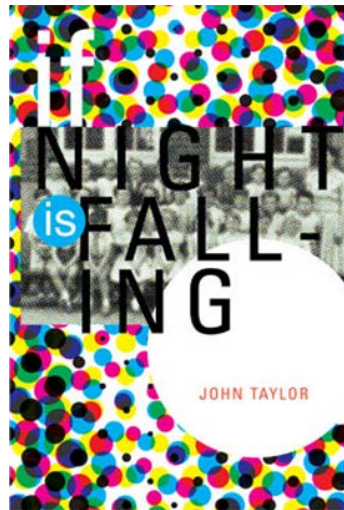
the silver gears in the sharpener near the door,

the wood shavings tumbling inside,

smelling as if a house were being built.

If Night is Falling by **John Taylor**, The Bitter Oleander Press, 88pgs.

International writer/translator Taylor was born in America and has lived in France since 1977, yet these poems arrived to him daily, refreshing memory of growing up in Des Moines in the 1950's, beautifully unadorned as if they were our own memories.



John Taylor

The meaning of a poem

. . . was mostly puzzling, yet in all cases it foretold (as I understood

while I was reading it at home, the night before) my classmates' uncontrollable giggles once I would recite the lines about the raven being *perched upon a bust of Pallas*. In addition, *the bust of Pallas* reappeared further on as *sculptured bust*, *placid bust*, then a *bust* that a raven, ordered by the poet, must *quit*, before the final image of the bird *never flitting, still . . . sitting* on the *pallid bust of Pallas*. Aggravating my predicament was a remark that the bird's fiery eyes burned into the poet's *bosom's core*.

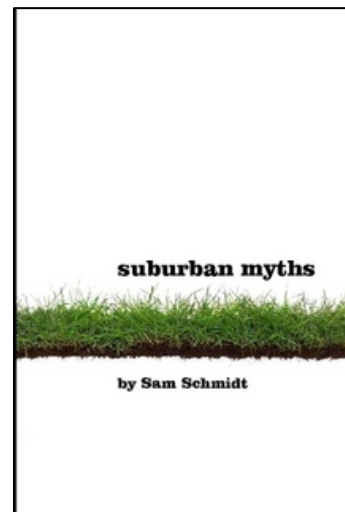
What to do about *bust*, about *bosom*?

I made substitutions; *bust* became *statue*; *bosom*, *heart*.

I memorized the poem that way, and practiced reciting it.

Suburban Myths by **Sam Schmidt** , Beothuk Books 72 pgs.

Daily life is exalted into poems including a collection of G.I. Joe poems. Schmidt takes a living room and turns it into a stage. He can take an ordinary husband and father and turn their spirits—with talent and vision—into actors in an alternate world. He creates characters who become mythic within the everyday. This is an invigorating book by a poet with bracing self knowledge.



Sam Schmidt

Egyptian Gallery

The sculptor believed
his chisel could make them eternal.

They sat stiffly while he
made sketches. So now

they sit on thrones, carved
from the same black granite as their bodies –

They loiter in this museum, strangers
in a hotel lobby, waiting for taxis, late wives.

Only in their faces I find . . . I want to find . . .
that this priest, for instance, might have laughed

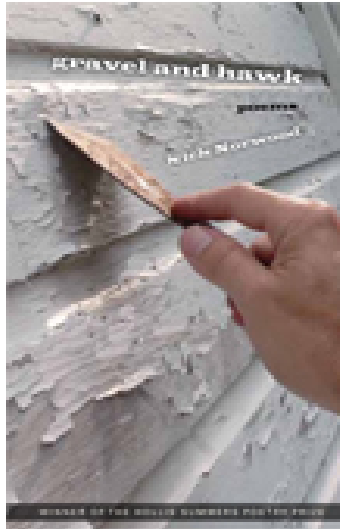
who only gave us his stare. I see,
where the stone around him breaks,

fingertips on his shoulder, all that's left
of the wife he was carved with.

Gravel and Hawk by **Nick Norwood**, Ohio Univ. Press, 68pgs.

Even if you never cared for the rural, or you grew up in a city, this will change you. The natural world lives within this poet in disciplined poems of comfortable silence bracketing culture cells of country life. There is substantiability in these reflections. The subjects are rudimentary; the emotions are gravitational fields of honesty.

Nick Norwood



Bush Hog

My uncle Jack, six one, three hundred ten,
kept us worried. We knew some day the stroke

or heart attack would come. He kept a smoke
between his lips, at hand a glass of gin.

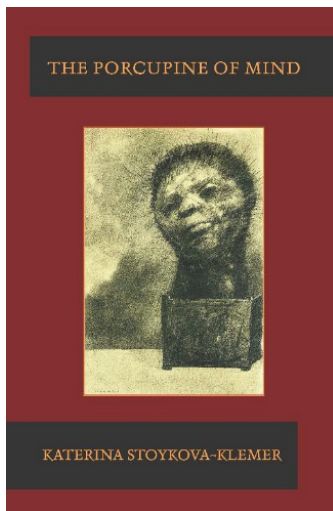
Balding, in black-frame glasses, nylon slacks,
his loafers wallowed-out, worn down to skids,

he showed his feeling once when some brat asked
how he ever got so fat – “Eating kids.”

The day came when, on his job with the state
observing mowers on a right-of-way,

a Bush Hog rooted up a leaf-spring slat,
spun it through the windshield of his Chevrolet.

It severed his neck, flew out through the back,
the twist of fate that claimed my uncle Jack.



***The Porcupine of Mind* by [Katerina Stoykova-Klemer](#), Broadstone Books, 99 pgs.**

The best revenge is writing really well. So we are gifted with these witty timely poems. This is about a tearing apart, the misbelieving in such process and pain; and the artistic stitchery that makes things whole. These are muscular words of intelligent humor and tenacity.

[Katerina Stoykova-Klemer](#)

AN HOUR AFTER

that repulsive growth, burnt by scarlet

medicines, finally fell off my face,

I met my future

ex-husband, and he decided

I was marvelous.

He said *I do*,

I said *I do*,

and so we did,

until a wart sprang

from his nose and grew as big

as an extra face,

grew as big

as an extra lung,

grew as big

as a Cadillac and grew much

bigger than us,

until the wart was all

I could see.

And he couldn't

see at all.

The Raindeer Camps by **Barton Sutter**, Boa, 117 pgs.

What a sure hand this man has. You can tell a seasoned poet when there are no lumps under the mattress. His measured appetites and sorrows are sometimes humorous, sometimes sinewy, always exactly planned.

My favorite parts—

Section One: Poems rhyme, with interior or end lines –a mastery that moves story through like a silver thread.

Section Three: political poems on Rove, Powell, Barbara Bush, not to be missed.

Section Five: an Ars Poetica of sorts , the poem “The Bone Yard” is worth the book.

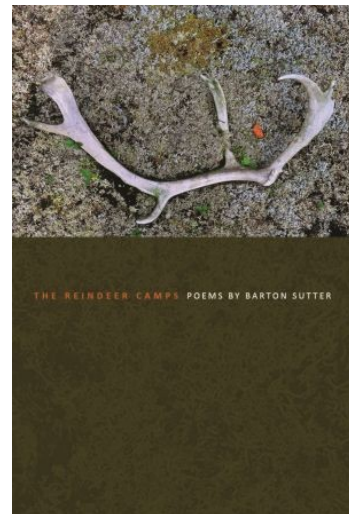
Barton Sutter

Hunger

John Clare, the peasant poet, who was labeled
“Weak but willing,” five feet tall, was barely able,
Because he had too much and more to do,
To keep his family fed while he kept writing, too.
He found odd jobs – thresher, gardener, cowherd –
Outside work he naturally preferred,

Transforming into verse what he observed,
Doing double time, unknown to those he served.

His poverty persisted once he published.
Fine paper was a dream, a great white wish.
One time he wrote on birch bark he had stripped.



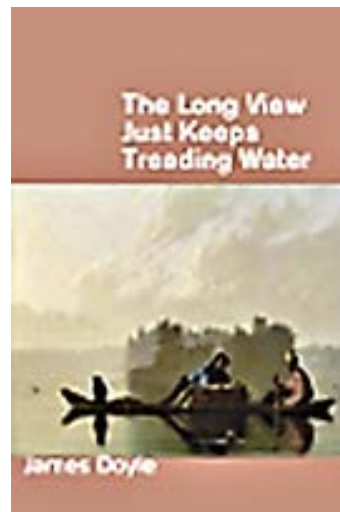
The ink he brewed has turned some manuscript
Bizarre, its paper browning now, with age,
Where homemade words keep eating through the page.

The Long View Just Keeps Treading Water by **James Doyle**, Accents Pub., 86 pgs.

These benevolent poems are messages and stories stained by nostalgia, humor and the remains of each day. The poet is a watcher who proves the world is evidence of our acute senses and fascinations. We can't control our dreams and streams of thought, but we can turn them into good poems.

James Doyle

Floating Gardens



– in memory of my brother Kevin

Just out of reach, overhead
and a few feet to the right
or left, the roses climb
their stalks into the desert

sun, the lilies sway
against themselves for the drops

of water hoarded from rain
so many millennia back

when the Sahara first turned
savannah into sand. The sky
was filling up with vision
that made him wonder

if this were the first or last
stages of delirium, his thirst
curling in on itself, the body's
conduits stoic and insistent

against all evidence. Let
the brain's synapses argue
death as pleasure principle
no matter how much stubborn

memory refused to yield. He
wondered what melodramatic gesture
was better than this, solid roots
and stems right at his fingertip