

Reviews

Judith Kitchen[†]

[†]Judith Kitchen died on 6 November 2014 shortly after completing work on this essay-review. Please see the special notice opposite page 659.

*An essay-review of

THE DEAD EAT EVERY THING. By Michael Mlekoday. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2014. 72 pp. \$15.00, paper.

LANDSCAPE WITH PLYWOOD SILHOUETTES. By Kerrin McCadden. Kalamazoo, MI: New Issues Poetry & Prose, 2014. 84 pp. \$15.00, paper.

TWINE. By David Koehn. Peterborough, NH: Bauhan Publishing, 2014. 112 pp. \$16.50, paper.

WATERSHED. By Laura Donnelly. San Diego: Cider Press Review, 2014. 75 pp. \$17.95, paper.

KEEPER. By Kasey Jueds. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014. 88 pp. \$15.95, paper.

Keeper, by Kasey Jueds, opens with a poem that deserves to be seen in its entirety:

First dark, then more dark
smoothed down over it.

First sleep, then eyes
open to the ceiling
where something circles. For a moment
you can't name it. And for a moment

you're not afraid. Remember

Blake's angels, how they leaned
toward each other, and balanced
by touching only the tips of their wings?
Between their bodies, a space

like the one just after rain begins, when rain
isn't rain, but the smell
of dust lifted, something silent and clean.

Spare and elegant, a bit like a Zen garden, the lines circle and balance as the poem proceeds to open the world—that distinct smell that *is* rain, that knowledge of what rain can sometimes be. So it comes as no surprise to me that the University of Pittsburgh Press selected this book for the prestigious Agnes Lynch Starrett Award. This debut collection is nearly perfect—measured, never pretending to ask more than it can deliver, and yet producing poem after proportional poem with a satisfying precision. “Balance” might be the exact word to express what Jueds is striving for. Typically her poems advance by association, then take a small sidestep (often over an enjambed stanza break) and go on, creating a sense of the inevitable.

Enjambment may be Kasey Jueds's most effective tool. In her hands, words blink on, assert their multiple meanings, thrust the poem forward, twist back on themselves, hold the poem hostage to nuance. Oddly, though enjambment usually allows for a kind of syncopation, here it seems to smooth the rhythms in such a way that meaning is elucidated and intensified. Along with varied lines, each adjective, each simile is—and this is the best word I can find—fitting. And yet each adjective, each simile seems unique, even matchless: the “train's brief scribble of smoke”; the “winter-polished” fields of Wisconsin; even the mine pit's “extravagant black.”

In fact, Jueds explores darkness—its condition—from more angles than would seem possible. For example, in “A Kind of Vanishing” the inside of a tin mailbox is compared to the total darkness of an abandoned silver mine, but all of this is in service of an imagined envelope: “How perfect the things / we are not meant to see.” But the poet also touches on the things meant to be seen, as in “The Sleeping Gypsy” where she looks hard at the dark night of Rousseau's painting, noting the wind in the lion's mane, the lack of wind on the sleeper's robe. At this point, she eschews description in

favor of poetry's other upshot: "Let him be touched. / Let him sense breath, wind, / another, wilder body's tide."

Kasey Jueds has an uncanny sense of the way things are of a piece—even the absences: those hollow birds' bones with an "emptiness at the center that lets them fly." Uncanny, too, the places where *Keeper* intersects with Laura Donnelly's *Watershed*. There's the same focus on music, art, and swimming, the same basic images (swings, parallel tracks, even the same painting by Bonnard, though Jueds has her focus on the model, not the painter). Scattered throughout the book, related poems on the names of flowers, the habits of birds, cave paintings, the human/seal selkies of Scots and Irish lore, dead animals, shark and skin and blood—all do double duty, reinforcing each other even as they launch ideas in new directions.

Knitting, for example, becomes a central metaphor; Jueds not only looks at the "wrong" side of a Fair Isles sweater or the particular cable pattern that allows the body of a drowned fisherman to be identified, she also thinks about the ball of yarn, the raw material. "You start / to see how it's made," the speaker notes, and yes, you begin to see the poem's inner workings. The opening lines of "Secondhand Dress" demonstrate one of Jueds's devices; the writing is lucid and lively as, letting one word or idea slip into (or inside) the next, she creates a seamless knit and purl of her own:

Somewhere between
 blue and silver
 color that asks
 nothing in return
 that returns
 nothing you know
 not river not windows not swallows'
 tilting flight

Over and over, Jueds creates the circumstance of waiting, body and mind on alert as the poem hovers in the conditional. This poet is searching for *sources*. Origin. Root cause. Foundation. The opening lines of "The Selkie Returns to the Sea" articulate both impetus and method:

I used to think my longing had an end.
 I dreamed the sea so many years, the sea
 became a dream.

To this end, Jueds tackles everything with a strong, sure intelligence, unravelling the "reverse sides" in order to see how the world works. There's more to it, though, as the speaker interacts with the very world she has laid bare. Near the end of the title poem, she gives voice to her ambivalence, and its accompanying conflict:

. . . everything is something
 I tried to keep, and

couldn't, and can't,
and won't, and won't
stop trying

You can almost hear the catch in the throat, the desire to hold on to the “everything” of experience. But, the speaker in “Mackerel Sky” insists, “Seems we can only look / a little at a time.” This outstanding collection is the result of that careful, microscopic looking, and from the attention this poet has paid to her sinuous craft. Kasey Jueds is a keeper