

**Asking My Liver For Forgiveness**

**By Rob Cook**

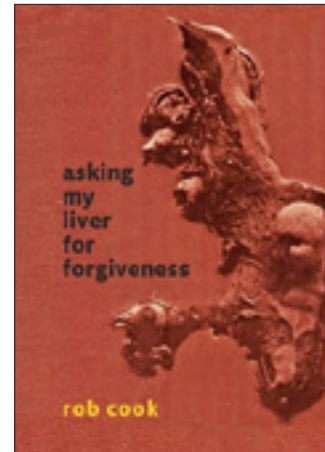
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*Review by Dennis Daly*

**O**ne part obsession, one part surreal, one part experimental, Rob Cook's new collection of poems, *Asking My Liver For Forgiveness*, delivers a consummate parable of medical terror. According to the book's Afterword Cook contracted an obscure liver disease back in 2010 which in turn triggered the ravages of cirrhosis. Until an official diagnosis surfaced in early 2014 the poet and his world spiraled into a maelstrom of unpredictable physical pain, emotional ennui, and psychological denial. Through it all he kept writing.



Cook's poems themselves leak pus, blood, and sweat off the page and into a syringe-fired dreamscape of alternating hopelessness and healing. At the same time the patient's offending liver becomes independent, animal-like, and even sentient. Poetic order imposes itself on the havoc and illogic in a calming, almost climatic, way.

Early in the collection the poet objectifies his body parts in an effort to understand the disease darkening his consciousness. In the poem entitled *Your Body That Led This Far* Cook asks some pertinent questions,

*Is your sugar flu at least one moment's  
true loneliness? Is your liver a frightened  
animal huddled near your tummy  
that reads the notes inside the harsh breads  
and chilis you send it? Does your heart  
already know the direction of your grave?  
How do you know which kidney  
Can be trusted? Which arm?  
Which leg? Which eye?*

Courting sleep at the Marion Hotel in his poem entitled *Blackness Over Motel Country*, the poet concocts a nightmare conversation with the dreamed up visage of a hospital nurse who once tended him. The coordinates of terror reduce "the best possible sleep" to a blend of anxious confession and jaundiced lunacy. Cook explains,

*"I got sick without once leaving my childhood," I tell her.*

*"The pine needles will not hurt you from there,"  
the woman says through her conduit of ash tray static.*

*It is not my own voice, the despair of the television*

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*that doesn't end. "I am always watching from  
the livers that came before you," she says  
when the sleep creatures pass like a blur of doctors  
and their searchlights of mist. Maybe she discusses  
my elevated comet count with the man selling  
the letters left in the vacancy sign ...*

War metaphors monopolize commiserations on diseases. Cook's immune system turned on its own vital organ, the liver, considering it an alien force bent on mischief. Brigades of soldiers were sent to destroy the offending party. The poet employs this battlefield metaphor in order to comprehend his internal chaos. He uses his title poem, *Asking My Liver For Forgiveness*, to reconcile with his former ally. Cook explains,

*... it's taken  
how many years to remember you  
slogging without faces  
through my liver's venereal swamps?*

*To walk with precision  
through my liver that cannot be  
comforted from the snake-hard cold,*

*its dark churches where monsters pray,*

*the ones I let in who will never stop  
stalking us, my friend, my liver,  
my friend.*

*I will always be sorry—for both of us—*

The poem *Cryptogenic Cirrhosis* chronicles a very bad diagnosis. Cook's persona spelunks his way through gothic caves of anxiety and medical unease. Facing the unknown of one's mortality forces the artistic mind to focus and refocus its imaginative powers on the minutia of whatever is at hand, presumable scientific certitude (or not). The wording evokes a strange and soaring elegance. Cook opens his poem with dissolution,

*not one doctor could diagnose  
each day i wanted  
a different angel to die,  
so they pillaged  
all the terrors in my body,  
which was a virus now,*

*though not yet pain.*

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*"you have cryptogenic cirrhosis" –*

*meaning the hypothetical afterlife  
will become, in the days of  
the impending panic transplant,  
more than just a child who nourishes a distant cancer.*

*Still, one can feel dollars  
Of damnation denominations  
Pasted to the kidneys' Egyptian ceilings*

End of days bring panic, religious fervor, and great expectations. Cook's poem entitled 11:59 chronicles all three using a mixed combination of Christian and medical imagery. The result both impresses and scares the hell out of you. Here's the heart of the piece,

*It is time to track god, digging  
with his enormous cross in the wrong  
direction, toward the thousand basements  
of the last crucifix company between  
jerusalem and the day after.  
It is time for everyone to stay silent.  
It is time to hear where the trees and the water  
have stopped praying for us.  
It is time for a hospital  
without the cruel voices that arrive  
from the center of the evening pills.  
It is time for a breakfast without scalpels,  
a nurse without tourniquets that monitor the liver's fear,  
a doctor without the elimination of names.*

Notice the repetition of the phrase "It is time." Cook seems to work himself up to a crescendo of control and hope that greatly tones down the panic and pessimism created by earlier pieces.

Exceptional artistry originates from diverse experiences, many of them disconcerting and even degrading. One's flesh follows its own genetic and environmental script in spite of our better, often antiseptic, angels. Wherever Cook may be on mortality's time span, his poetic work inexorably advances before him with its surgical candor and its strange, unblinking imagery. If you harbor even a modicum of belief in the curative power of words, read this marvelous poet