

Phillip Arnold's *The Natural History of a Blade*
Dos Madres, 2019

Review by Marcia Ross



Two important things about Philip Arnold's poems: they are faithfully attentive to etymology, and intently focused on the natural world while not self-consciously showing off his considerable knowledge. His plain subjects—earth and leaves, changing light and shadow, the fall of snow, the death of everything, suggest with exquisite sensitivity our parallel human experience, our struggle, even as his poems enrich the mind with gladness and ease. They do these things with so little showiness that one can easily miss the deep moments as they pass by in modest expression.

By my sights, Mr Arnold is a poet to watch for—or better, to listen for—as time goes by. His future poems may leave behind some of their delightful but occasionally distracting linguistic eccentricities, stuff that sounds really good or obscure, but that can baffle the earnest reader or cause her to lose her pace or place, or progress. But there will be a Casino Real payoff. For all of us.

Arnold's interest in etymology is one of the quiet pleasures of this collection. We learn immediately that the word blade is derived from Middle English, German, and Old English and that it can denote (or suggest) a leaf, a blossom, a blade (knife, spade). It can also bring to mind the voices of other great poets. When we read a single line like "at night/ we become the delicate tongues of bees" and have a sweet sense of Walt Whitman who sits nearby, contemplating "a blade of grass" at the beginning of *Leaves of Grass*. Or we may be surprised with one of Thomas Hardy's fine tetrameters rhythms that feels almost uncanny and which is not copying Hardy in the least, but instead riffing on rhythms that conjure his genius. Arnold is on firm, familiar, rich ground in these poems, and he knows it. I take that as a sign of good courage as he grows as an artist.

The title piece of the collection, "The Natural History of a Blade," is an example of a poem with an original voice and something important to say. Without ever sounding astonished Arnold astonishes:

*The scored sapwood opens the mouth
Of the forest: brown petals open*

*In a dream of thirst, a throat as wide
As the mid-winter sky.*

In "The Appalachian Character for Death," with its revelation of ravishing, frightening brevity:

*six
black
strokes*

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“spell out nature’s shorthand / across wet branches” in “winter ink” for the sign of death. Before long, after some thoughtful consideration the poet settles into a Keatsian/Hemingway/Camus musing with:

*It isn't how a life will be erased
That unsettles me, but how hunger grows
While the dying are now on our time.*

Our time

In “Black Mountain Point” where the poem’s speaker remembers “to isolate the details / of your silence” (just try it), you have a hint of Arnold’s considerable linguistic powers under the cover of understatement and ambiguity. Whose silence, we don’t know; and the mental impossibility of isolating the details of a silence? There are many examples of such skill and innuendo. At the end of this poem his speaker says only “Nothing is sudden.” (Was it Freud who said, “all change is incremental”?)

Of the several remarkable poems in this collection, there is nothing to criticize except perhaps a tendency. Arnold can be thrilling, provocative, and insightful in bringing together the reality of a living nature and the catastrophe of living, for all creatures. At times the level at which he unearths showy or strange uses of language can distract; it can sap the flow of meaning from his more predominant and expression of humble suggestion and modesty.

I believe he has the makings of a great poet.