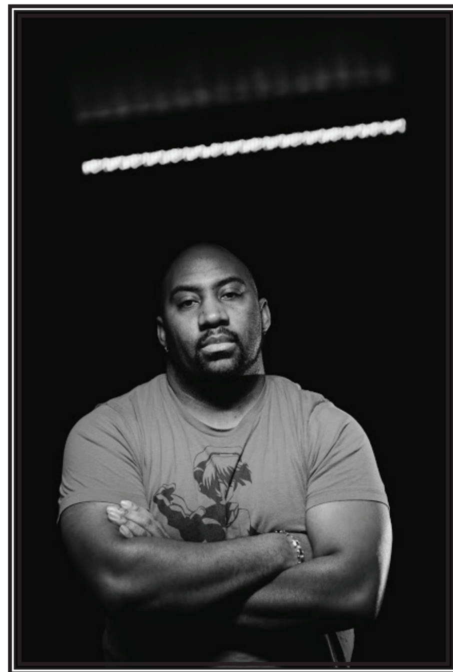

We Inherit What the Fires Left
by William Evans
Simon and Schuster Paperbacks

reviewed by Gregory J. Wolos

As I reread William Evans's powerful new book of poems, We Inherit What the Fires Left, in preparation for writing this review, I couldn't help but think of Covid-19 and its oversized impact on the Black community. The virus, to me, seemed an apt metaphor for the enmity—the kind of toxic, historical racism—Evans struggles to rise above as a father and a Black man as he examines through his poetry his own defeats and victories. The reader watches as Evans attempts to convey to his daughter—and interpret for himself— the particular vulnerabilities their flesh is heir to. But viruses, even devastating pandemics, are not willfully malevolent; diseases eventually succumb to therapies and vaccines deriving from humankind's united intelligence and effort. And metaphors, while they may serve to explain, are only shadows. Evans, through his poems, carries the reader with him as he maneuvers through the actual landscape left by the fires of ignorance and hatred that represent his and his family's inheritance. As I read the poems in We Inherit What the Fires Left, I'm forced to confront the fires fed by my own inherited white privilege, even as it inoculated me against the flames' destructive force.

In the collection's opening poem, "The Engine," Evans, as he records his daughter watching as a sunset "fell out of the window," offers us his own point of view: "I had a cut above my eye once/ and assumed everything I saw was bleeding." He understands nightfall as "a black they can't murder" and celebrates "days my car makes it /to the garage" as "days I can live forever." He sees himself in the present through his past: "Even flattened against the street, an officer's/ knee in my back, I look young for my age." And how will this legacy help Evans educate his daughter, who, as he observes in "Mimic," "is already my mimic after all,/ having taken my nose/ and eyes and smile for her own"? Knowing what to share with his child and what not to is a continuing struggle, because "I never/ know what windows are worth/ destroying." His daughter knows he is Santa Claus, and he corrects her when she calls a baseball a football. He equivocates when she says her grandparents are in heaven, telling her "close enough." But how to deal with the threatening paradoxes of life? When together they see a deer, "beautiful and liquid" and "the girl's eyes widened/ until light came from them," the father is silent and smiling as she tells him "it's so cool." He thinks, but does not tell her, not yet, "Did you know that some people shoot them?" Evans reveals his own ambiguous feelings toward mercy in "Might Have to Kill," in which his own pacifist father ("who marched against the war") wants him to kill a groundhog

that's messing up the lawn. Did Evans learn his pacifism "after the third fight/ in the third white neighborhood"? He distracts his daughter when she asks him to kill a spider, and identifying with the gopher, wondering what it would do "if it knew it were being hunted." Ultimately, he argues that the "summer is nearly over," giving his father to understand that "the boy who looks like him/ waiting for the sun to finally go down" is hoping to avoid being the deliverer of death.

Evans expects that there are lessons his daughter will learn for herself by simple observation. In "Waves," when she wades in the ocean and wonders what secrets the ocean will bring to the shore, he mutters under his breath, "Probably slaves," keeping his own cynicism to himself for the time being. He remembers "what lessons/ I give without ever offering," a point illustrated on the ride home, when "an officer/ pulls us to the side of the road/ and asks me whose car I am driving/ my family home in." As a father, Evans must perform a delicate balance between protecting his daughter and teaching her to protect herself. When, in "Passing for Day," she climbs into her parents' bed late at night, he waits until he hears her "soft snore," like "a subtle prayer against my neck, then I know it is safe to rise" before sliding out of bed, because "building a heaven doesn't mean you get to stay." In "Sharks and Minnows" Evans forces himself to play an active role in his daughter's education. As the girls on her soccer team dash around the field, giggling as they avoid the soccer balls kicked to "tag" them by their own coach and their parents, the poet follows the pattern of near misses until he feels compelled to offer a necessary toughening: "because I haven't tagged anyone/ with a ball in a long while and my role/ could not be more clear, I begin/ to kick the soccer balls harder." Some lessons seem impossible to teach: in "Looking Over My Shoulder She Discovers a Lynching" Evans hopes his daughter will "please remember this picture" as she learns to distinguish between the whites in the photograph (the same "not-people" who "pulled your dad from the car") and her "friends from school, from gymnastics, from Build-a-Bear," and teachers who "look like the not-people."

Raising his daughter in a racist society, Evans ruminates about his own issues with assimilation, unable and unwilling to forget in "After the Storm, It Was Business as Usual," about "the time a cop appeared/ and asked me if I lived at the home I was punching my garage code into." How can Evans make peace with the society he describes in "I Will Love You Most When I Barely Remember Anything," in which "I drop my daughter off at school/ An officer pulls/ me out of the car as the sun goes down. Something died in between"? In "How to Assimilate" Evans remembers surprising a visiting white friend with an empty gun "even though I knew it wasn't/ that funny." For the friend the experience "wasn't cool," and the poet "could never really/ figure out why I aimed a hollow/ threat at my friend except/ to say that I probably gave him something I know so well." As for his fears regarding his role in his daughter's education, Evans muses in the first poem of the collection's third and final section, "You haven't been right/ since your high school teacher told you to stop/ showing off in class. Now you get nauseous/ when your daughter aces her spelling test./ When you were younger, your father overheard you/ talking to you white friends and told you/ code-switching will kill you."

Evans recalls times in his youth when he silenced his own voice, that "I was once a beautiful bouquet of new stalks,/ but nobody told us what it takes to bloom." In "Pledge to Raising a Black Girl," he asks, "Do you know how many/ classrooms I either dulled my sharp or dulled/ my black until I got tired of being the only/ kingdom without its own campaign?/ How do you know what you have a taste for/ if you've been told never to show your teeth?" Part of the "pledge" alluded to in the poem's title seems aimed at allowing his daughter to retain her own voice in the face of the difficulties she is sure to confront. There is a touch of pride in the poet's voice as he describes his daughter: "You would've thought we set that girl on fire/how she got so cocky, smart as a broken window." Evans argues, "Can't be mad at the talk/ back because we did teach her to talk shit." A lesson learned that he hopes to impart to his daughter.

In the final poem of We Inherit What the Fires Left, Evans concludes that the way "things don't die" is that "[t]hey are loved on by those/ too young to believe in death's/ argument." And in a brief prose piece that ends the volume, he questions "What happens when black bodies are still full of life and ambition?" He claims that he has "planted a stake in a neighborhood and a future and have decided that nothing will move me so easily." He acknowledges the survival of his father, "born after the dawn of the civil rights era, as well as his own "as the boy who can chart the violence against [his father] through the neighborhoods he has lived." When he and his father are gone, "there is another—my daughter—who may have to fight in similar ways . . . to rebel in similar ways. But she will do it, from her own plot, a governance unto herself. We," Evans asserts, "aren't going anywhere."

And I, a father and grandfather myself, can admire and sympathize with Evans's ambition and fears, vividly and tenderly expressed in We Inherit What the Fires Left: sympathize, but not empathize, secure but guilty about the protection my privileged skin provides me against viruses metaphorical and real.