

Previously Owned
By Nathan McClain
Four Way Books
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Review by Mark Walsh

“Boy Pulling a Thorn from His Foot”, the ekphrastic opener of Nathan McClain’s vibrant, well-wrought second book, *Previously Owned*, serves as an excellent overture for what follows: poems of solitude, and deep looks, poems that examining pain, but also poems that turn their attention to the reader, asking us how we are reading these lines and seeing these images. This is a book that draws us in because it holds something to see again, then questions our assumptions, and see it from a different perspective.

McClain achieves this to a striking degree in his handling of the pastoral. Relocating from Brooklyn to Amherst delivers McClain into a new landscape that is inviting and complicated. Amherst itself, he reminds us in his poem “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”, was founded by an English Lord who ‘it has been said, distributed smallpox-infected blankets / and handkerchiefs to Native Americans’. This same poem opens with another reminder that Twain’s American Übernovel “was banned in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1885.” Two uncomfortable truths about Massachusetts towns long admired for their progressive ideals. The signals are clear – what we generally hold to be reassuring and positive does not free them from a complicated history.

His poem, “Where the View Was Clearer” succeeds in reconceiving the pastoral, where the standard natural images are not so much comforting as strange, with signs that are fraught with signifiers:

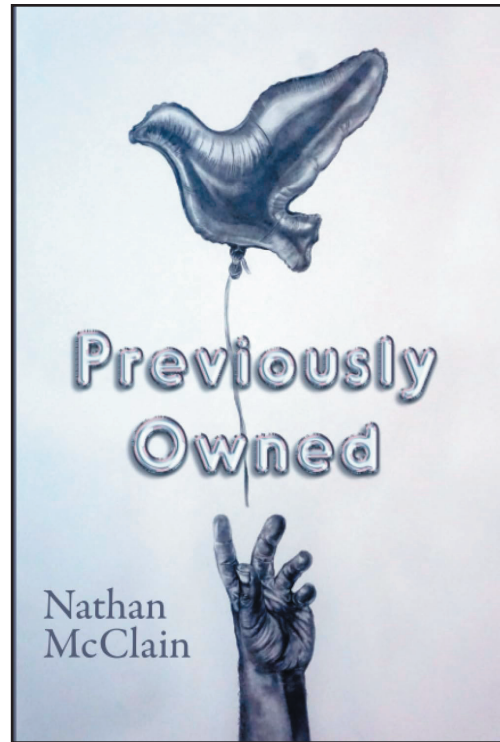
.... My wife asked,

*What are you thinking?
Or What’s the matter? But*

*I was a stand of trees by then. Impenetrable
as the wood from which I imagined*

*Bishop’s moose first emerged,
otherworldly, taking shape*

*In my mind even now, though
I’ve never seen a moose,*



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*only signs warning of moose,
and NO PASSING ZONE signs*

as we drove Route 9 to the trail.

The sly allusion to the Bishop poem made me smile. When couched in the idea that all images need a certain anchor in the real world, what is a moose with no clear reference, no shared experience?

What these poems like these help me better understand is the continuing duality of America: being part of America which means – in part – being part of this landscape. But at the same time, when Black Americans are kept apart from so many spaces in this country that it creates a psychic distance or strangeness. That elements that assume comfort in the pastoral can be off-putting and weird for many Black people. This land was made for you and me...but not exactly....

Along with the content of his poems, there is much to celebrate in McClain's style. An interesting device that runs through *Previously Owned*, is the steady stream of repeated phrases that creates a meditative recursive effect. The phrases echo, alter slightly and reemphasize. This is done nicely in the facing poems "Sisyphus: To Do List" & "Self Portrait as the Movie Inception". The mundane is emphasized in "Sisyphus":

*Monday crossed off. It's been
crossed off it seems, forever.
Tuesday – move the Buick. Again,*

*To the opposite side of the street. At sun-
rise if possible, or if you know better.
Monday crossed off. It's been*

*that way since way back when
it seems, though he can't remember,
Tuesday – move the Buick. Again?*

Who hasn't crossed the threshold into workaday middle age and not understood Sisyphus? "Self Portrait" feels more dream like in its seven self corrections:

*It's pouring. You can't hail a cab. No, you're on a train. Quite dry, the
red wine swishes in a plastic cup. Maybe you're asleep. No, when do you
sleep? Wake up, there's a butcher knife on the wood cutting block, so
clean and sharp. Is this a dream? Your wife's laid her head on the tracks
again – they thrum. Come lie with me, she says. No. You have no wife.*

Each "No" serves to restart the vision, (or dream? nightmare?); the shifting images trying to coalesce with the speakers intent, but then slide into another "No" that leads to a deeper question of self-portraiture. Not only was I reminded of the ways that the city folded in on itself in the dreamscape of *Inception*, it also reminds me of Christopher Nolan's 2008 film, from *The Dark Knight*, where The Joker constantly revises his origin story to point where the self is torn into too many pieces to build up again. Do all these "No's" lead you closer to truth or move you further away?

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My favorite use of his recursive technique comes in the cycle of poems "They said I was an alternate", thirteen poems using the same title that detail the experience of being an alternate juror at the trial of a Black man. Placed in the center of this collection, these poems, including a fourteenth poem titled "the sentence," are a tour de force of patterned language that doubles back on itself, all the while shifting the angle of trajectory in each poem so as to give the reader a full and thrill sense of being not just an alternate juror, but a turned object, shifted opinion, a substitute, stand in, and all the other connotations of the word. The cycle sets up the contrast of two Black men experiencing the judicial system, from different positions – one man at the hands of the system, the other man seemingly working for the system. I found the fifth poem in this cycle the most compelling, where the speaker, after hearing the testimony of alternating police officers feels the situation morphing into absurdist theater:

*An another, yes, an officer
Knock, knock Who's there An officer,
of course (Can I get a witness)
They called one – an officer It was*

*like watching the saddest floats of a parade pass
They called an officer as a witness
and again, instructed us You sit
there now, like good little children,*

*and listen Listen good, children, they said,
as if we might soon be tested*

You can't help but feel for the speaker's parenthetical plea. This is a fine representation of the foregone conclusion the justice system can serve up in such cases. And we the reader, just like the speaker, begin to wonder what we are doing here and what is the purpose of this show?

There is more to dive into with *Previously Owned* – urgent love poems, fresh takes on the *Aubade*, more subtle plays of language; a healthy amount to call attention to and celebrate. However, I worry I may have said too much, so I will step aside because it is Nathan McClain's voice that you really should listen to.