

timentality.” Let’s make an important distinction – the characters feel deeply, edging toward insanity in their own isolation. DeLillo, however, pulls off an astounding flight of horrible, lyrical beauty in this book, a down-right HAUNTING fluidity of descriptive prose that is so masterful it makes *White Noise* look like the abrasive sarcasm of an insufferable child.

Don DeLillo is, quite honestly, a much better writer than I ever really thought he was. He was clever and witty, sometimes profound – but rarely empathetic. And with *The Body Artist*, he enters another aspect of humanity, a place where what we fear the most doesn’t come from without but from within: not the fear of death, but the reality of it. He goes for not the brain but the soul. And he arrives. No, I doubt you’ll be entertained – you’ll be emotionally pummeled by this book’s implications.

Rain Mirror.

Michael McClure.

New Directions, 1999.

112 pages. \$13.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by J.W. Bonner

Michael McClure’s latest collection divides into two long sequences: a collection of 50+ haiku and a selection of offshoots of earlier poems, graftings that have been transplanted into new poetic terrains. These poems dive rather than walk across the page, vertical plumbings as opposed to standard horizontal renderings. Apropos of this Beat poet, most lines are only a beat, a syllable. Although a little does go a long way in many of these poems, too much doesn’t go far enough, finally.

Given the space limitations, let me point to the collection’s strengths. The opening sequence of haiku share the Japanese origins in a focus on “seasons and special subjects,” but an owl might be incongruously – but aptly, given McClure’s home near San Francisco – paired with garbage cans. Petals, flowers, insects, and animals figure in these poems and vie for space with cars, bandaids, helicopters, and phones. The haiku are presented as vertical strips, and they are stripped to syllables and letters. The tone of the poems is often informal (“HEY, IT’S ALL CON / SCIOUSNESS”). Nonetheless, at their best, fine images abound. For example, look at how McClure depicts the rim of light seeping into closed eyes: of “NOTH / ING / NESS / of intelligence; / silver / sunlight / through / closed / eyelids.” Capillary brightness gleams in a center of blackness, darkness – just as with mental drift or the incipient stages of sleep the mind actively continues along certain pathways, even when they are not directed. Nice comparisons include pine bough tips with monkey fin-

gers or a sunlit butterfly with a light show at the Filmore – both psychedelic.

The poems in the second section depict a kind of “Reason / whose details are confusion.” Written in the aftermath of personal trials (“after meltdown”), these poems, too, extend down the page. At their best, the images are plain and domestic: “Scarlet lipstick all over / the frail cobalt cup / fine / as the mind / of a moth.” But then the jarring smashing of the poetic prettiness at the poem’s conclusion: “A handful of excrement smeared / on a wall.”

McClure thinks of images as big as God’s “HUGE FACE,” but the best of these “SMALL” poems have “a soul / like an opal.” McClure wisely quotes Whitehead’s statement, which applies equally to the writing of (good) poems: “We think in generalities but we live / in detail.” The best of these poems are replete with the details of daily living.

Of Moment.

Jonathan Greene.

Gnomon Press, 1998.

61 pages. \$10.50 (paperback).

Reviewed by Robert West

Jonathan Greene’s *Of Moment* contains 51 new poems – with an average length of less than six lines. In its commitment to the miniature, it recalls Fred Chappell’s *C*; however, whereas Chappell grounds his book in the Latin epigram, *Of Moment* is rooted in East Asian models, as its two translations from haiku suggest. Time and again Greene succeeds in producing something not merely brief, but exquisite. Take this untitled poem:

I leave mowing at dusk
with swallows criss-
crossing the air

like a ship
blessed by dolphin escort
I dock the tractor in the shed.

The actual image and the accompanying simile are remarkable enough, but notice the way the poems right-hand margin zigzags, mirroring the swallows’ diving. And notice too the other reversals: the rhythmic as well as visual doubling back of “with swallows criss- / crossing,” the switch from the trochaic fifth line to the iambic sixth as the tractor (and poem) withdraws and parks. Greene does more than describe the scene – he virtually enacts it.

These poems can seem deceptively simple; on rereading them, you usually discover you missed something

the first time around – technical aspects to be sure, as with most good poets, but also sometimes complexities of attitude. The last poem, “Reading ‘The Death of Woman Wang’” is a good example of this. Its five lines meditate tersely on disaster:

Quake, storm,
flood –

through the night
the coffin maker
hammers.

What can we take from this? The easiest thing is to breeze through the poem, reading it simply as a carefully hewn assertion of death’s relentlessness, of the natural world’s indifference or even hostility toward mankind. But there is a dimension to this poem that makes it much more interesting than that – an acknowledgment that there’s always profit to be made from bad times.

These poems invite us to dwell on them, to refuse the specious equation of a poem’s length with the amount of attention it deserves.

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Wherever.
Kevin Bezner.
Cincinnati Writers’ Project, 1999.
49 pages. \$12.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Miles Efron

At the end of Book V of the *Aeneid*, just before he visits the underworld, Aeneas loses a close friend. While steering the fleet, the Trojan helmsman, Palinurus, is lulled to sleep by the god, Somnus. As Palinurus dozes, Somnus throws him into the ocean. The loss rouses Aeneas from his own dreaming:

Here the commander felt a loss of way
As his ship’s head swung off, lacking a helmsman,
And he himself took over, holding course
In the night waves. Hard hit by his friend’s fate
And sighing bitterly, he said:
“For counting
Overmuch on a calm world, Palinurus,
You must lie naked on some unknown shore.” *

Losing Palinurus reminds Aeneas of his own isolation, his status as a perennial wanderer. And Palinurus is only one in a series of friends lost to Aeneas, a character nearly incapable of sustaining human relationships.

Like Aeneas, the narrator of Kevin Bezner’s *Wherever*

is haunted by an inability to keep his friends. For one thing, he is too peripatetic for closeness: “I have lived many / places. Not one / I call home.” (“Wherever”). Other loved ones have left him (“Reading the Birds”):

Another death. Another crow.

This one hides
behind the full leafed trees, black
movement,

a painter’s brushstrokes
in green.

And off I go
to wander with eyes around the path below,

Closed by a strong end rhyme these lines accentuate the most overwhelming fact of Bezner’s world: whether by dying or wandering, we manage always to sabotage our intimacies.

But the affinity between Aeneas and Bezner’s voice runs deeper than rootlessness. Both men are troubled by ghosts and have trouble sleeping because of it. “Doors,” one of several prose poems in *Wherever*, records a dream:

I am at my mother’s house . . . I expect to see something
bad, so I shiver,
but a baby appears. I reach out to it. It floats up to me, but
in midair it
becomes a gargoyle and leaps to my throat. I put up my
hands in defense.
And, suspecting I will die, I wake up.

In “After My Father’s Death” Bezner again straddles dreaming and waking:

And while I remain in dream
I am startled awake.

I want to say, “You died in May.
I saw you in the mirror
in June.”

In “Reading Jotei” the insomnia motif becomes literal:

Up late, sleepless
again, the old worry
that I’ve lived too many places
and so have missed my life – .

As in *Aeneid* V, a speaker’s insomnia evokes loneliness; it prompts him to speak about the loneliness that attends the business of roaming. In *Wherever* we see this dynamic writ large.

Yet for all the thematic similarities, Bezner remains