

# New Poetry from Kevin Honold: “Elegy for the Emperor Frederick II”



HERE AND GONE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

i.

*view from Emigrant, Death Valley*

The snowy Amargosas kneel  
beside the salt flats stained  
with the blue shadows of clouds and the fading  
paths of walking rain.

The bitter dust comes back to life.  
Dervishes of gypsum and borax  
spin across the basin, divine conjurations here and gone,  
celestial legerdemain.

The winds entice them, no prayers detain them.  
Beloved of heaven but a moment,  
then drown themselves  
in salt and distance.

ii.

*Mesquite Flats*

They say the dunes of the basin  
pace a vast circle on the desert floor, inch  
by inch, a millennial march about the perimeter  
of their colossal stone corral until they arrive  
back where they began.

Not a grain of sand, they say, escapes this valley,  
but each is buried in its turn a thousand years  
until disinterred by a chosen wind  
that carries the grain to the next dune,  
there to be buried once again.

Centuries pass

in this manner: a wild leap then a long  
long wait, an elemental orbit  
to nowhere—not at all like us or  
maybe not.

iii.

Your Majesty had so many questions.

*Where is Purgatory, where the Pit?*

*Below ground? above the clouds?*

What strange things to ask when the very  
seas and mountains were counted  
among the treasures of state!

iv.

Certain winds prevent departure,  
wrote a Jin poet during the difficult  
months after the Mongols sacked Kaifeng, observing  
how breezes compose  
abandonment in dead leaves and in memories

of friends no longer with us.

But little troubled was the old master  
in his cups, seated on a stool  
beside the door to his mountain hut, knowing  
the costly scent of haw blossoms

will vanish at a touch of breeze.

Such grace in the face  
of hardship and change  
is rare, and always has been.

v.

*traces of old wildfires in the Panamints*

The tangled cries of unseen coyotes echo from hillsides  
arrayed with the black skeletons  
of junipers torched by the fires  
that crossed these hills  
ten years ago.

A howling so  
joyously unreal, a purling  
bright as the waters of Shilohs,  
Hiddekels, Pisons,  
and many other streams  
I'll never walk beside.

vi.

That the intellect would expire  
of inanition except it find nourishment  
in the world of things, was current wisdom in Frederick's day.  
The mysteries of faith were for slaves to proclaim, and so  
he called Christ and Moses  
arch-deceivers.

Ill-advised citizens who disdained the imperial corvées  
inevitably emerged from their beleaguered  
towns with their swords hanging from their necks  
in token of submission. Anyhow,  
he hanged them in the royal forests where  
they ripened, split, and fell  
like fruit in its proper season.

*Stupor mundi* he called himself, Wonder of the World,

no longer with us.  
Truly, not all his ships, not all the slaves,  
not convoys of painted  
oxcarts creaking with treasure, nor all the blood  
and all the pain will be forgotten  
till the last jewel is pawned  
for the last war.

vii.

*death of Frederick*

At the limits of knowledge stand the sentinel  
oaks of curiosity and desire, and there he paused,  
dispirited and syphilitic.

The contention that those who possess  
great power are more terrified  
of death than common folk

is probably true. With his own hand he drew the white cowl  
over his brow, took the bread of Christ on his tongue  
and died on the feast of Saint Lucia.

A period of silence lasting seven nights  
was periodically broken, the chronicles say,  
by the mournful cries of gibbons trapped in narrow silver  
cages in the imperial menagerie.

To this day, Frederick's  
*Science of Hunting with Birds* remains  
the final word on falconry.

viii.

The great wheel of stars  
turns above the Chloride Cliffs,  
shedding peace and ancient light.

The stars are pinholes in the night's  
blue brocade, so the royal stargazers affirmed,  
through which the ethereal fire

or the Holy Spirit burns.

In the high pastures, the Herdboy leads the moon by a rope  
up and over the Providence Mountains.

The stars—so many silver bells  
each of which I must  
dust and name before I sleep—

keep company with honest  
Orion, who hath no place  
to lay his head, who rests  
a bony jewel-encrusted  
hand upon a crook,  
lamenting his meager  
flock through the wee hours.