

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.