

Poetry Review: “The Light Outside” by George Kovach



George Kovach’s poetry collection, *The Light Outside*, begins with a narrator who’s stuck holding open a window.

He’s a little embarrassed about it. The window, that is. He accidentally painted over it a few years past, in a hundred-year-old house, and only just now has gotten it to budge. And so, finally, holding it, he’s not sure that he wants to shut it again.

*With the window free a burdened balance replaces
the ease the architect intended. I have to hold it open.*

The situation is humorous, humble. It sets the stage for the way Kovach will approach many of his poems: curious, searching, and then decisive. The journey he is about to take the reader on is far from light, and sometimes darkness will overwhelm. But there is a unique resolve to this collection: “I have to hold it open.”

It’s a resolve befitting a poet who has chosen to try to see hard-won light, who has endured the Vietnam war and then, as an artist, worked (through his literary magazine, *CONSEQUENCE*, and other venues) to highlight and promote artistic voices often very different than his own: prismatic, divergent; contrasts and complements. Like the Rothko painting that graces the collection’s cover—“Dark Over Light (No.7),” in which a charcoal square threatens to overtake the apparent delicacy of a smaller, pale rectangle—or the Sugimoto photograph referenced in the poem “Picture at an Exhibition”—the strength may not be in the encroaching square but in the sliver below that, against all odds, remains open.

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Hiroshi Sugimoto, "Boden Sea," 1993.

Kovach's poems often ring with the language of the sea—coves, moorings, ledges, gulls—though each word holds a far more distilled power than that of a natural world merely-observed. Here, nature observes you—the melded, overlapping nature of the populated Atlantic seaboard, where the human and the wild may have long cohabited but can't claim to be used to one another, not quite. The gray fog and tides meet low chain-link fences, lilacs, Catholic statuary, paved patios and Coppertone in summer, echoes of Pinsky and Bishop and Lowell.

The legacy of the latter is most overt in "Covenant," which opens with Lowell's famous line, "The Lord survives the rainbow of His will," borrowed from "[The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket](#)." Like "Quaker Graveyard," it is a poem about a shipwreck. Both poems share a rhyme scheme and irregular pentameter as well as a vein of bitterness-in-loss, of grappling with what could easily seem, from the ground, an indifferent Almighty.

Whole families

*Left what failed them, but held close to their faith;
boarded the St. John in Galway,
threw sprays of white rock-cress leeward
and watched the green hills fade. October 8th*

*1849, hard into a gale
Within view of a sheltered cove the rigging
failed, shrouds ripped from the bleeding deck,
voices below screamed in the dark and wailed at God.*

Now a statue of John the Baptist stands watch there, over a shoreline that has eroded to his bare, stone feet.

Lowell, a conscientious objector who dedicated “Quaker Graveyard” to a cousin killed at sea in the Second World War, limned that poem with a tense and devastating ask: Why would a creator let so many people perish in such cruel ways, and why do we, as humans, seem hell-bent on heaping even more suffering upon ourselves?

Kovach, contrasting Lowell as a combat veteran of a different, perhaps in some ways more culturally fraught war, uses “Covenant” to ask the same. “Covenant” is subtler and shorter than Lowell’s poem, and equally compassionate, but it maintains its predecessor’s edge, the sharp intelligence that won’t let the reader off easy. If a rainbow must be initiated by massive loss and violence—survived, perhaps, only by the Lord with his iron-and-dew will—then it is a double-edged sword: a promise of an eternal love, and a promise that large-scale loss will happen again. Does it comfort you? In a stunning twist, Kovach’s final line reaches out to another Lowell allusion, this time from “For the Union Dead,” which uses a separate historical event to cast its evaluating eye on modern man. Kovach writes,

*Slick cormorants skim
with cruel black wings beyond the harbor’s edge.*

and that judgment-by-nature, which may seem at first an easier thing to dodge than the judgment of God or man, is packed with all the horror and human-on-human hurt Lowell alludes to with his own famous final lines, *A savage servility slides by on grease.*

We are the mourners, of course; and we are the noble lost, the starving faithful. We are also the savage servility. Anyone can slide by, watching.

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I am not surprised that “Covenant” reads to me like an anti-war poem. Kovach is founding editor of the aforementioned

Consequence magazine (along with Catherine Parnell and a [masthead](#) of other editors), which focuses on the “culture and consequences” of war and its effects. *Consequence* is an exceptional journal, wide-reaching and brave, and it has served, for me in my last two years with *Wrath-Bearing Tree*, as a model of what a real literary, intellectual and artistic effort toward justice, true exchange of ideas, and cooperation might look like. Dedicated to the voices of all people touched by war, the magazine has published a special issue featuring Cambodian writers, and its most recent issue—its eleventh volume—features poet Brian Turner as guest curator of a [selection](#) of searing and fantastic Iraqi poetry.

Kovach’s “Editor’s Notes” for each issue read like beautiful small essays in themselves. “Prejudice finds soft targets among the vulnerable,” he writes (Vol. 9, February 2018), making plain his opposition to the [Muslim travel ban](#). The Editor’s Note for Volume 7, three years prior, reads like a mission statement:

For me, reading these works [in the magazine] unfastens the flak jacket of my assumptions and enables me to enter a kind of sacred space where the meaning of suffering and loss become complex, nuanced, spoken in a voice that’s both strange and familiar. The cumulative effect is recognition of our shared humanity and how the experience of war is both different and the same, regardless of where it’s fought.

“Unfastens the flak jacket of my assumptions”: It is this humility—this willingness to make oneself a soft target, on par with everyone else—that sets a journal like *Consequence* apart, that sets the work it features apart. This is an age where it is so easy to turn away—to slide by, watching; or to dismiss the soul for the show, to over-watch, isolated, judgmental, and gaping.

I like the closing lines of Judith Baemel’s poem [“Sputinu in Gerace,”](#) published in *Consequence* last year. It is a poem

about olives the way “Quaker Graveyard” and “Covenant” are poems about shipwrecks. The voice is one of both inclusivity and distinction. Some readers will be the voice of the colonized islander, describing the types of olives, and some will be the invaders. Perhaps this is historical and cannot be helped. Perhaps, being human, we can choose the way we proceed from here.

No. Don't say. I'll tell you. The invaders didn't call these cultivars nocellara etnea e Moresca and Biancolilla as we do now but it is what kept them here, wave upon wave, until we did not know the difference between them and us.

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Several of the poems in the first half of THE LIGHT OUTSIDE touch on veteran experience. “The Page is Empty,” about the memory of a body—interestingly, the written-down memory of something the narrator claims he cannot remember— is almost too harrowing to read.

*He's uncertain, so he leaves out
the glottal stop of a lung
pulling air through the folds
of a fresh tear; leaves out the snap-
shot-silence of the others, prone
in rank water, transfixed*

*by a wall of patient reeds (the missing
sound's the soft sweep of reeds)*

It's followed by an equally unsettling but highly visual, energetic long metaphor, “[Another prose statement on the poetry of war]”:

*Imagine war after a fix, gold studded and cuff-linked,
prowling the wedding reception, uninvited. He fingers the tip
of a rubber tube coiled in his coat pocket...He shakes hands
greedily with the wedding party. They beam at his glazed eyes,*

sallow flesh, acetone breath. The groom's family thinks he's a friend of the bride's, the bride's family looks at each other as he slides to the maid of honor, the best man...

Each poem in the collection hands off a word, theme, or object to the one that follows it. "Soundings," for example, a poem about tourists on a whale-watch boat, passes a tour guide (in another time and place) to the curious travelers in "Basilica." "Basilica" passes a watchful eye, as well as mentions of gods and trees (wood, oak, carvings) to the wonderful three-part poem "Siegmund," a lively and humorous recounting of Richard Wagner's "The Valkyrie" from the Ring Cycle.

It's a wonderful interplay, not just between the lines of each poem but between the poems as partners and showmen, jostling slightly to tell you the story, as if they're saying, But there's more, there's more. You really didn't think that would be all, did you—that there was only one side to a thing?

I should mention, then, that the poems about war hand off to poems about family, parenthood, marriage—that they lead into poems about love.

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There is humor in these poems, too. "It's hard to watch immortal mid-life crisis," the poet muses in "Siegmund," as the Norse god Wotan throws a hissy fit. (Surely, Cosima Wagner thought the same thing about Richard a time or two.)

Another god, or demigod, arrives, in a playful rumination on Ansel Adams:

*He breathed the tops of hemlocks
spectral oaks and snow above the tree line.
When the aspens silvered, he came down*

From El Capitan carrying plated images

*of rivers slowly splitting mountains,
his hoarfrost beard brittle in the wind.*

Word play is in fine form; the poor, boat-bound tourists in “Soundings” “toggle in dramamine equilibrium between alarm and regret,” and in “Basilica,” there are “hubristic papal bees squatting between olive branches, a profligate pope’s baroque addition.”

More than anything, though, there is the joy and relief of a world filtered through this poet’s searching mind. In many poems we are reminded of what we are not seeing—reminded, gently, to look back—or forward. In “Soundings,” the tourists miss the whale after all: “But we’re looking behind, to where we thought we were.”

Frustrated, the narrator in “Basilica” observes a statue and thinks, “I can’t make out what’s in the pupil’s blurred/geometry.” Later, s/he says,

*There’s no sense of scale; every perspective’s
blocked by angles, ages of angles designed
for rapture, built on boxes of bones.*

*

The overwhelming mood of the book is one of a tender, intelligent hunger for illumination—to see the world for what it is and our human role in it. What is the point of us, so easily distracted, easily discarded, building our monuments? We rapture on boxes of bones. The stone god won’t look us in the eye. “But why,” Kovach asks, in “Lucifer’s Light,” “do I remember darkness better than light?”

I’d argue that he might not. After reading the collection twice, I’m still thinking of that first poem, “A Burdened Balance,” where the narrator is holding open a window he’s accidentally painted shut.

*Years ago, careless and in a hurry to finish at the top
of a tall ladder, I painted it shut from the outside.*

Now it won't budge.

And so the narrator is stuck there, having finally got the hinges to move.

*I hear inside the wall the window's counterweights recoil and
clang together,
bang against the wood mullion.*

*The brittle cord connecting them fails—they fall
and with them what I took for granted, the way things work.*

Fresh air flows in, rousing a wasp which has been nesting in the attic. The wasp flies out and the narrator, still indecisive, remains, laughing slightly at himself (the window is getting heavy), but waiting for something. "I've no reason," he thinks, "to keep the hobbled window open." This admission is funny, self-deprecating, and wry. The poem is about holding a window the same way "Covenant" is about a shipwreck and "Sputino in Gerace" is about olives. We are waiting, like the narrator, stuck, laughing, humbled, to see what will come next—some bit of joy or mercy, some bit of the light still outside. There's certainly been enough of the opposite. Why not just shut the window?

I've no reason, I suppose

*To keep holding the hobbled window open. But I don't
want to let the heft of it drop, to close a way of returning.*

Kovach, George. [*The Light Outside*](#). Arrowsmith Press, 2019.