

New Review: Mike Carson on Kevin Honold's "The Rock Cycle: Essays"

RIVER TEETH LITERARY NONFICTION PRIZE

the rock cycle

essays

Kevin Honold

Kevin Honold's new essay collection, *The Rock Cycle*, begins in the Arabian Desert. It is 1991. U.S. forces have just invaded Kuwait to push Saddam Hussein's armies back into Iraq. Honold's unit is lost. They stumble upon a Bedouin camp. His Lieutenant asks the Bedouins if they have seen other soldiers, tugging at his uniform, then pointing at Honold and the others in Honold's unit. The Bedouins do not help them. The U.S. soldiers drive on. Honold says the Lieutenant was a decent man. He didn't want any trouble.

A little later in the same essay, Honold talks about Euripides' play, *The Bacchae*. He calls it a strange tale. In it, the unbeliever as well as the believer are horribly punished. I find that confusing, he says. I don't. I have long found *The Bacchae* to be relatively straightforward. What I find confusing is Honold's *Rock Cycle*. There is much punishment, but no punishing. It is a painstaking record of human failure that is also an improbable document of human freedom. It's about integrity and decency and generosity in a world where believer and unbeliever alike are horribly punished.

I know. It's insane. Batshit crazy.

But that's the point.

In "Light Discipline," Honold's second essay, the author tells us that in the desert, "notions of order and disorder are irrelevant."

He then quotes Benedicta Ward's translation of *The Desert Fathers*:

"Macarius the Great said to the brothers in Scetis after a service in church, 'Flee, my brothers.' One of the brothers said to him, 'Abba, where can we flee when we are already in the desert?' He put his finger upon his lips and said: 'I tell you, you must flee this.' Then he went into his cell, shut the door, and remained alone."

You just went into your room, Abba.

There's nothing in there, Abba.

Abba?

But I tell you, Honold insists (you reading this, you who thinks that you know, you who thinks that you are sad and wise, you who think you are not sad and wise, you who thinks you are anything at all), you must flee *this*.

Flee what?

After Honold's Army unit leaves the Bedouin camp, they find the enemy. American planes and tanks then destroy the enemy. The enemy is no more. They are dispatched. Disappeared. Smashed. Smushed. They have been burned and shot and exploded. The Berlin Wall has fallen. The Iraqis are history. We are history. History is history.

Honold tells us he hid in his tent while the other U.S. soldiers cleaned up the bodies. He read Herman Hesse. Like all young boys do when we hide in our tents.

In the same essay he reflects that "there must be few things more shameful than to be held cheap by the dead."

This will strike some people as silly. They were the bad guys, Kevin. You didn't even kill them, Kevin. The war in Iraq started in 2003. People die all the time. And so on.

But this emotional cheapness, to Honold, is precisely the problem. This book is filled with the deliberations of thinkers who refused to be held cheap and hold cheap. Their imagination took them over the edge of History into something else, something that is history and is not history, where fidelity to the givenness of things does not become an idolatry of the necessary. And Honold (somehow) weaves these ancient imaginations into preternatural essays of his own, strange alchemies of syntactical discipline, reckless

curiosity, and impetuous generosity.

He admires thinkers who give without reason. Who hold nothing cheap, neither the dead or the living or the birds that watch over both. He also admires the worldview of entire peoples, like the Huron of the Ohio Valley, who believed stinginess the one unforgivable sin.

In "A Brief History of the Huron," Honold tells of how the Huron welcomed the Jesuits when they arrived in their forests, armed with nothing but a fanatical eloquence and memories of their own martyrdom. The Hurons admired the Jesuits' courage. Still, being un-stingy people, they wanted nothing to do with their heaven, that desperate either/or, this maniacal righteousness. It must have struck them as unimaginative. A little sad even. All this wealth and technology and History and this is the best you can do?

Some death bed scenes:

"Which will you choose,' demanded the priest to a dying woman, 'Heaven or Hell?'" 'Hell if my children are there,' returned the mother."

"'Heaven is a good place for Frenchmen,' said another, 'but the French will give me nothing to eat when I get there.'"

It saddens Honold too. Not just the death-bed Jesuits, but all of us basically decent people who think the way out of the desert involves condemning others to tepid moralisms. He seldom gets angry, Honold, and then only at the fact that we, Jesuits and Hurons both, are not alive to how good we actually are, how good we want to be, and how this goodness is never, ever transactional and mercenary.

Here he is in a much later essay, as he cycles the Mojave in 2013 and is tended to by stranger after stranger in the fantastical and impossible union of disparate peoples that is the U.S.A:

"It's a fact that most people are on the lookout for someone to be kind to. This might be in answer to some unconscious suspicion that existence is justified, in some small ways, by acts of selflessness. But much faith is required to accept the proposition that goodness is instinctive. The world belies that notion every day, in a million ways, and mocks it endlessly. To confess that sort of faith is to invite derision; to act on it is seditious, if not plain batty. Still, the fact remains."

Plain batty. You said it, Kevin.

At the end of the "Brief History of the Huron," Honold tells us the Jesuits strung fireflies to the trees when nuns arrived in Quebec. This too is a fact. Just like the women and men who reach out to Honold on his bicycle are facts. Just like the hysterical laughter of young Honold staring into the Persian Gulf is a fact. The book is filled with many facts: batty, seditious, insane facts. Reading this book is much like arriving at the end of the trail in Zanskar, India, stumbling, as Honold does, upon "a sheer flight of stone where the sky had been," so close you "can smell the melting ice that streamed from its face at a hundred points."

Still, the original question. The problem at hand. We are in our tents in middle of the desert. Bodies are piling up outside and have been piling up for 4 billion years and we are listening to a pop song. Reading Hesse and playing cards. Yet we are the killers. We are the ones doing the killing. We are the killers and the forgetters. But we are also the rememberers. We are the ones on the lookout for someone to be kind to. We are also the ones reading Honold's book.

It doesn't make any sense. We don't make any sense.

In "A Natural History of New Mexico," Honold discusses how Western education has taught us to mistrust our imagination. He tells us that he has spent his whole life unlearning this,

learning instead that “one event can bear multiple truths.”

Here’s a multiple truth: Yes, remembering everything would, as Honold points out, annihilate the world in an instant. Thank god for the fact we do forget. We live in a semi-comatose oblivion and this allows us to survive, to wake up in the morning, to move forward from unnecessary wars and failed relationships and the things we didn’t say and the things we did. But then there’s the opposite truth, as Honold says, “if we fail to bring the past with us into the future, we will arrive less than human. A rootless and death-forgetting people have no one to forgive them and nothing to forgive. They have no need of atonement, and therefore seek no absolution. For such a people, blameless in their own eyes, compassion and mercy become difficult.”

This is true too. We have two truths. Here’s a third truth, perhaps even harder than the other two (but no less true):

“But this forgiveness, for oneself and for the world, must proceed from a broken heart; a broken heart is the alembic in which compassion is quickened. That is why, in the old story, a man of sorrows came looking for other men and women of sorrows, and forgave precisely those who love too much. Brokenheartedness is a discipline learned in shame, in failure, and in years. Forgiveness is, in a sense, a homely art, self taught for the most part. It has a power to destroy power, and to make free. Human freedom is precipitated by this strange alchemy. I’ve read about it in books, I’ve seen it practiced. This is the truth that sets free. But the truth is beyond me, every day.”

The power to destroy power. What an idea! How wonderful! Actual freedom! Not the pretense of the thing, not the posture of it, but a memory of the past that is not a forgetting of the past. A way to have integrity without having to take away another’s integrity. To cast them into hell. To damn them with stinginess. But isn’t this morbid? Brokenheartedness? How can

you be forgiving and morbid at the same time?

Our imagination often fails us. Another fact. Not the last fact, but a fact nonetheless.

In "The Rock Cycle," the essay that gives the collection its title, Honold comments on how early modern thinkers tried to explain away the fish fossils on mountain tops by calling them sports of nature, *lusus naturae*, God's jokes. Nature's comedy. Figure this one out, scientists, they laughed.

They did figure it out. Scientists are an imaginative and patient bunch. The most famous of them, James Hutton, watched the Scottish earth for twenty-five years. He concluded: "solid parts of the present land appear in general, to have been composed of the productions of the sea."

Rocks move. They go up and down like blood pumping through geological arteries.

Deep Time. We live in deep time. Wait long enough and nothing stays still. Not even mountains. ("What you look hard at seems to look hard at you," says Gerard Manley Hopkins in Honold's first essay.)

But Deep Time only points the problem with a giant clown finger. *Nothing* stays still. An inferno of corpses is heaped outside our tent while we feverishly read and play and sing. We have not buried a single one of them. We don't know where to begin. Our imagination flails. It strains and bucks and begs for mercy or calcifies into ignorance and pride and History.

Honold doesn't have an answer. All he has are these essays. Essays are truer than answers, and more difficult, more dangerous. Instead of punishing because we have been punished, they give because we have been given. They flee the timid transactions of selfhood and self-aggrandizement for the terrifying dislocations of our innate selflessness. They

are—if we are being perfectly honest—insane. You should never sit alone in the desert, finger to your lips, listening to the rocks move and people forgive. Who knows what Deep Time might say to you? Who knows what our history might become?

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Kevin Honold's *The Rock Cycle: Essays* was the winner of the 2019 River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Book Prize. [You can purchase it here.](#)