
Pro Rege

Volume 47 | Number 4

Article 10

June 2019

Black Sunday: Poems (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (2019) "Black Sunday: Poems (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 47: No. 4, 44.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol47/iss4/10

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Job's neighbors had his health in mind, but none of them, nor their arguments, could satisfy the strife that raged in the soul of the man God determined the Devil should "consider." Job had lost everything, his family, his land, his enterprise, even his health in a tsunami of bad times unlike anything anyone could ever have seen. Job must have numbered his days as "the worst hard times," which happens to also be the title of Timothy Egan's masterful portrayal of an American time and place we've commonly come to describe as "the Dust Bowl."

To thousands of high plains residents, the Dust Bowl may well be as close a phenomenon as we can remember to the tribulations of Job. Today, eighty years later, it's impossible to imagine thick black winds so powerful they dent fenders, dunes so high they swallow farm machinery, static electricity so severe people dare not to touch each other, storms so black that men, women, and children get lost between house and barn.

You can go back imaginatively by way of a shelf full of vivid portrayals right there beside Egan's *The Worst Hard Times*. There's a masterful documentary by Ken Burns. There's a museum of photographs by masters like Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans. There's John Steinbeck, and there's Sonora Babb's too-often overlooked *Their Names are Unknown*.

But no one I know has done what Benjamin Myers has done with the Dust Bowl in a series of sonnets (of all things) that open the lives of six characters he carefully chooses as a chorus out on the high plains, all of them living through "the worst hard times." Myers is a former Oklahoma poet laureate who teaches at Oklahoma Baptist University.

Suffering, oddly enough, can be shaped into something beautiful in the hands of someone who sees more than meets the eye, and Myers does. *Black Sunday* is poetry, but when you close the book's back cover, you need to remind yourself that the world you were just in was verse—sonnets, in fact. What Myers has done with these portrayals is bring us, heart and suffering soul, into our own humanness. See if you agree.

Will Lists His Assets on Another Loan Application:

800 acres of itch, grit, and chirr
crawling with hoppers, burning like a match.
All mine. The foot deep drifts of dirt that were
my neighbor's field, mine too now, since I catch
with my strip lists the dirt he don't do much
to keep. The tractor with the rear wheels stuck
halfway in sand I owe your bank a bunch
on still and won't pay off unless my luck
turns. But it won't. We shot the little herd.
The truck is dead. Your bank has got the car.
The combine's broke. I guess I've got my word,
and next to that my other assets are
dirt sore eyes, overalls with one knee hole,
a body dressed in rags, a ragged soul.

It's a masterful portrayal of Dust Bowl despair done in a familiar form, the kind of assessment we all do, formally and informally, a list. Will Burns' assets are barely fourteen lines long, scribbled out in despair as hard-edged as sweeping out the house with a grain scoop.

Is there hope here? I think yes, not because the clouds of Black Sunday hold some blessed silver lining, but because Will Burns ends his paltry list of assets not with something outside but something eternal within, his soul. Putting "his ragged soul" where he does, at the very end, gives it most attention in a final line not so much confession as David-like testimony. What comes before that word is commodity; the last line reveals his eternal self and destiny.

And it's there, he says. It may well be as ragged as his overalls, but his soul has not blown away.

God himself does not speak in Benjamin Myers' *Black Sunday*, certainly not the way he does to end the book of Job; but then the losses Will Burns lists don't tally up the way Job's did. Will, after all, still has a family.

All of which is to say that Benjamin Myers' *Black Sunday* isn't the book of Job. While that's true, the folks whose intimate portrayals emerge in this compelling book of poems are most definitely kin.