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A Review of *American Ash* by Michael Simms

Alexandra Umlas · Wednesday, February 3rd, 2021

The final poem of Michael Simms's recent book of poetry, *American Ash*, ends with the lines "... and everything is / Beautiful as you feel yourself / Floating over the city and you wish / The story didn't have to end" (79). Simms is talking about getting old, but this was also exactly my sentiment as I finished reading—I wanted the book to go on and on.

Luckily, I own two copies of Simms's book, having misplaced one, and having ordered a second; and I will keep them both, maybe stashing one away in my car for emergencies. In other words, this is a book you should include on your own bookshelf as soon as possible. It is one of the most wonderful books I have ever read, and my words here certainly will not do it justice, which is another reason you should buy the book.

Simms's poems are lucid and clear. This is not to say they are simple, but I gravitate towards poetry collections that I can understand most of on the first reading, and this is one of those collections. There is no grappling with these poems for meaning, but instead, the easy recognition that something important is being said — the thrill of remembering or seeing something in your own life, again, with new eyes, through masterfully constructed poems. These poems are visceral and shimmering. At times, wrapped up in their language, I felt as if I were standing by the most beautiful of lakes, where the world is doubled and refracted, and where I saw, as I read, myself shifting and rippling in their waters.

In one of my favorites, "The Summer You Learned How to Swim," Simms remembers his daughter learning "the turtle, the cannonball, the froggy, and the flutter," — the brilliance of the poem lies in the way it holds so much tenderly in its three stanzas without being sentimental. In it we find the love between a parent and child, the idiosyncrasies that make relationships unique, the courage it takes to parent, the patience needed, and the awareness of how we are changed by our children. Simms sings us into the memory: "That summer all the world / Was soul and water, light glancing off peaks" (5). Suddenly, I am transported to and reminded of my own learning as a parent, to my own moments of water and light, to those small memories, those inimitable feelings, that have now been unexpectedly expressed again, and that I experience again having read this poem.

Simms has been a life-long champion of poetry and poets. He started Autumn House Press in 1998, and now edits *Vox Populi: A Public Sphere for Poetry, Politics, and Nature*. His vast experience is evident in the way he focuses attention on the material of the world and then surprises the reader with the power of what that focus, honed by a gift for words and experience, can do. Every poem gave me something to recognize, something to grapple with, some magic that made me see the world in a new way.

In "Oh Darlin'" Simms confides, "I like it when women I don't know / Call me Darlin'. There's something / Kind and generous in the tone / Without being sexual. The intimacy / of strangers is

luminous...” (7). There is an intimacy and luminosity in these poems, an honesty that left me nodding my head. There is something that happens when you recognize the world so clearly in a poem. You want to tell somebody about that poem. You want to share it. As I read *American Ash* through the first time, my husband happened to be close by, and I found myself saying, “Listen to this... listen to this... listen to this...”

Simms draws on his experiences, on his careful seeing and listening, on the people he encounters, and on the geographic landscape around him, to say something about how we grapple, as humans, with a world that is both wild and wonderful. The poems are often mutually lyric and narrative. In “Wolf Corner” Simms writes,

I thought your death would change everything
 But the Brazos River has not changed its course,
 And the shrug of these brown hills,
 The jagged indifferent line of mesquite against the horizon,
 The strings of spittle hanging from the mouths of cattle
 As they chew cud in the narrow shade of the water tower
 Remain as I remember (11)

Death changes everything, and yet it changes nothing. I have always thought poetry holds paradox in the most magnificent way. In this poem, which explores how things, were, are, and will be, Wolf Corner is now a shopping mall with a Walmart and a KFC. How can we stand change? How can we be okay with the finality of death, with how everything in the person’s being – the energies that are that person, the knowledge they hold that has taken so many years to accumulate – are gone? Poetry is a way of resurrecting those energies. As Simms constructs this poem, the person, this place, this memory, this moment, is gifted to the reader. There is a connection that occurs. The inexpressible is expressed – the million wisdoms passed down in language.

Simms’s poems often ask the reader to examine his or her place in the world. They are investigations of the world in language, investigations of its joys and its pains, and of its complexities. The natural world sits next to what we have constructed. Our own limitations subsist next to the things of which we are capable. In “Going Deaf,” Simms writes, “For a long time, you thought I didn’t have a hearing problem, / But a listening problem. And damn it, you were right. / So many sounds I ignored when I had the chance to hear them” (21). Damn it – these poems compel us to look and to listen while we can. Some of Simms’s narrative poems read like fables, showing us something of the world and then hinging or whirling and then showing us something else. There are lessons, but I think the lessons will be different for each reader. These are poems that demand that we hear them. We are better for having encountered them.

The cover of *American Ash* is a detail from a photo by Sara Van Note which shows scarring inside of a tree made by the emerald ash borer, invasive insects that are killing the ash trees in North America. “American Ash,” the title poem of the collection, recounts time spent on Howard’s farm getting firewood. The poem contains many stories, but just as the American Ash are in jeopardy, humanity also often seems to be in jeopardy. Humans are sometimes not so different from insects and are often much more destructive:

Once when he was drinking
 Howard told me how he watched
 Seventeen Vietnamese children
 Mistakenly machine-gunned

 By our own choppers and Howard

And his buddies were ordered
 To pile the bodies
 Pour gasoline over them
 And light them on fire

And I thought Holy Jesus
 These men we send to do
 Unspeakable crimes
 In our name

Bury that shit real deep
 Where no one can ever find it (31)

In *The Art of Voice: Poetic Principles and Practice*, Tony Hoagland says that “poems of experience bear the scars and wounds and scorch marks, even the imperfections that damage leaves on the soul, but a good poem also testifies to the triumph of still being able to speak.”

Simms’s poem is a testament to Hoagland’s statement. This is poetry that brings to the surface what would otherwise be buried. In “Who Will Tell Them,” Simms writes, “It turns out you can kill the earth, / Crack it open like an egg.../ Who knew you could wipe out / Everything? Who knew / You could crack the earth open / Like an egg?” (44). In “The Garden and the Drone,” Simms asks, “Can we believe in kindness the way we believe in rain?” and then writes, “If we step over the homeless man / On the sidewalk, then we can easily ignore / The child in Syria blown apart by our taxes / And our drone hovering over the garden / Where the wedding party waits / For the bride” (63). Great poetry changes the way we look at the world. Simms gives us new windows through which to see ourselves and the impact of our actions.


These poems are not only “able to speak,” they are an essential document of life. They leap, they sing, they twist, they are like the universe, which in “Oh God She Says,” Simms describes with humor:

Oh God she says
 The dog has learned to spell
 And suddenly the whole universe

Makes sense it’s a living breathing
 Cell with ribosomes and
 Mitochondria and a tail and

Things hanging out of its mouth
 Like spittle and we are lying beneath
 The table waiting for food to drop

From the beings having dinner above (67).

These poems have cells, and ribosomes, they have people and places, and trees, and ant beds,  hearts, and lungs, and coffee, and death. They have woodpeckers, nations, and radiant Tuesdays, they have weeds, and hands, and memory. They speak to what has been, to possibility, to connection, and to a deep affection for humanity, imagination, and life.

In the vast world of contemporary poetry, *American Ash* stands out. Michael Simms bears special witness in these masterful poems. Reading them gave me the same feeling I had encountering the buzz saw that “Leaped out at the boy’s hand” in Robert Frost’s ““Out, Out—”” or the feeling I had

reading Li-Young Lee's lines in "From Blossoms": "There are days we live / as if death were nowhere / in the background," and the same feeling as discovering Sylvia Plath's "Tulips," which are opening like the mouth of some great African cat."

Simms has written a miraculous collection. I feel honored to be able to read it, to be able to experience

The world

As whole and beautiful with
color and music
and joy

In the redness of red the taste
Of mint the stars
Popping

Out like musical notes
(from "Consider the Hummingbird" 73).

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