

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Blood Dark Sea by Dennis Gulling

David Ensminger · Wednesday, November 2nd, 2016

For many readers, poetry is the fine floss of disciplined discourse that makes the world a bit more cogent: language is a magnifying glass that picks up the shards of life, examines each dutifully, and returns the reader to a sense of ease: it neither burdens the reader nor stirs the dust motes of reality. To others, it is a wild place reeking of textual insurrections and distressed perspectives — concept art that makes poetry itself suspicious ... is it art at all? For still others, poetry exists as a rhythmic, colloquial exercise all balled up in street slang and staccatos, like yelling identity politics from the street corner.

To outlaw poets like Todd Moore, and his prodigy [Dennis Gulling](#), a former student of Moore's high school days (or doldrums) in Belvidere, IL (home of a squat Chrysler plant amid endless tasseled cornfields), poetry is like hot tar on a sweltering summer afternoon. It sticks to the hands, like dried blood too. Poetry gets in the marrow, deep inside the inner-cinema. It is Shakespeare stuffed into skinny, highly coiled poems.

"I write against the academics of the world," Todd Moore uttered, which meant self-marginalizing himself like Charles Bukowski. But to those on the outsider poetry circuit, he is legendary — the John Dillinger of our dreams. Gulling treads that path as well. Twenty years ago, we occupied the same hand-sorted Xeroxed chapbooks, watched the same vintage films unspool like an alluring toxin, read at the same cafes full of hungry-eyed kids looking to reclaim the void. We turned towards downtown alleys and said, kiss me deadly.

Gulling exercises a keen ability to weave Jim Thompson-like noir bursts into a cocoon of compressed words — clean lines drawing distinct traces of loss and loneliness. Violence also becomes an internal specter, gnawing at the characters. They are fenced-in; they wake up scared; they can't program their lives right; they stare blankly into the sky, waiting for something redeeming to happen ... Nothing more than a jail cell of another day opens to them.

At other times, they are brutal, malignant. Those moments make my spine shudder.

Gulling's lines are stark, pinned down, shorn of excess. Like the work of Langston Hughes, no reader will stumble over the gymnastics of his language. This means the words cut even deeper because they are quick, boiled down, and under your skin within seconds. Marriages go down the drains; cops, beer, and old ladies commingle; airplanes hover like odes to escape that will never come; and blackjack tables and power tools frame the lives of the desperate and uncured.

Plus, women exert the violence as much as men: typical gender roles are upended in an unyielding fashion. Gulling avoids the fake heroics of *Charlie Angels* or the slapstick psychosexual escapades of Russ Myers' sexploitation films. Gulling sketches the gritty corridors of female pain and revolt, in which marriage feels like a noose, so when women inflict their own physicality on greaseball men — sometimes crushing them with cars, sometimes using a power sander — perhaps the best soundtrack might be a song by L7 or a female grindcore band.

Of course, such dire circumstances are disturbing, but even more disturbing is a thousand years of repression that have victimized these women. Hence, every knife wound they inflict seems like a small Gettysburg.

In the end, not unlike Hubert Selby Jr., Gulling offers Polaroids of damage and suffering — gruesome as any emergency room, true as tomorrow's police blotters. Yet, poisoned love never found a better home than his cradling arms.



The Blood Dark Sea

by Dennis Gulling

[Zombie Logic Press](#)

Series: Rock River Literary Series (Book 3)

Paperback: 101 pages

Publisher: Zombie Logic Press; 1st edition (2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0967019176

ISBN-13: 978-0967019178

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