

## THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE ENDLESS IN-BETWEEN

a review by  
James W. Kirkland

Scott Owens. *Counting the Ways*. Mainstreet Rag, 2020.

— *Sky Full of Stars and Dreaming*. Red Hawk Publications, 2021.

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**SCOTT OWENS** teaches at Lenoir Rhyne University, edits *Wild Goose Poetry Review*, and runs Taste Full Beans in Hickory, NC, where he hosts Poetry Hickory, the reading series he founded in 2007. He is the author of thirteen poetry collections, including several that have been reviewed in *NCLR*.

At first glance, *Counting the Ways* and *Sky Full of Stars and Dreaming* by Scott Owens seem to lead in different directions, one back to the dark world of a childhood fractured by physical and emotional abuse and the other into a strange new world where

Not even spring itself can know  
what a challenge it is to rise  
each day, how we struggle to find

what to do next, wonder if it's all  
worth it, how we hold our breath  
fearing that death might find its way

To our door and see the lintel  
marked. ("Passover in the Time of  
Pandemic," *Sky*)

Upon further reflection, though, the differences seem more apparent than real, especially if we view the two books as companion volumes, each expressing in its own distinctive ways what Owens describes in an interview with *Wild Goose Poetry Review* editor Glenda Beall as the power of poetry to "make a difference in everyone's lives" – to help us "recognize the value of things through their connectedness to other things," especially "the connectedness of one human life to another. This is what allows us to achieve catharsis by watching, listening to, or reading about someone else's experience. We recognize our own story in theirs and are able to learn from it."\*

Though inspired by Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Owens does more than simply "copy the idea," as he intimates in "13 Ways of Deconstructing a Black-

bird." He uses it as the structuring principle for the collection as a whole, which consists of forty-one new and previously published poems, the majority of which include the phrase "13 Ways of . . ." in the title and all but a few of which follow the same thirteen-stanza pattern as Stevens's poem.

While the "13 Ways of . . ." pattern might seem restrictive, it is in fact totally consistent with the book's underlying principle, which Owens describes in the "Author's Note" as the assumption that "there is a meaningful narrative inherent in tracing the occurrences of an image or motif across time," a narrative that invites "readers to consider the vital motifs that have defined their own lives, to consider to some degree who they are now and as the sum of occurrences of objects, ideas, concepts that have played and continue to play a recurring role in their lives" (vii).

The motifs and images that "continue to play a recurring role" in the poet's own life and art are on display throughout each of the book's four sections, beginning with what Owens considers to be the book's "seminal poem, 'Breakings,' which even though it didn't have 13 ways was the way it had all started" ("Author's Note," vii). Contrasting sharply with the seemingly peaceful forest scene depicted on the book's cover, the lead poem plunges us immediately into "the black magic of breakings" where "nothing could match / the sounds of shattered glass," the "cries of children," the "big-

handed breaking / of his mother's face, his brother's / mouth, his own shattered skin," his futile efforts to "break the habits / of breaking." Further revelations of the father's rage and its impact on his family surface repeatedly in subsequent poems, notably in "What the Protected Don't Know," "13 Ways of Voices," "Why I Don't Like Violence in the House," and "13 Ways of Fathers." Yet violence is but one of the many vital motifs central to Owens's poetic narrative.

Often, the subjects that interest Owens most are "the smallest of things" ("How Words Can Save Us"). The dirt road that runs through farmlands in "the middle of nowhere, South Carolina" is imaginatively transformed into the "Road to perdition, road to hell, / road to recovery, high road, / low road, open road" ("13 Ways of Roads"). Ordinary glass jars sitting on the kitchen shelf take on human characteristics, "mouths / open, waiting to be filled" ("13 Ways of Jars"). Cardboard boxes packed "with hand-me-down dishes, hand-me-down clothes" become, at different moments, "a Chinese puzzle of containment," a "box of wounds," a music box that plays "Beautiful Dreamer," "The box of your voice [that] closes its lid / around you" ("13 Ways of Boxes"). On a visit home, each house he passes becomes not just one of the many places he lived but a "house of silence, / house of cries, mad house, angry house" where "walls speak with angry, familiar voices" ("13 Ways of Houses").

The natural world, too, furnishes images and motifs that

recur throughout the collection, in poems that invite us to contemplate the "hypnotic dance of snow falling. / Trees lit up with white" ("13 Ways of Weather"), "dreamscapes of memory . . . the water dark and still / and reaching towards you like an open hand" ("13 Ways of Water"), "scraps / of clouds . . . illuminated / with midnight" ("All the Way Up to the Line and Beyond"), "yellow lights [that] dance in limbs / of apple, pecan, crabbapple, / a quiet I cannot comprehend" ("Epigraph to the Firing Squad"), the "wood thrush's wooden / music, magic flute that says / the woods are nothing but leaves singing" ("13 Ways of Birds"), "the great blue heron, / heavenly cruciform, / the X of my unwritten map" ("13 Ways of Direction"), and – most memorably – the enigmatic blackbird.

In the first of two poems titled "Deconstructing the Blackbird," the speaker remembers an earlier time when, "in the town where he grew up / blackbirds were little more / than stealers of corn, targets / for slingshot or shotgun," but by the end of the poem they have become the physical embodiment of "darkness falling from / darkness into darkness creating / the plural light of understanding," a light that shines most brightly in the second and final version of the poem, which stands alone in the

book's final section, affirming once more the connections between *Counting the Ways* and Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird": "Too few or too many blackbirds and significance would be / blurred beyond or beneath meaning. Ironic that what is is made / meaningful only through our limitations."

*Sky Full of Stars and Dreaming* begins where the previous book ends, with the poet seeking new ways of seeing – and understanding – the world. But this time the inspiration comes not from fellow poet Wallace Stevens but from artist Caspar David Friedrich, whose painting *Monk at the Sea* occupies the entire front and back covers of the book. The painting, as Owens aptly describes it in the opening poem "Around," is:

80% . . . sky  
10 dark water  
Alien and empty  
Or unknown  
All but one figure of the rest  
Sand devoid of life"

– yet the monk, "one figure of the rest"



RIGHT Scott Owens at Taste Full Beans, Hickory, NC, 8 June 2021

\* Glenda C. Beall, "Scott Owens to Visit Far Western NC and North Georgia," *North Carolina Writers' Network-West's Mountain Writers and Poets* 3 May 2010: [web](#).

... still stands  
 Solitary and small  
 As if he could matter  
 As if he could penetrate  
 Sky, water, earth  
 and understand.

Echoes of these lines can be heard in many other poems in this collection as well. The untitled haiku immediately following "Around" links the "Night sky full of stars" to "dreaming," both of which contribute to the dreamlike atmosphere of poems such as "Filling the Void," where stars "split the light / that filters in / through empty panes"; "The Possibility of Substance Beyond Reflection," where a glance at a "V of geese . . . flying overhead in the / slate gray sky" provides the stimulus for philosophical speculations about "the unreflective nothingness beyond, where even / they had to question just how real they were or just how real they / might have been"; and "Yellow Xterra," where the simple act of looking through a car's "tinted glass" reveals "a perfect sky of stars, / broken only by shapes of leaves, / . . . the quiet of solitude, / absence of expectation."

Nature holds other secrets as well, which Owens continually seeks to unlock through language both literal and figurative, believing that "the hope we have / grows stronger / when we can put it into words" ("Words and What They Say"). In "In the Cathedral of Fallen Trees," for example, a walk in

the woods becomes, metaphorically, a journey to a sacred space where "the light spread / through stained glass windows of leaves, / . . . every stump . . . a silent altar, / each branch a pulpit's tongue." In "Subterranean," a mole tunneling "just below the surface" of a flower bed assumes a mythic identity, reminding the poet of

... Atlas  
 the earth on his shoulders  
 forging a labyrinthine  
 home in the dark world  
 of bright bulbs and sweet seeds  
 turning and reshaping the soil  
 visible only in sound.

In "The Idea of Order at Soul's Harbor," a stream flowing from the mountains to the sea

... makes an eddy  
 where anything, anyone,  
 floating down might catch  
 and climb out  
 and find a safe place  
 to call home

– a place "where so much / seems possible."

The effort to put into words what would otherwise be inexpressible sometimes awakens memories of the "breakings" depicted in so many of the poems in *Counting the Ways* – but in *Sky Full of Stars and Dreaming*, these moments occur far less frequently than in the earlier volume, and always with a different outcome. "How I got here," he explains in the poem of that title, was

... by having belt buckles  
 lashed across legs, hands  
 burned on electric stoves,  
 by being locked in closets for hours  
 . . . by being shoved  
 into the back wall of a baseball dugout  
 by my own father . . .

But this time is different:

... shoving back,  
 . . . never backing down from anyone  
 wanting to be called *Daddy*  
 . . . I got here on the wings of dreams  
 and schemes and other things  
 refusing to be kept in boxes.  
 I got here by believing it matters  
 to try to make a difference.  
 I got here by writing poems.

Ultimately, poetry is for Owens a means of "redeeming everything he was given, / the good, the bad, / the endless in between" ("Just"), whether he is counting the mysterious ways of blackbirds or standing with Friedrich's monk gazing at a night sky full of stars or sharing with us a father's advice to his son in "Sharing a Drink on My 55<sup>th</sup> Birthday," advice intended as much for readers as for the audience within the poem:

Be drunk on life, on love, on trees,  
 on mountains, on spring,  
 on rivers that go the way  
 they know to go,  
 on words, on art, on dancing,  
 fighting against nonexistence,  
 on night skies, on dreams, on mere minutes,  
 on the ocean that stretches beyond  
 what you ever imagined forever could be.  
 And when someone asks you  
 what advice you have, give them,  
 as you've given everyone and everything,  
 the best of what you have. ■