

"BLESS ALL THAT RUSTS AND AGES"

a review by Jim Clark

Paul Jones. *Something Wonderful: Poems*. Redhawk Publications, 2021.

Al Maginnes. *The Beasts that Vanish: Poems*. Blue Horse Press, 2021.

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Here we have the most recent volumes by long-time stalwarts of the North Carolina poetry scene, *Something Wonderful* by Paul Jones and *The Beasts that Vanish* by Al Maginnes. Both are heftier collections than your typical slim volume of poetry, coming in right around one hundred pages each. Perhaps that's because these poets have been around long enough to have some things to say. And perhaps because they have been around a while, it's not surprising that poems of mortality, aging, and death are a signal feature of both books. Indeed, the first poem in *The Beasts that Vanish* is "The Skeleton Parade," in which the skeletons arise "crook-kneed from the nest of their military graves," a nice echo of Thomas Hardy's "Channel Firing," and more than appropriate for the troublous times in which we find ourselves. We are later warned, "those who have left youth behind / stay away knowing soon enough they will // join that procession." "The Conversions of the Body" is a meditation on body and soul by one who avers "the church of flesh was all // I would believe in" and concludes with "our bodies and the lives they inhabit / vanishing into the shapeless / vowels of our final breath." "What We Are Coming To" imagines a kind of purgatorial afterlife where we must try and undo all the damage we have, wittingly or unwittingly, done in our lives, only to learn it's all for naught as "nothing you do will change / any wrong or kindness you've done." The poem ends with

lines that could almost provide a credo for the whole collection: "The life you lived is all / you can leave behind. / Now eternity can begin." Jones's "At Seventy" begins pointedly and unforgivingly – "Days like this, I know I'm going to die" – but then in the next line makes a turn characteristic of this poet: "I also know I'm not dead yet." The speaker lies "in grass beneath the bewildering blue," admiring nature and taking "the slow way," creating a mood similar to James Wright's famous poem "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota." The poem concludes with the speaker opting to "just lie here on this green bed – / fire behind me and ashes ahead." "My Precious Death" also begins pointedly: "I haven't been giving it enough / thought these days." There was a time, the speaker recalls, when "every cough, every ache / flashed like a damn police car / demanding that I pull over." This poem belongs to a genre of poems that personify Death – Emily Dickinson's famous "Because I could not stop for Death," where Death is described as a kindly suitor, or John Crowe Ransom's "Piazza Piece," which fashions Death as "a gentleman in a dustcoat." In this case, the speaker glimpses Death in the mirror as "the skull- / faced cop behind me," with one hand "touching the brim of his dark and silver hat / and the other, yes I saw it, on his gun." In "Seventy-Three," an audacious Paul Jones rewrite of Shakespeare's beloved Sonnet 73 ("That time of year thou mayst in me behold"), the

speaker finds himself "in twilight," wondering "how many more before death plants me below?" Yet the years suggested by the poem's title, provide wisdom, insight: "But here I can see further, here my life's breadth / forms a vista," a vantage point from which, in a very familiar sounding couplet the speaker affirms: "What we see in age makes all we love more strong, / knowing what we love we leave before too long."

From this, one might get the idea that all the poems in these two collections are dour, morbid, or somber. Not so! I've followed Al Maginnes's career for nearly thirty years and it's always seemed to me that his greatest strength is narrative. He's a born storyteller and has spent a lifetime honing his craft. Narrative is a powerful tool for any writer, but in Maginnes's poetic hands it's pure gold. His stories are painful, wry, exhilarating, surprising, and revealing, often simultaneously. When I read a poem by Maginnes I'm reminded of Hannah Arendt's observation that "storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it."* I've known of Paul Jones as a poet for a good deal longer than thirty years, and his great gift, as I see it, is imagination, which can take many forms: imitation, parody, wit, surprise, transgression, shock, bewilderment, and on and on. He is our great contemporary metaphysical poet. When I read a poem by Jones, I think of Wallace Stevens's maxim from "Adagia": "Poetry is the gaiety (joy) of language." The cover art of Jones's *Something Wonderful*

makes me think of Maurice Sendak. So, with that, "Let the wild rumpus start!"

The title of Jones's book reveals one way in which his poems are gay, or joyous – they are at pains to find the wonder in quotidian objects that we usually take for granted. Like Pablo Neruda in *Odes to Common Things*, or Francis Ponge, the great French "poet of things," Jones writes poems of praise to bread, cicadas, damselflies, okra flowers, slugs, old dogs, and tubers. He even articulates a sort of *ars poetica* about this mode of writing in "The mundane but discreetly lovely details of our daily lives." So, in "Hot Now!" it is not surprising that he tackles that wondrous, though ubiquitous, Southern gustatory touchstone, the fresh Krispy Kreme donut. The first line presents the culinary treat as a metaphysical conundrum: "They have no ends, no centers." Who was it that said, "God is a circle whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere"? Nobody seems to know. Voltaire, maybe? Pascal? Hermes Trismegistus? Nicholas of Cusa? At any rate, there's something pretty special about that delectable sphere. At first "Angelically white" these "Hillbilly bagels" floating "down the river of hot oil" eventually become "tan, taut yet tender." Jones's judicious but generous use of rhyme,

both end and internal, as well as his heaping helpings of alliteration, add to the poem's celebratory mode.

[T]hey come to us hot
off the rollers through the shower
of molten sugar, a waterfall
of nearly supernatural
supersaturation,

the speaker tells us, increasing our desire for them, of course, but also continuing the metaphysical discourse. "I'll down a dozen before daybreak," the speaker, hapless mortal and slave to his senses, alliteratively avers. And the poem even manages to stay in tune with the book's overall theme of mortality: "If I die of cardiac arrest, / at least I will have had the best / last meal. Not that I'm asking / to die, but that's the honest truth." And of course, "honest truth" rhymes with the earlier "sweet tooth."

Something Wonderful also contains several delightful and well-executed parodies of poets such as Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Christopher Smart, and, obliquely,



COURTESY OF JANIS HARRINGTON

* Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Harcourt Brace, 1968) 105.

Dylan Thomas. If one has already included a poem titled "Against Bird Poems," one might as well go whole hog and write a poem against poets, and so we have "I Too Dislike Them," appropriating its title from the famous beginning line of Marianne Moore's poem "Poetry": "I too, dislike it . . ." The poem begins, "Aspiring poets are jerks / Who confuse quirks / With sound work." It's up to the reader to decide if the speaker says this earnestly, or with tongue in cheek. From there, in a series of terse tercets we get a survey of what several famous historical figures have said about poets: Nietzsche, who felt that poets were purposely oblique to hide their vacuousness; Plato, who judged "They cause commotions"; Auden, who claimed "nothing happens" because of poetry; and possibly Wallace Stevens, whose *ars poetica* "The Idea of Order at Key West" is alluded to with its "small boats on the sea at night, / Flickering patterns of light." The poem ends with the tart kiss-off, "They were right, the Old Masters: / Poets are useless bastards." Ouch.

Next up is "My Roommate Jeffry," a hilarious parody of "My Cat Jeffry," a well-known section of Christopher Smart's much longer work "Jubilate Agno," which *Google Books* claims is "the most famous piece of poetry ever written about a cat." Perhaps. At any rate, the roommate Jeffry's cat is named "Nico." Jones has Smart's anaphoric long lines down to a "T."

For example: "For he is a fan of classic rock. More than a fan. He played *In a Gadda / Da Vida* on vinyl on repeat for days. Until he misplaced the record or the / cleaning crew took it or he can't recall just now." The poem concludes with the speaker getting "quite serious" with Jeffry's girlfriend Sally while Jeffry "is traveling to Colombia despite State Department warnings not to / go there. / For he seeks 'the only pot worth smoking.'" Finally, we have "The Red-Vinegar Sauce," of course a parody of William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," in which Jones joins the company of such esteemed North Carolina poets of pork as A.R. Ammons, William Harmon, James Applewhite, and Shelby Stephenson. The poem is a more than credible imitation of Williams's poem, with Eastern North Carolina "red vinegar / sauce" substituting for "red wheel / barrow," "pulled / pork" for "rain / water," and "white / coleslaw" for "white / chickens." It works, and it's delightful.

Like Paul Jones, Al Maginnes is a music lover. Many have read his thoughtful record reviews in *Connotations*, where he was the music editor, and elsewhere. "Playlist for a Photograph of a Record Burning," with its gritty, journalistic feel, furthered by the supplied date of "August 16, 1966," tells no less than the story of a generation, its ideals, excesses, and uncertainties. Our focus is on "the one boy" who "looks full on / at the cam-

era, his glare / scorching the glass lens, a challenge to all the years to come." The others stare "raptured, into the barrel." The first song on the playlist, mentioned in the second strophe, is The Lovin' Spoonful's "Summer in the City," with its declamatory beginning of "Hot town!" The ministers, of course, declare the heat from the burning records "is nothing, / beside the fires of hell." The speaker looks down the avenue of years to come, seeing war, protests, the revolutionary eroticism of Jimi Hendrix, and, perhaps sadly, those congregated there "enter / their own individual hells." Strophe three lists the various albums and memorabilia – The Beatles, The Animals, The Rolling Stones, The Kinks, Sonny and Cher – "all fuel for the righteous flame." In strophe four, the speaker thinks "someone / loved those records once," which causes him to recall a line from a Johnny Cash song – "Love is a burning thing" – though Cash's records "are not the ones / burning here." The speaker doubts that "music could / be unheard," and we are back to the boy who "still stares, / transfixed in the eye / of the camera." Perhaps thinking of the riots, bombs, and other violence that were all part and parcel of the 1960s, the speaker imagines the boy, in a year or two – 1968, perhaps – wondering "if fire ever truly bought / salvation." There follows a list of things to come: "moon landings, Nixon, Watergate, / glam rock, cocaine, Woodstock, / weapons

of mass destruction, / disco, recession." The poem concludes with "He will learn / there is never enough fire," an ambiguous ending that suggests that while fire can purify and lead one toward salvation, the earth, with its "ten thousand things" in the Buddhist tradition, is simply too much for it, and us.

An admission: on February 22, 2022, I was re-reading Maginnes's poem "Stern," keenly aware that I needed to hunker down and get to work on this review. I made a few notes, and then, satisfied with my productivity, logged on to Facebook, where I promptly saw a post by my friend David Rigsbee celebrating poet Gerald Stern's ninety-seventh birthday. I think of Al Maginnes, the poet, in terms of the lineage of his strong, supple, resonant poetic voice. Two names always come up – Richard Hugo and Philip Levine – and sometimes one or two others. From now on I may also include Gerald Stern. "Stern" begins with the speaker (pretty clearly Al Maginnes) remembering the first time he ever heard Stern read – the poem "The Dancing," on a Bill Moyers' TV show. Stern's poem vividly evokes the family spontaneously dancing in celebration of the end of World War II, "the father using hand and armpit / to squeeze out farting sounds." It's a joyous, almost ecstatic, moment, but Maginnes, like Stern, is ever aware of the inextricable nature of comedy and tragedy in our everyday lives, as



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he notes "the three of them / safe from and irreducibly caught in the wheel / of history." The poem's long, supple lines allow Maginnes to paint a strikingly vivid portrait of "the cities of the 40's." Maginnes admires the poem, and for a while uses it as an example in his poetry classes. Perhaps because of its setting in the 1940s, so far removed in time and culture from Maginnes's students, he finally stops using it, admitting "my taste runs counter / to my students." They prefer, he says, typically "poetic" scenes of waterfalls, green fields, and daffodils, "while I try to explain the blossoming joys of decay, / of alleys through poor neighborhoods, the acne / of rust on a car left abandoned on the highway." When Maginnes learns that Stern "had spent years in community colleges," he begins to see him as a kindred spirit, and one day sees him in person "at a writers' conference as he moved / slow as a planet

amid a constellation of smaller poets." Having seen Stern numerous times at writers' conferences myself, I can vouch for Maginnes's spot-on description of Stern as "heavy with mirth and awe" and his characterization of him as "the deli owner who rings up your Reuben," the armchair boxing critic, or "the lawyer drafting the Talmudic passages / making it possible to leave your estate to your fat dog / and not the grandkids who never visit or call." "Tonight, somewhere north of me, I hope Stern is writing / a poem," the speaker muses, and then ends the poem with a memory of Stern giving a poetry reading, which he left "grateful for the angels of poetry the ones who come / on half-sprained wings to bless all that rusts and ages, / who come to us when we are wild enough to dance."

To end, I'll paraphrase Neil Young, which both Jones and Maginnes would probably approve of: Paul Jones and Al Maginnes, long may they run. ■