

LOVE AND DEATH IN NORTH CAROLINA POETRY

*a review by
Catherine Carter*

Jessica Jacobs. *Take Me With You, Wherever You're Going*. Four Way Books, 2019.

Wayne Johns. *Antipsalm*. Unicorn Press, 2018.

Eric Tran. *The Gutter Spread Guide to Prayer*. Autumn House Press, 2020.

CATHERINE CARTER is an English professor at Western Carolina University, a poetry editor for *Cider Press Review*, and the Jackson County regional representative for the North Carolina Writers' Network. Read more about her with the review of her latest poetry collection, also in this issue.

Because two of the three books I was given to review explore the terrible grief of loss, while the third opens the pages of a passionate marriage, I initially considered calling this review "Two Funerals and a Wedding." In the end, though, the title seemed too flippant for these three books' most serious subject matter: the temporary nature of love on earth – especially love that must struggle even for acknowledgment – and its inevitable end, which, surely, even the happiest among us dread long before it arrives. While none of the three were written during or for the 2020 pandemic, all are remarkably timely for pandemic reading, in a year whose losses are accruing exponentially. The three books position love, loss, and fear of loss in context of disparate experiences of and beliefs about the sacred or holy; all three pose more questions than answers, as is only appropriate when what is asked is ultimately unanswerable in human terms.

Of the three, **Wayne Johns's *Antipsalm*** most explicitly and consistently employs the language and framework of the holy. The book deconstructs conventional Christian imagery, iconography, and art to grapple with the loss of the poet's partner to suicide. As its name suggests, the book is a tightly unified gathering of song that engages with the sacred; "Antipsalm" is both the title poem and a summary of the whole book's matter. Faced with unbearable loss, which must

nonetheless be borne, the book entwines poems from when the speaker's partner (the late poet Rodney Jack) was alive with poems from after his death, a push-pull of love and death, passion and loss.

The book's initial poems set the stage, beginning with a near-drowning in "Saudade," and the excellent but often un-followable advice for the grieving and, perhaps, the suicide: "not to pull anyone else / under, when you go under – ." Readers soon learn, however, that the loss of the poet's partner, terrible as it is, is compounded by enforced silence. Johns's and Jack's partnership ends in Jack's suicide in 2008, well before equity in marriage rights in America had been acknowledged by the 2015 Supreme Court decision. In writing of the funeral, Johns documents the fact that most of Rodney Jack's family would not acknowledge the poet-speaker as the next of kin that he is. The shattering loss of the beloved to a suicide, which may stem at least in part from the exile and persecution to which so many LGBTQ+ couples are subjected, occurs in a context in which the bereft partner is not formally allowed to grieve. This is loss in context of bigotry; moreover, many of the poems are haunted by the fear of bigotry crossing the line into outright assault, so that the lovers can hold hands or walk arm-in-arm only in the dark. If love names us, showing us who we are and making us who we are, the action of hatred splinters the identity that love

OPPOSITE Wayne Johns reading at Scuppernon Books during an NCLR celebration of the James Applewhite Poetry Prize finalists and winners, Greensboro, NC, Apr. 2019. (He was reading his finalist poem, published in *NCLR Online* 2019, and went on to win the 2019 Applewhite Poetry Prize.)



PHOTOGRAPH BY AMBER FLORA THOMAS

Here, the dire environments of the alien moons quickly become Dante's hell of frozen seas, murderous angels, and hacked bodies (the forest of the suicides appears later, in "Flight"). Even the diction and meter suggest the *Inferno* in the slow-paced, formal, prophetic iambic pentameter of the penultimate line.

Many of the poems offer ekphrastic meditations on art and artifacts whose subject matter merges the divine and the failures of the all-too-human body – Dante's *Inferno*, Michelangelo's *Desire*, the Shroud of Turin, a painting by the narrator himself – while others find their meaning, or lack of meaning, in the nonhuman natural world. "Adieu" relates the release of a thread- and hair-entangled frog from the house back to the water, where voices from the dark, "out of the flashlight's beam" call to it, louder and louder.

As much as the poet would like to believe or discover that death is not the end of love, however, the anti-psalm can offer no such promise. Johns's title poem, a bitter re-vision of the Lord's Prayer, asks the divine to give us (back?) our newly dead, and to "forgive us our hungers as we have forgiven // Your open mouth, insatiable as a black hole // That consumes us in its silence."

"Marriage" depicts lovers rowing on the river's "stained- / glass panel of inverted trees. / Water striders distort the image," seeking to "eventually strike a rhythm." The stained glass suggestive of church is immediately distorted by the motion of everyday creatures upon its surface and undercut by the line break that emphasizes the end word "stained." And in "Sighing Wind," the poet performs a deft mimesis of the extent to which loss and grief drive us all into the arms of the pathetic fallacy. In this poem, the field is split "like an old wound"; the creek "threatens" to flood; mist is "a blessing or warning"; and the "proverbial" lilies of the field (though in this case they are water lilies) "rupture the surface," expose their throats as if to violence, and are "choked" by the long stems,

acknowledged and shaped. In "Last Testament," the poet asks, "who am I, uninvited, not / noted among the pallbearers, the survived-by, / and what right this ghostface like a negative / beside the all-black congregation." Rodney Jack has died, but the poet has become the ghost.

Johns finds this situation reflected everywhere: not only on earth, but in the heavens, too, like Jupiter's moons in "Unrest":

Scarred from previous eruptions, calderas
chance the surface . . .

like the souls of the lustful given flesh only
to be herded up the tower's winding stairs

and pushed, one at time, into the smoldering pit.
Undying angels, grown hideous in exile,

dredge the half-fleshed souls
and cast them back down.

And there will be no rest from this. Although
from here, the surface almost seems serene.

WAYNE JOHNS is a Professor of English at Greensboro College and a poetry editor for *The Adroit Journal*. *Antipsalm* was the winner of the Editor's Choice award from Unicorn Press. His prior works include the chapbooks *An Invisible Veil Between Us* (Thorngate Road, 1997), winner of the Frank O'Hara chapbook prize, and *The Exclusion Zone* (Seven Kitchen Press, 2018), winner of the Rane Arroyo prize. His work has also appeared in *Best New Poets*, *Ploughshares*, *Image*, and *Prairie Schooner*.

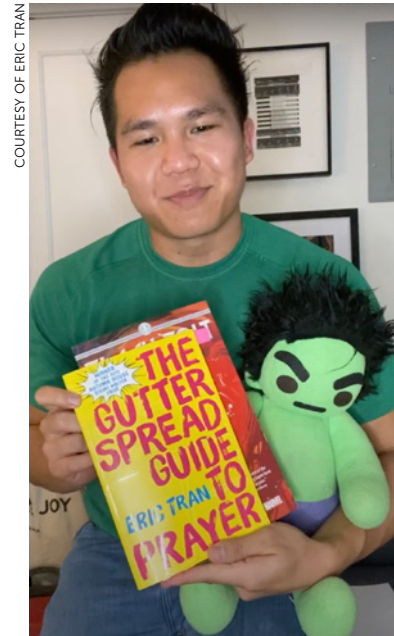
“umbilical tethers” connecting them to the mud: “They’re still dying // to touch.” This description is particularly striking because, literally speaking, the lilies are not “rupturing” the surface but floating on its surface tension, and, as the poet surely knows, the “umbilical tethers” of the long stalks are keeping the lilies alive, not choking them. But in the face of devastation, what we literally know is of little use. Grief changes the whole world, including the images of immanence and holiness, into something darker: choked, ruptured, distorted, “dying // to touch.” This is the sort of move made by poets like Frost in “Design,” in which the poet consciously chooses to find a malevolent meaning in the non-human because the possibility, or probability, of there being no meaning at all is too painful.

In the final poem, “Hope,” where poet and readers are suspended between worlds like a bird trapped in a flue, hope is no more than “this faint / flickering at either end.” In the penultimate poem, “Faith” is light that “falls / on but fails to illuminate / the black water.” In that swamp (or “what was once swamp,” but is now ruined by drought), pain is a stain marking how high the water reached on a cypress knee, a molecular scar found in the DNA of those who’ve suffered. Johns says (in one of my favorite lines), “We must go // under and rise whole or not at all.” And which it is to be, none of us can know. The anti-psalm is the only psalm the book can honestly offer.

The title of **Eric Tran’s *The Gutter Spread Guide to Prayer*** suggests a more informal approach to love and grief, and to some extent it is. The title works at three levels: the “gutter” between two pages of a comic book or graphic novel, and the “gutter spread” of the action, which happens unseen in between panels and pages in such a work; the popular use of “gutter” as the lowest of possible places to end up, the supposedly ultimate destination of the addicted and the lost; and the simultaneous use of “gutter” as an adjective to condemn some form of language or sex as innately vile.

That title also foreshadows the intertextuality of the allusions that shape the book, through which the poet and speaker seek both escape from and ways to articulate and interrogate grief and love through a queer lens. He adroitly juxtaposes characters from *Harry Potter*, *Assassin’s Creed*, *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Mad Max*, and DC and Marvel Comics, among others, and uses them to explore public traumatic events like the mass murder at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando and the election of Donald Trump.

As a gay man of color, Tran also explores the loss of a close friend, also to suicide, in context of a wider culture that recognizes the depth of that loss barely if at all. Although he identifies himself as “not a particularly religious person” (an appellation which, despite the “anti” in *antipsalm*, I would



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hesitate to apply to Wayne Johns and his encyclopedic knowledge of religious art), Tran writes elsewhere:

Zach Doss was one of the most miraculous things to come into my life. . . . I didn’t tell anyone when another gay male friend died a month later. Or the one after him, or the one after him.

My new colleagues and friends were well-meaning, good-hearted people, but also cisgender and straight. I didn’t trust them to understand the queer phenotype of grief. . . . How I am left dumb imagining all my loved ones disappearing – that young queer death is tragic, yes, but also inevitable. For as much as grief consumed my life, there was no room for it either.*

But prayer is everywhere in this book. Five of the poems are partially entitled “Lectio Divina,” evoking the Christian tradition of reading a sacred passage four times, first for comprehension, then for meditation and

ABOVE Eric Tran doing a virtual reading of “Lectio Divina: Black Bolt #6,” 24 Apr. 2020

* Eric Tran. “What’s Left: Queer Grief in the Everyday,” 32 *Poems* 17.1 (2019): [web](#).

for prayer, and finally for contemplation – and indeed, Tran’s Lectios are structured in four parts. The texts for the holy readings are quotations from fictional superheroes; for instance, in “Lectio Divina: Emma Frost,” the X-Men’s Emma Frost (a woman who can become as hard as a diamond, an ability many might envy in a world of painful feeling) draws on the tradition that associates gayness with superheroic mutation as she adjures Professor Xavier’s students, pinned by the world’s gaze, that they “must be nothing / less than fabulous.” (Emma also has a knack for a perfect line break, at least with Tran’s help.)

One of my favorite of the intertextual poems is “Amadeus Cho, Totally Awesome Hulk.” Amadeus Cho is another fictional superhero, a young Korean-American also known at various times as Iron Spider, the Prince of Power, Mastermind Excello, and – as the subject of this poem – a latter-day Incredible Hulk who takes up that mantle from Bruce Banner. The speaker first remembers a cousin who felt driven to change his Vietnamese name, Hung, because

I’m sure you know why. Imagine,
forced to forfeit what your mother gave you

because of every person who’s made dumb
jokes about eggrolls, about eyes slanted
like the eaves of buildings

in the rain

He then goes on to hope that Amadeus Cho has never felt that loss and humiliation, that he is as “terrifying, aggressive, / and haughty as I devour in print,” and apostrophizes him:

Come green man, cousin,

let us be two-faced, ambitious,
hungry. Tactless Asian:

Toothy, artful, heroic.
Toxic, angry, hellish.

This poem illustrates some of the ways in which so-called pop culture and nerd culture, too often sneered-at as lowbrow, can indeed become divine readings.

These cultural icons can offer visions of an Asian anger, power, and hunger too often proscribed by American culture, of a gay voice which can shatter mountains and crack a planet (as in “Lectio Divina: Black Bolt #6”), of remorse for our human failings, configured as an effort to stand like a dune against the tide (as in “Lectio Divina: Big Barda and Mr. Miracle”). Within the covers of popular culture, the poet can identify “He Who Helps Drag Queens Descend the Stairs,” not only as patron and saint, but even as a kind of archangel who can sound the last trumpet of Judgement Day:

... You harbinger

of a spandex pantheon, you gel-tipped
trumpeter. Here, background music

is heralding. Take up your brassy horn,
press it to your lips, and blow.

Seen this way, it seems particularly apposite that one of the Lectio Divina poems begins with the Marvel android hero known as (the) Vision.

Finally, this book finds both escape and understanding in brief single moments. For instance, consider the prose poem “Eloisa –,” one of the most explicit and most hauntingly beautiful of the book in its images of a bathhouse’s steam, mist, and anonymous touch. Over the course of the poem’s single stanza, the bathhouse becomes a maze, the elusive lover a minotaur hunted by the poet’s Theseus or Orpheus (another recurring character), though also, irreverently, one component of a handful of party mix. After an encounter that leaves the speaker unsatisfied, the man from the heart of the maze, the “dark sylph” who has been silent throughout, communicates only by touch, reaching out “to grab my wrist and [give] it a gentle squeeze goodbye.” In another moment of connection, in “My Mother Asks How I Was Gay Before Sleeping with a Man,” the speaker’s mother

ERIC TRAN is a resident psychiatrist at the Mountain Area Health Education Center in Asheville and a poetry reader for *Orison Press*. *The Gutter Spread Guide to Prayer* is the winner of the 2019 Autumn House Rising Writer Prize. His prior publications include the chapbooks *Revisions* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2018) and *Affairs with Men in Suits* (Backbone Press, 2014). His work has also appeared in *Iowa Review*, *Pleiades*, *Poetry Daily*, *Best of the Net*, and *NCLR Online*. Listen to more of Tran’s readings on the Autumn House Press Youtube Channel.

acknowledges that “you had to reach out your hand, palm the heat / hold the fire in your fist to learn how to be afraid.” Shortly after the middle of the book, we are offered instruction in how to pray, and this, too, happens in individual moments:

be willing
 be wild
 be blueberries in summer
 be forgiveness
 like a small dark box
 be prostrate
 be praise
 an overflowing fountain
 be a whistling worried kettle
 beg *shepherd*
savior
take me off the fire
empty me out

Perhaps, in this book, the prayer has been answered.

Jessica Jacobs’s memoir-in-verse, *Take Me with You, Wherever You’re Going*, explores the trajectories, tensions, and labor that underpin a marriage. It may initially feel like an easier book to enjoy than Johns’s or Tran’s because this poet’s current experience of love and marriage is generative; the connection is ongoing, the poems passionate, romantic, glorious. But this book too brims with the knowledge that all unions must in the end prove temporary: even at best, one spouse must die first, in a world of continual threat. Moreover, in poems like “Ain’t Nothing Like Breck for Stop n’Stare Hair,” the book asserts love in context of a culture that constantly works to clothe naked desire in “shame as my hair shirt,” a world (as in “Leaving Home”) that allows wildness to live in its suburbs,” only so long / as it doesn’t

bare its teeth; so long as when the light // finds it, it drops its prey and wags its tail; / so long as we confine our darkness to the dark.”

Take Me with You is divided into six sections, roughly corresponding to phases of the poet’s life: her childhood as a “primal thing” (in “To Florida”) in the seasonless, alligator-haunted landscape of a home that tries to kill her; the post-Florida years in which the poet has met her future wife but resists the pull of that connection; the years of partnership, then the years of marriage; the period of terror upon “finding something” growing in her spouse’s flesh; and, finally, the aftermath in which the tumor proved to be benign, but in which the poet must continue coming to terms with eventual, inevitable loss.

The poems are fearless in spelling out their thought processes and unpacking their metaphors in pursuit of clarity at the literal level – a kindness to the good-faith reader. But they are not prosy; even as they pursue controlling metaphors into crevices and around corners, they manage to end in startlingly and beautifully unexpected places, which also feel inevitable – that ultimate reading experience of “I couldn’t’ve put it like that, but it is like that.” For instance, in “What I didn’t say those years you thought I’d forgotten you,” the poet begins:

was I was my own city, my own New York, and you
 a succession of rolling blackouts . . .
 The charge too much
 for any wire to hold, we passed it from one to the next in a series
 of cascading failures.

The metaphor of electricity for the connection between Jacobs and her then-future wife (which also recurs later in the book) is then unpacked and unrolled:

. . . Each time you returned, traffic lights failed
 and pedestrians fled – the tunnels clogged as bad arteries, bridges
 quivering above the glossy throat of the East River. But others,
 others stayed. Opened
 windows and kicked off sheets, made love
 to battery-powered boomboxes on stoops below,
 where, neighbors carried grills from fire escapes to sidewalks
 and shared all the food they couldn’t bear to waste. Such toothsome
 smells from those feasts against spoilage, those burnt
 offerings.

JESSICA JACOBS is the Chapbook Editor of the *Beloit Poetry Journal* and lives in Asheville with her wife, poet Nickole Brown, with whom she has recently co-authored *Write It! 100 Poetry Prompts to Inspire* (Spruce Books, 2020). *Take Me with You, Wherever You’re Going* was one of *Library Journal’s* Best Poetry Books of the year, as well as the winner of the Goldie Award in Poetry from the Golden Crown Literary Society and a finalist for the Brockman-Campbell Award. Her prior work includes *Pelvis with Distance* (White Pine Press, 2015), winner of the 2015 New Mexico Book Award in Poetry. Her poetry, essays, and fiction have appeared in *Orion*, *New England Review*, *Crazyhorse*, and *Guernica*.



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Here, the presence of the beloved in the city of the speaker halts everything but opens windows for communication even with noisy neighbors, sparks a shared feast, which is also a shared hecatomb to the divine – including divine love. And then comes the moment, after dark, when all these (remember, metaphorical) neighbors and citizens of Jacobs’s inner city, “like the children / we’d taught ourselves not to be,” stand together, “– hands on hips, elbows jutting / like wings, heads thrown back – remembering what had been / there all along: the night sky, suddenly visible.” The blackout brought on by beloved presence – the presence the speaker has been trying to forget – wings the people and reveals the beyond-human reality which the city’s lights have hidden: the starry night sky. The controlling figure of the poem appropriates the familiar tropes of desire as electricity and love as stars, but makes them all its own by connecting them to the tunnel traffic, the kicked-off sheets, the grilling of freezer-food, and by configuring the beloved as blackout rather than spark, the meetings of those lost years of not-togetherness a series of “cascading failures.”

Any lover might rejoice in such an inventive and loving tribute, and the book is rich in

them – tributes to love’s hazards as well as its delights. The tails of the kites flown together are “an exaltation of metronomes, / keeping time for their joy.” Not only *in* their joy, but *for* their joy: while the beloved and the love survive, time can still be joy rather than penance. The couple not only married, but “married / our books,” a whole-hearted commitment fellow bibliophiles will appreciate. The newly wedded couple in “Elopement Epithalamium,” the recognition of whose marriage is “dependent, anyway, on what state we are flying over” makes “Nightly Visits to the Doubt Couch.” The spouses’ honeymoon years are described in “The First Rule of Rock Tumbling Is Rocks Must Be of Similar Hardness”:

rock tumbler, more slurry and coarse grind,
two roughs bashing at each other until our edges wore

not smooth exactly, but worn
into each other – gear-tight, cog in cog, turning
our shared hours . . .

The poet, having neglected to rescue in time a turtle, which is destroyed as it crosses a road, castigates herself that “thinking about doing the right thing / is not the same as doing it” and wonders, of her wife, “Will she love me / less when she learns / I am not equal / to the person I am when she is watching?”

Here, too, there is prayer: the final poem asks of moving “in time” with another, of learning another body, falling apart and coming together, “What is this if not / some kind of grace // some human-sized serving of God?” And here, too, of course, is the shadow of loss to come. The tumor of sections V and VI is benign in “Nevertheless,” spurring the poet to check the doorposts of the couple’s new home for traces of the Passover blood that induces the angel of death to spare the lovers, to meditate on how they have been spared to each other, this time, and to find no answer.

In “Why I can’t write the poem about how we met,” the poet begins, “Because I came to that bar with someone else / and left with her, too,” and concludes memorably, “Because // I didn’t insist, and the time we lost / is lost for good. Because whether a story is happy // or not depends on when you end it.” ■