

SEARCHING FOR MEANING "IN A BEAUTIFUL BUT FALLEN WORLD"

a review by James Kirkland

J.S. Absher. *Skating Rough Ground*. Kelsay Books, 2022.

JAMES W. KIRKLAND is a Professor of Folklore, American Literature, and Rhetoric and Composition at East Carolina University. He has co-authored and co-edited seven books including *Writing with Confidence: A Modern College Rhetoric* (D.C. Heath and Company, 1989), *Herbal and Magical Medicine: Traditional Healing Today* (Duke University Press, 1992) and *Concise English Handbook*, 4th ed. (Houghton, 1997). He is a regular reviewer for *NCLR*.

J.S. ABSHER has been a finalist in *NCLR*'s James Applewhite Poetry Prize contest numerous times, and, as a result, *NCLR* has published several of his poems since 2016. His first full-length book of poetry, *Mouth Work* (St. Andrews University Press, 2016; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2017), won the 2015 Lena Shull Book Contest. His chapbooks are *Night Weather* (Cynosura, 2010) and *The Burial of Anyce Shepherd* (Main Street Rag Publications, 2006). He lives in Raleigh, with his wife, Patti.

J.S. Absher's latest collection of poems, *Skating Rough Ground*, is at once deeply rooted in personal experience and closely attuned to the essential facts of human experience in all times and places. As he explains, "I began as a Southern writer, working within the frontiers of a family, but over time my range has expanded, perhaps without losing touch with my origins."* This expansive new artistic range is evident throughout the new collection, which consists of more than fifty new and previously published poems, grouped into six sections on topics ranging from the beauty and sublimity of the natural world to suffering and trauma in art and the transformative power of poetry.

Although the poems in the various sections differ widely in form and content, collectively they offer eloquent testimony to the poet's powers as an observer and interpreter of the natural world: its "river eddies and flow-ers, / wrinkling into bloom" ("Full Moon at Fews Ford"); "the bright / bole of the sycamore . . . split into three / crooked fingers" ("Slow"); "a flowering thistle, / that bristles in the sun, / each hair casting / its tiny scar of shade" ("Art"); "the morning sun . . . / resolved into rays and flecks / burning in the light" ("The Day"); the "chitter and chat" of winter rain "gurgling and chortling out the downspout" ("The Rain on Alan Avenue") – just to include a few.

Interspersed with these illuminating moments of sensory experience are passages that

invite deeper contemplation of the ways in which language – especially figurative language – can transform words, objects, and experiences into moments of revelation. The wings of butterflies, as Absher describes them in "Slow," are "folded like Dürer's praying hands." The common vine may "crack / a pipe . . . or break / a window," yet "resurrects" if "Cut / . . . to the ground," and shoots out "runners tough / as the devil's shoestring" ("Campsis radicans"). Joy takes on human form in "Ballade of the Top," where it "dances to the devil's fiddle / and do-si-dos with Jesus." The mountains in "Children on Mertie Road" jut into the sky, where "the skin of heaven wore thin" so that "the sacred could seep through like strained milk."

Often, Absher's memories of particular places are inseparable from thoughts about their current and former inhabitants. In "Winter Rain Daylong Falling," for example, the poet sits "in the dark" remembering Meemaw's stories about times long past: Caesar's Gallic Wars, "the boys in Belleau Wood falling in the wheat," the days "before the strokes, before her speech was gone, / before the three pigs (going to the fair / to trick the wolf) and the wolf too were gone." In the very next poem, "The Day," we find Absher alone in his room, gazing out the window "towards the ridgetop, the Dunkard church in the curve / of the two-lane, and, just beyond, the graveyard," a scene that reminds him of his two grannies, now deceased: "Emma

* "Unpayable Debts: J.S. Absher Introduces *Skating Rough Ground*," *Dawning of a Brighter Day: Twenty-First Century Mormon Literature* 8 June 2022: [web](#).



COURTESY OF J.S. ABSHER

with arms stretched out to read who'd died / (she'd be in the Dunkard cemetery soon)" and "half-crippled Sallie stringing the green beans / (years of suffering and strokes lay just ahead) – / while I stood quietly in the little room / watching the random sparkles in the sunbeam, / worlds I could move with a single breath / of poem or prayer, but could not control."

Other people figure prominently in these poems as well: an unnamed neighbor suffering from a terminal illness who "drives himself to the scrapyards / alone, facing his last days, each one hard" ("Waiting for Hospice"); a "graying woman / and her mewling, hissing cats / hunkered head down" in front of a "lone house facing a field / where the North Sea rigs are being built" ("Until You Come"); the title character of "Patient John Doe in the Rec Room," who engages in an imagined debate with Aristotle about the meaning of love; a farmer named John "in his 80's scyth-

ing grass / with an easy, fluid motion, laying it down / in swatches as neat as a schoolmarm's letters" ("A Good Death").

Joining this company are figures from the more distant past, in particular the painters and sculptors who appear in the book's many ekphrastic poems, the majority of which dwell on what the poet describes as "the arrogance of the artists" and the suffering of their subjects ("Unpayable Debts"). Gentile Bellini, the fifteenth-century Venetian painter, prides himself on his skill in capturing on canvas the "unshouldered head" of John the Baptist yet displays no empathy for the victim; the nineteenth-century French painter Leon Bonnat is so "eager to glimpse / how a thin man of Adam / is altered by crucifixion" that he "fetched from the *salle de dissection* a corpse / dead of indecipherable / causes and nailed him to a cross." Bonnat's contemporary Edgar Degas, though possessed of a "fierce craft" that blurs the boundaries between art and life, is oblivious to the physical and emotional pain of his fourteen-year-old model, "contracted to stand all day in the fourth / position. . . . / to be vaguely seen and sharply felt, / nude and clothed, posed and re-posed."

These portraits of the artist appear in the book's third section, "Interrupted at the Crucifixion," but the first and in many ways the most compelling of Absher's ekphrastic poems is "Prodigal," which captures in print the essence of Rembrandt's renowned painting *Return*: "He first clasped

the neck of his son in joy, / not grief – the aging father in Rembrandt's / *Return*" – in "fear / he will lose the boy again" then with the other hand caressed him "with lovingkindness." Strategically situated at the beginning of the introductory section, "His Own Hand," "Prodigal" sets the stage for Absher's book-long search for what he describes as "aspects of living the Gospel in a beautiful but fallen world" ("Unpayable Debts").

While Absher always keeps this goal in view as he moves from section to section and poem to poem, the journey is filled with uncertainties. "What should I wish for," he wonders in "Dawn and Later," "Which prayers will touch / heaven? I wait to be told, / needing so little, wanting so much" – questions that resurface in slightly different form in "Sheol," where the poet pictures himself

. . . wait[ing] in a twilight space
emptied of what I was and said,
of how I did and was done to.
When will I be filled with grace
and all the lonesome laid – out dead
be summoned to come to?

Answers to these and other questions of equal magnitude lie close at hand, often finding expression in poems that celebrate the smallest and seemingly least important things. In "Flower of Zeus," the flower provides the stimulus for prayers of reassurance and redemption:

*Purge me from fear
and anger, give me
a cheerful face, a heart
of gladness and tender
mercies, wisdom's beginning.*

In "The Rain on Alan Avenue," the poet remembers a day during his childhood when

heaven made constant noise –
ice that sizzled in the pale beech leaves,
blackberry hail that rattled the roof,
the high fall wind (it made trees bow
till they licked the ground) with a whirring voice
repent, rejoice.

Echoes of these lines can be heard in the book's final poems, "At Heaven's Gate" and "The Creator Praises Birds." In the former, "even envy weeps / in joy of it all – the night settling / in, the mallards sleeping on one leg, / the drone of semis climbing the grade / out of town hauling repentant prayers, / the freight of our holy commerce / too massive for words." In the latter, God speaks with a human voice, offering a praise song for the "brave-heart / tender fledgling, wobbly / winging over / houses, over / pavement, risking all to / climb the air by /

beating wind I / too created, rising / heavenward in joy."

Taken together, these poems bring the book to a close on the same hopeful note sounded in earlier poems such as "Ballade of the Top" and "The Conversation of Matter," reminding us that "joy and pain, deliberately blurred, / revolve on one axis, not spheres apart, / spinning together through the world." Echoing the book's title, Absher writes that "[w]ithout friction . . . language" – especially the language of poetry – "does no work." But

. . . If it wears skates on rough ground, it
takes a tumble. Even prayer needs resistance – a stick
crosswise in the throat,
garbling words like a sob.

How hard to admit we love the world – how
hard it ought to be – yet its unrequiting
beauty resists abandonment . . .
("The Conversation of Matter") ■

2024 ROANOKE-CHOWAN AWARD FOR POETRY GOES TO A COLLECTION FOR ALL AGES

Kin: Rooted in Hope by Carole Boston Weatherford, published by Atheneum Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, received the 2024 Roanoke-Chowan Award for Poetry, an honor bestowed annually to "the best book of poetry by a North Carolinian." The book is written for readers age ten to ninety-nine, according to the publisher's [website](#).



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Kin is the first collection for young readers to receive this prestigious honor. It is also a *Boston Globe-Horn Book Poetry Award* winner and a *Coretta Scott King Honor Book*.

The award was presented by fellow poet and North Carolina Literary and Historical Association board member Crystal Simone Smith, who noted that *Kin* is "a mother-son collaboration illustrated by Jeffery Boston Weatherford. Together they explore their heritage giving voices to their kin. It is a powerful journey of pain and perseverance, but most importantly, it is the stories of the enslaved, historically silenced in our nation's narrative. Weatherford amplifies these voices with exquisite clarity."

Eighteen books were nominated for the 2024 Roanoke-Chowan Award, and five other collections were shortlisted by this year's award judges: *Knowing* (Press 53) by Mark Cox, *Night Wing over Metropolitan Area* (Carnegie Mellon University Press) by John Hoppenthaler, *unalone* (Four Way Books) by Jessica Jacobs, *What the Light Leaves Hidden* (Unicorn Press) by Terry Kennedy, and *Midlife* (Measure Press) by Matthew B. Smith. ■