

POEMS OF HOPE AND REDEMPTION

a review by James W. Kirkland

Scott Owens. *Prepositional: New and Selected Poems*. Redhawk Publications, 2022.

Scott Owens's latest book, *Prepositional: New and Selected Poems*, follows a course much like the one familiar to readers of his previous two collections *Counting the Ways* (2020) and *Sky Full of Stars and Dreaming* (2021), both reviewed in *NCLR Online Fall 2022*, combining new and previously published poems in a single volume organized into multiple sections based on a recurrent theme or motif. There are significant differences, however, as Owens explained in a recent *Emerge* interview:

While most of my prior books had some pretty heavy content, each also contained a certain number of poems about "redemption," and when I looked at those, I realized that most of them found redemption through relationships. Aiming to fulfill my reader's wish, I set out to explore that idea more fully and write new poems about the redemption inherent in relationships to go along with those that had already created a thread throughout my previous work. Writing with such a positive idea in mind . . . made the whole process enjoyable, and having the opportunity to play around with my favorite part of speech (prepositions) made it fun.*

At first glance, Owens's penchant for "playing around" with prepositions may seem difficult to reconcile with his efforts to "explore . . . more fully the redemption inherent in relationships" and related themes, but as he explains in "13 Ways of Prepositions" (one of several poems modelled on the "13 Ways of" formula of *Counting the Ways*), prepositions are not only "always different / from other parts of speech but also /

often different than you thought they were," taking on new meaning in each new context. "Life as a Preposition," for example, tells the poet's life history in a series of one-to-two-word lines, almost all of which end with a preposition:

I was born from
brought into
raised by
mostly did without
left behind
looked over
steeped in
reminded of
shouted at
held back
kept under
Until I

woke up

then "moved beyond" and "never looked back." Owens continues this prepositional word play in "The Problem with Deciding on a Single Object to Follow the Preposition 'With' Preceding the Gerund Phrase in This Fragment of a Title," a humorous account of the plight of the writer facing "too many problems / to choose from" ranging from the mundane ("food allergies," "blind dates," "a comfortable couch") to the profound – "the way the world ends, / whatever way that is." In a third variation on the prepositional theme, he adopts a more serious tone, celebrating the natural beauty of "cedar waxwings in a greening tree / along the tracks in downtown / Blue Ridge, GA," linking birds and tracks in "Prepositional" "with the sun / rising from mountains behind them / to the top of a clear blue sky / on a warm morning in early April."

In other poems, too, Owens takes us on a journey *from, to, of, with, and through* the book's varied sections, each named for a different preposition, pausing along the way at locations both familiar and strange. In "On Realizing the Importance of Place," a child playing in "a place you think / that hardly matters, / red hill, white trailer / dog behind one wheel" brings the realization

that every place matters
to someone, the sunset
the trees, the silence
of birds gliding above,
the perfection belied
by imperfect vision.
It all matters to whatever
child knows this as home

In "On Settlemyer Bridge," "a boy stands" on a bridge "where time stands still, / casting bait, dreaming of water running / to places he's never seen, but never seem out of range." In a third, "Water Ways," the "coves and slues" of a boundary lake "tucked away behind every curve / of land" remind us of "how it feels / to find belonging / in being alone." In a fourth, "Orchard," an orchard "bulging [with] fruit" dangling from "limbs bent low from / harvest weight" offers

hidden boughs to rest in
when there's no one else to count on
and little certainty of where we're from,
as if the whole world might be made of

trees. . . .

In many others, we find ourselves in places "defined only by relativity to other places, / North Augusta, Ninety-six, Due West" ("By").

Just as important as these "prepositional location[s]" are the people who inhabit them – people such as the poet's grandmother, an "accidental conservationist" skilled in stitching into quilts patches of worn out clothing "whose



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squares felt as familiar / as anything saved from oblivion" ("Economy"); his loving, self-sacrificing brother, who "has never kept a single lake, / single lost grave to himself" but "Always . . . calls, then waits until I / can come" ("Common Ground"); an anonymous mountain climber with his "head bent, legs pumping, / swinging out and back / farther and higher each time," sharing with all of us

the same dream,
letting go,
rising above
what holds us down,
going beyond
such mundane limitations. ("The Allure of Flight")

Similarly, in "Behind," "a gardener / long forgotten" leaves "to children / not his own" a "legacy of growth / beyond years, beyond the reach / of knowing, where all that's left / is what is left behind."

Equally memorable, for very different reasons, are the many humorous poems interspersed with those more serious in tone, including "Almost or Ode to JT O'Sullivan," inspiration to

understudies, stand ins,
second-rate poets, career minor leaguers,
Hollywood extras, perennial bridesmaids,
VPs whose POTUS was never
impeached, assassinated, or just found dead.

* "Owens To Debut 18th Book At Poetry Hickory, December 13th," *FOCUS Newspaper* 17 Nov. 2022: [web](#).

"Communication During Covid" is the story of a couple attempting (and failing) to communicate during the pandemic: "You say, *He has a PhD*, / but I hear, *He has PTSD*. / You say, *You can take off your mask*, / but I hear, *You've got cake on your ass*." And "What's Wrong with Super Powers" is a comical self-portrait of the poet as a would-be superhero named "The Alliterater," who appropriately enough speaks in alliterative language "fraught with possibilities / for misuse, misunderstanding, misinterpretation / leading to mischief, misery or mundane misfortune."

When Owens is not acting the part of a make-believe superhero, we see him in other roles: a father engaging his two-year-old daughter in a conversation about the "awesome power of stars" ("Naming the Stars"); a husband assuring his wife that love does not diminish with age but endures

until the last leaf falls,
trees refuse to bud,
buds refuse to flower,
flowers refuse
the intimations of bees,
directive of spring's unfolding ("Until");

a teacher seeking to convince his students "*that despite everything, the world / is a fine place to be and that they / can make it even better*" ("At the Reading"); a time traveler seeking to redeem from the past moments of intense sensory expe-

rience: the "smell [of] camellias blooming in the dark" ("With"), a wood thrush's "song , resounding / through farm and village / and a thousand years / of furrowed fields" ("Triptych"); the "screen door hum / of unseen cicada" (untitled); the sight of "Footprints . . . washed or blown away / by nightfall, words drowned in the wind / and waves, everything else / consumed by time or sea" ("Barrier Islands").

As these examples suggest, Owens is above all a gifted poet, repeatedly reminding us that "the hope we have / is strongest when we find a way / to put it into words" ("Words and What They Say"); that "Where there is language there is art" ("The Art of Everything"); and that where there is art there are poems that leave us "almost exhausted, / tongue-tied and dripping sweat, / gasping for breath, for words, for anything / that might make a single moment more of meaning" ("Towards"). That meaning may reside in something as small and seemingly insignificant as a preposition ("Nearing the end of my sentence") or as momentous as Owens's apocalyptic vision of the "last day of the world" in "Away," the last poem in the book, where in an act of quiet courage

the girl at the Dollar General
on Highway 16 puts everything
on sale, then walks out,
turns toward the river
and just keeps going. ■

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