

IMPERMANENT TABLEAU

a review by David E. Poston

John Amen. *Dark Souvenirs*.
New York Quarterly Books,
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DAVID E. POSTON is the author of two poetry chapbooks and the full-length collection *Slow of Study* (Main Street Rag, 2015). His poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Broad River Review*, *English Journal*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Pedestal*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and others, including a poem in *NCLR* 2021 that received second place in *NCLR*'s 2020 James Applewhite Poetry Prize contest. He has taught at UNC Charlotte, at Charlotte's Young Writers' Workshop, and for thirty years in North Carolina public schools. He has led or facilitated writing workshops for Novant Health Hospice, the North Carolina Writers' Network, and the North Carolina Poetry Society, among others. A past editor of *Kakalak*, he currently serves on the board of directors of the North Carolina Poetry Society. A new poetry collection, *Letting Go*, is forthcoming from Fernwood Press in fall 2025. He lives in Gastonia, NC.

Dark Souvenirs by John Amen is dedicated to the poet's uncle, Richard Sassoon, by all accounts an extraordinary teacher, painter, theater director and manager, writer, and world traveler. But the central thread of this book, Amen's sixth collection, is Amen's reaction to Sassoon's suicide at age eighty-three. In the conclusion of "First Date," Amen writes, "don't misunderstand me, I'm not / giving you a story, I'm trying to work / my way out of one." Do not assume, however, that the chief aim or accomplishment of these poems is to poetically work through the stages of grief or to express cathartic anger. For all he works through or out of in these poems, Amen accomplishes much more.

In a 2015 interview with Kris Sweeting for *West Trade Review*, Amen notes the influences of Kafka, Anne Sexton, and Confessional Poets such as Sylvia Plath (with whom Richard Sassoon shared what has been described as an intimate friendship) early in his career. Amen describes that earlier poetry as darker, but also cathartic, addressing "a need to process inner conflicts, family problems and just that general sense of being somewhat out of sync with life around me or even within me."^{*}

As Amen's reaction to the trauma of suicide returns him to past conflicts, his maturity – poetic and personal – enables him to explore them more fully and fruitfully. This collection has three major threads: emotion-driven poems reacting directly

to the suicide, narrative-driven poems casting a wider net over past experiences and relationships, and philosophical/spiritual poems, each thread energized by transcendent, vivid surrealistic imagery. Throughout, Amen keeps a delicate balance between nostalgia and regret, between anger and acceptance, between recrimination and celebration. Buddhist concepts of impermanence and the fluidity of consciousness inform these poems both thematically and technically, with constantly shifting personae and speakers, both external and diegetic voices. These threads blur as well, moving readers through the pound locks of consciousness from one poem to the next. In these poems, as "Waiting for the Sibyl" puts it, "Visions flood my / limbs before sleep churns like a pound lock."

The opening poem, "Family Systems," plunges immediately into the ripple effects of the inciting incident:

Three weeks after his bullseye shot,
his cellphone kept dialing – long,
blank messages, I could almost hear
the engine of his breath. He should've
been the world's youngest maestro
but spent his years hiding in the valves
of a westside trumpet, blowing sparks
but no music, a part he couldn't conjure
once he inhaled. Finally I answered,
waited for the caller to begin his confession.
Hope can nail your feet to a burning floor,
grief can smoke the dirt under your shoes.

The conclusion shifts to pathological family images and memories:

I could hear my father grinding his teeth
from across the room. My mother stared
out a window, whispering to herself,
deciphering omens in the birdsong.
I told you a thousand times, she blurted,
crazy dervish spinning in my direction,
never hang a hat on a black doorknob.
Now look, just look what you've done.

^{*} Kris Sweeting, "Interview with John Amen," *West Trade Review* 6 (2015): [web](#).

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Our uncertain perspective on events, chronology, the identity of characters and especially of speakers in this and subsequent poems underscores Amen's thematic emphasis on the shifting impermanency of perception and consciousness. "Regrets" directly addresses repercussions:

He left me his demos,
wine-stained tablature,
family bible, chocolate streaked across its cover.
As the trigger finger follows
the loud voice's lead,
so grief's a flood,
your fists hold back water
for only so long.

Recovery from shock and grief over suicide blurs into recovery from addiction in "Recovery" and "Addict," then blurs back into grief recovery in "Where the Work Is."

Along with the surrealistic imagery describing the mortician in "Funeral Dream," for example – "wrapped in seaweed . . . credit cards nailed to his feet" – is the wryly apt comment that he has spent "years of betting on bad limbs, bad science" to enable him to earn his living. There is warmth and humor as well, in the tall-tale exuberance that concludes "Ode to Country Music 2" and in the account of Suzanne the beekeeper and her tattoos in "Roman à Clef."

Poem titles do yeoman work – individually to maintain thematic focus and collectively to echo and speak to each other – to great cumulative effect. There is an easy fluidity to the language that supports equally well the narrative, lyrical, or more emotionally charged passages and is consistently enhanced by unobtrusive mastery of line breaks. Poems that differ formally, such as "The 49 Days" and the series of eleven brief prose poems beginning with "Apprenticeship," stand out more distinctively because of that formal difference.

Motifs include a mother haunted by visions and superstitions, an absent father, childhood and youth in Tryon, addiction and recovery, stories – joyful and sad – of friends, memories of a tent revival and Nina Simone and a grandfather's preoccupation with Elvis. The recurring images range from the negative – bloodstains, a bubbling spoon, floodwaters, a Holocaust ghost at the dinner table – to more ambivalent images: angels and cherubs, trumpets and drums, and the playlist of memory. Comforting, albeit escapist, images are found as well: a beloved Morgan horse, cars blitzing down various highways.

The collection's best features appear in "Poem for Bill B." It begins with a narrative whirlwind:

Bill B & I met & got sober in May '89, hours spent
in musty church basements, smoke-filled VFW halls,
discussions, confessions over pots of black coffee.
I pounded for UPS, carting boxes from ten to six,
slept in a Days Inn by the airport. Someone dropped
a cigarette on a mattress, flames erupted at one AM
on a Monday. By dawn, the street was littered with
charred furniture, damp ash strewn for miles. Mike M
died that year in a car wreck, LJ guzzled a pint after
four months clean, cannon-balled off a rooftop dock.

The surrealistic and the spiritual emerge in lines such as:

. . . I felt that alien ship
hovering above the powerlines, the same way I did when
my younger sister died. Buddhists talk of impermanence,
how all content dissolves, what you've acquired, people
you love, consciousness itself.

The ending lines shift to deep longing over a song the speaker has "wanted to write since I was a kid, I can't nail / the chords." After describing ways both Bill and the speaker sought consolation in faith, the poem ends with: "Though perhaps we / ignored the angels during our terrestrial stay, we might / in that balmy glow, free of craving, heed their patient call."

In "The 49 Days," Richard is the speaker, and that poem – along with the group of prose poems – contains some of the strongest, most lyrically powerful imagery in the collection, peaking in this stanza:

What foul galleon flew the dock, I perched
a mad gull the razored balustrade.
Then on infinite gangway, then
stretched arms wide to the bow,
I called in spindrift, *wait! wait!*
What dying desire insane to stoke
I tore & stabbed with invisible hands.
& the restless ship, plodding mammoth,
bawled like a dire Sphinx, lunged from the light,
melting as I quivered on the chain.
& the stranger for whom I felt
such rended lust had vanished, I was
sun-wiped, a million stars beyond.

The collection's final poem, aptly titled "Impermanence," begins:

Richie finally gets his '69 Corvette,
cruises uptown Bardo with big cash,
shredding solos for his mentor, treating
the cheerleaders to hotdogs & beer.
I text the ferryman & convince him
to skip our port, lassoing the goodbye sun.
Richie idles on a boomerang curve,
honking for me to join him.

The poem shifts from whichever Richie or Richard this is to the troubled speaker:

You lean over the balcony, tangled
in rainbow vines, waving to me.
A terrible wind blows, & I page back
to the rough water. When the anchor drops,

I want to run for the bluffs, steal another day,
another shimmering chorus, but my feet
are frozen, & night crashes on the shore.

That sounds like despair, and it echoes the stark beginning of the collection's title poem: "I studied your craft, / how you drove the demon of glut-tonous age / from its hiding place." From that detached, almost ironic opening, the title poem broadens to a conclusion that seems to characterize all our existence:

No way to preserve your opus,
air that still trembles,
trying to catch its breath.
Memory does its best
to salvage a keepsake
– pulp, bullet, bone,
a new constellation in the night sky –
but symbols are lost,
art fails, except as it screams at the dead.
I hope what remains of you
can recognize my voice.

Perhaps one could begrudge Richard for driving off into that balmy glow, free from suffering and pain, joining all the other departed characters in these poems, leaving only dark souvenirs. Or one could choose, as this reader does, to find consolation in that prospect. Whatever darkness and light Amen explores here, his art does much more than scream at the dead. And it does not fail. ■



COURTESY OF JOHN AMEN

JOHN AMEN is the author of five previous poetry collections, including *Illusion of an Overwhelm* (New York Quarterly Books, 2017), which was a finalist for the 2018 Brockman-Campbell Award and included work chosen as a finalist for the Dana Award. He is founder and editor-in-chief of *Pedestal Magazine* and the recipient of the 2021 Jack Grapes Poetry Prize. His poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared nationally and

internationally, and his poetry has been translated into Spanish, French, Hungarian, Korean, and Hebrew. He conducts writing workshops and performs widely, both poetry and music, and is a certified teacher in the Narrative Enneagram professional training program. Born in New York and raised in Tryon, NC, he lives with his wife in Charlotte, NC.

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: Art by John Amen's uncle, Richard Sassoon, to whom the collection of poetry is dedicated