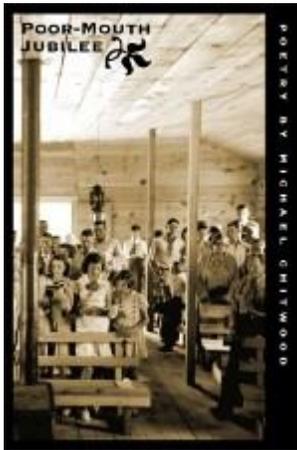


Book Review

Poor-Mouth Jubilee

Michael Chitwood



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“True revelation occurs amid distortion”—The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 1: Religion

Southern poetry occupies an inimitable place in contemporary literature. Michael Chitwood, whose work has gained significant recognition and a wide readership over the last two decades or so, represents a current trend of an increased interest in Southern poetry. His latest collection, *Poor-Mouth Jubilee*, reaches back to the heart of what can bind a Southern town together—religion—in an effort to explore the meaningfulness and fruitfulness of human relationships. Chitwood’s usual positions of irony, skepticism, and cynicism toward Christianity are softened, considerably, in *Poor-Mouth Jubilee*. Still, the unrelenting quality of obstinacy that characterizes a particular sect of Southern literature from William Faulkner to Flannery O’Connor is ever-present in *Poor-Mouth Jubilee*. The concept of obstinacy in Southern literature translates into the idea that while it is impossible to overcome suffering through a transcendence of it, nonetheless there can be a repudiation of the belief that suffering is meaningless. *Poor-Mouth Jubilee* reminds us that meaning can be found in the smallest of appreciations. In the poem, “Now And In Our Time of Need,” Chitwood describes how a flock of crows can remind us of the need for prayerful meditation.

Crows know the give and go.
They imprint like words on the sky’s blue page.
They fly through the pine stand like a sentence.

If we could read that swift progress,
that syntax,

if we could follow its logic,
if we could with the mind's eye
discern the tone of its location—

see how it moves through the boughs,
that thought, that flock,

that going that is the way the mind moves,
that prayer flashing in the understory—

if only we could.

There is no real remnant of the theological doctrine of human depravity in Chitwood's poetry; there is only the sense that something has haunted, preoccupied religion for a very long time. The poet never names or identifies what this theological haunting is; but, usually Chitwood's theological concepts in his poems are often undermined, deliberately by the poet. And yet, out of this undermining, which is really nothing more than the destabilization of a text by way of irony, satire, and metaphor, Chitwood is able to 'locate' the theological in an gratefulness for the everyday and the ordinary. Not waiting on a church building, the poet looks toward the regular people of Southern towns to find evidence of God's peculiar reality.

Chitwood's poems offer small stories wrapped inside the language of poetry. Because of this story-telling dimension, several of his poems in *Poor-Mouth Jubilee* lend themselves to good summaries. The poem, "Defense Fog In Which I Miss The Eastern Seaboard's Largest Flag Flying Over a Toyota Dealership Off 1-95 Near Washington, D.C.," is about mistaking low lying for heaven. He writes, "White night,/Distance is done in./Is this Heaven,/this cloud come to ground?/Our lights/are two short sticks;/they cannot reach/to tap the ground." The mistake can't occur unless there is first a belief in the concept of the heavens. The poem throws in a lot of non-religious images that culturally because of their iconic status have almost the air of the sacred; though, falsely sacred—Muhammad Ali, General McArthur, Nixon, Elvis. In the poem, "Visiting Tom," Chitwood narrates what it is like to go and see a dare-devil pal who takes unnecessary risks, though his risky behavior is what draws people to be attracted to him. Though religion on the surface has nothing to do with the story, Chitwood manages to work it in anyway, to remind the reader that in the South the vastness of space and the air of assumptions of risk can take on the newly sacred (culturally sacred). Chitwood describes in "Visiting Tom" the feel of riding a motorcycle at high speed—his friend's favorite pastime. He writes, "The fields empty for miles, no hills./It was like God was rushing at you,/the big nothingness of it." The experience of God is found in the simple act of riding a motorcycle in the open vastness of land and creation.

In the poem, "Fourth Hour of the Afternoon," Chitwood describes the sensations of a summer in North Carolina, comparing the wind to Pentacost. Though the reference to Pentacost could be taken by some as sacrilege, the poem's tone is one in which the poet compares nature's bounty and its more destructive impulses with both Old and New Testament allusions. Chitwood writes, "A cold front is bringing the Pentacost/to the pine tops. There is a shiver in that herd,/ozone sharp as a whiff of hot tin." Also, there are descriptions in "Fourth Hour of the Afternoon" of the sanctity of nature when the poet

says, "You can see the rain coming, cowled,/head down, hiking steady with its crystal/prayer beads worried in wordless prayer." The poet also compares those who have tried to articulate the sacredness of life, nature to someone who brings an animal before an altar to slay it, or as he says, "translating the altar blood of fatted calves." His point is that some essences cannot be truly described without destruction.

Some of the poems in the volume are touched with melancholy; an example is the "The Accident," which narrates the story of a bereaved woman. The loss of the woman's husband brings with it the collapse of her dependency in life; but, the poem is mostly about shock, that sense of shock that comes at the surprise of the death of a spouse. The woman is stuck, psychologically and emotionally immobilized in her grief to the extent that she is unable to perform the simple task of filling out a set of insurance papers—"She couldn't bring herself/to fill out the life insurance forms./Bring herself./From where she sat now she could see clouds,/the billow of them./It could be like drawing the thought."

Even in the seemingly absurd or the unusual, there is always just enough sufficient grace present in any given situation to hammer out a story of how the tragic can be salvaged. The poem, "Three Dogs As the Figure Of Death," seems to be kind of parable with a morality. The grace of this poem is to see within the lumpiness of three mangy yard dogs, the unity of form (the dog's "triangulate" shape and the beauty of prayer as represented by the pose animals can take).

They have found the sunny spot in the yard.
They are in relation, triangulate.
They are like loaves rising, their warm bodies in ferment.

Here Here and Here
The truth is
Say what you will

I see the one most forward as the prayer of the other two.
Fur is its own reward.
They can smell me thinking.

Chitwood does not adopt the position in *Poor-Mouth Jubilee* that religion can 'save' people from going through miserable times, but he does explore the basic Southern Christian belief that we need to look for ways to 'redeem' bad situations. Chitwood keeps aspects of religious language to prove this point, but while secularizing the belief to present it from his own perspective. The poem, "Self-Help," explores the poet's question about why some people are not healed by their rituals. He writes, "They take away dirt in vials,/so much dirt it has to be replenished./At night the priests/bring in the bucketfuls from elsewhere on the grounds,/sacred dirt is sacred dirt they reason./All day the grieving dust collects dust." Then, there is also the strictly humorous in Chitwood's poems. In "Take Comfort Where You Can," he sarcastically examines the logic of the old Southern saying that someone 'doesn't have the sense God gave a goose.' Drawing on this old Southern piece of folkloric wisdom he writes,

Not for nothing
Are we given at least as much
Sense as God gave a goose,
Which we have no access to, sensewise.

In other words, we are bound by limitations. *Poor-Mouth Jubilee* depicts a clash between those who truly are capable of believing that religion can offer sanctity from the trials of life and the narrative voice of the poet who does not fully accept it, but still puzzles over it, nonetheless. The poet's voice in *Poor-Mouth Jubilee* demonstrates that with or without religion people have a responsibility (even a right) to find solace somewhere. Is there a level of contradiction then within the collection? Yes. But Southern writers have historically been quite adept at managing contradictions; he is after all only following in the footsteps of those authors who have already defined the niche of Southern literature with incongruities. In the poem, "Deer," Chitwood audaciously sets up a comparison between "church women" dressed in high heels, their good intentions, and the movement of deer. On the surface, it seems there must be some rule—poetic or otherwise—that is being broken, here. What's the connection, the reader with any curiosity at all must ask.

I am being prayer for. The deer
appear across the road. They seem to
drift from the understory, alert, ready to
startle.

When they cross the road to come
into my yard, they have the mincing
steps of the macadam of women in heels
on the icy sidewalks outside a church.
someone is sick.

As autumn deepens their coats will
darken, go grayer so that they will blend
with the slates and pewters of winter
trunks.

They are creatures of listening.
Their hunger brings them here.

In addition to religion and its impact upon how a small Southern town operates, Chitwood also focuses in the collection on themes such as regional poverty, absence and loss as life-lessons, and the need to develop acceptance toward that which one cannot control or predict. There is also a need for abstract thought to have sacred purpose. "Go In Fear of Abstractions," attests to this technique in the volume. The poem reads,

It's summer now.
But I'm thinking snow,
The snows of yesteryear
With three crows gliding in,

As they alight
Chinese characters form against the snow's rice paper.

Wellness. Beauty. The Divine.

They are there so suddenly,
Blindingly black on white.

But no snow.
No snow now.

Some reviewers of *Poor Mouth Jubilee* have referred to it as a book about “happiness—Andrew Hudgins, for example said of it, “No book about happiness has made me half as happy as I was made by *Poor-Mouth Jubilee*.” This seems only half-true, though. While there is much wit and sarcasm in the book to help the reader smile at the troubles that may come one’s way, overall *Poor-Mouth Jubilee* remains a deeply felt book about sorrow, despair, and coming to terms with the losses that accumulate in life. The term itself jubilee means “celebration” or “festival.” In Southern versions of Christianity, by today’s standards, a jubilee refers to a Gospel music gathering. But historically, Southern jubilees included not just the entertainment of Gospel music but the preaching of sermons as well.

Hence, there is a rhetorical and oral cultural set of traditions that Chitwood’s title deliberately signifies to Southern readers. And given this expectation it is almost as though the Southern reader flips open the collection thinking that a sermonic quality will be present in the poems—*this is not the case*. The sheer lack of the sermonic makes the work deliberately conspicuous.

Works Cited

Chitwood, Michael. *Poor-Mouth Jubilee*. North Adams: Tupelo Press, 2010.

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