

*Afterword to Lee Gerlach, Selected Poems (Ohio University Press, 2005)*

*I knew Lee Gerlach first as a teacher. My second term in college I landed by chance in his section of an introductory course on modern literature. Every term for the next three years I took every course he offered. The range of the courses may seem as if I have made them up: Chaucer, pre-20<sup>th</sup> century American poetry (Edward Taylor and Frederick Goddard Tuckerman were his favorites, but his talks—he didn't lecture—on Emerson were especially sympathetic), 20th century American poetry (he had us read dozens of poets arranged like leaves on a big family tree he devised), modern criticism (he was hard on Eliot, and his allegiance to Yvor Winters, his teacher, proved a mixed blessing), and modern European poetry and fiction. He even risked classes on Asian poetry (T'ang and S'ung masters, Persian and Urdu ghazalists, Basho and Issa) and prose (Kawabata, Tanizaki, Narayan, Anand). Day after day I felt he was pouring his life straight into mine. His voice in reading poems aloud was a beautiful instrument, a manly, measuring tenor, sensitive to the music of the lines, but undramatic, unprofessorial, always keeping a respectful distance from interpretation. It was a revelation of the spiritual radiance of poetry. Even now, thirty years later, I can still hear his voice in my head.*

*That voice, more meditative, imagistic, and intimate, of course, than the one I heard in class, but no less learned and informing, is the voice that the reader of this book has now had the pleasure of hearing. Gerlach, who is eighty-five, has been writing poems for so long that he has mastered several metrical modes (traditional English verse, syllabic verse, varieties of free verse), worked through several language strata and strategies for configuring the relation of image and statement, and, needless to say, set down the*

*manifold interests, attitudes, and convictions of a long life. Still, the voice in all these poems is recognizably one voice.*

*“In the Nightstruck House” may well be the earliest poem in the book, a poem written, I suspect, when Gerlach was a member of Winters’ school of young poets in the 1950s:*

*Here in my arms I carry you  
As one day you may carry me.  
You will not wake to what I do.  
The house is black without degree.*

*I hold you thus, the only cause  
Worth mentioning of all I know.  
It does not move by any laws;  
Mover itself, yet it may go.*

*Perhaps I hold you then for this:  
I may not hold you long nor well,  
For as you stir you change, and kiss  
Nor cry may overmuch compel.*

*Small boy, small boy, I give you back  
To the warm groaning of your bed,  
And sighing sleep, and gentle wrack  
Of time converging on your head.*

*Firmly iambic, insistently monosyllabic, the sentences as simple as the rhymes that end them—the poem may seem no more than a period piece, though a fine one. What makes it more than that is the portrait it gives, tender and almost melancholic, of a domestic interior. The man in the poem, a father alone in his house at night, feeling the force of his attachment to his infant son and, at the same time, a nameless, countervailing, and finally undermining force in the very air he breathes, is a figure one finds in many of Gerlach’s poems. “White Nights in Mission Hills,” a suite of three poems, two set in the poet’s*

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*house on the rim of a wooded canyon in San Diego, is perhaps the best of these. Solitary, in need of solitude, but looking back at what he has strayed from, Gerlach’s householder poet is surely one of the representative figures in American poetry since World War II. Gerlach’s distinction lies in his handling of blank verse, his susceptibility to wonderment and joy, and, most of all, his evocative descriptions of the natural world and his responsiveness to it, its beauty and otherness, its allurements. “The greatest*

*poverty is not to live/In a physical world,” I heard him quote in class. Few American poets have lived so richly in that world. Still, unlike poets who fill up lines with notations of phenomena, mere the statistics of attention, Gerlach seeks always to understand his experience of the world he knows and loves well. At times he does so memorably, as in these lines from “Wakemanship”:*

*Reality will keep  
blossoming, take leaf,  
no matter how  
we rest or go.*

*And in this passage from the third poem in “White Nights in Mission Hills”:*

*Dry country.  
Surrounded by city, this archaic place resists  
Tomorrow. The owl hunts here. Kit fox and possum  
And skunk clamber through cover up to the lawns.  
Children of moonwalkers watch from the dark door.  
Here they come, shadows emerging from black ice,  
Old fleece, a blur, a soft bristle sliding.  
Hesitant, they gather at the edge of the clipped yard,  
Stand there, alert and ancestral, waiting to speak.*

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*These lines, like a modern poetic Lascaux, have haunted me for twenty-five years.*

*I was delighted to discover in these pages a poem, “In spring flowers, such as those described” I hadn’t read before. It seems to me an extraordinary poem, Gerlach’s writing at its most characteristic and beautiful. From the opening line, which might have been lifted from some field guide to North American wildflowers, the poem moves through a series of associations, from the field guide note to an image of pistils as violin bows, to memories of a childhood in Wisconsin, that “left-handed mitten,” to the historical memory of the Native Americans, Chippewa and Fox and Sac, who dwelled in the poet’s woods, making music, too, before the poet was. Connecting it all—flowers, music, woods, humans—is grass, earth’s complex and beneficent universal:*

*Wherever you go—the grass family, slender  
And tall with hollow, round stems, spikelets, scales.*

*There the triticum ripen, the inner and outer sleeves,  
Feathery stigmas savour the sun and are grain.*

*The poem may remind the reader of Whitman's "A child said What is the grass."*

*But Gerlach's poem takes a closer, not to say more scholarly, look at things than*

*Whitman's, its images are both more exact and arrestingly strange, and Gerlach's soul-surrender, in memory and in meditation as he writes, is more personal and, to my mind, more persuasive because less speculative, than Whitman's:*

*I have gazed into the bristly crowfoot, its hairs  
Spreading like the sun, and forgotten the way back.*

*I have walked these woods, have sucked the grass.  
I have listened to the oaks, the andantes of waterleaf.*

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*Reading these lines—this poem—requires attention, but it is attention the reader gives necessarily and almost unwittingly. Pleasure becomes absorption, and then for a while there is only the poem.*

*This book is just Gerlach's second. His first, *Highwater* (Handsel Books), was published only three years ago. For too many years I was afraid that he was destined to join that group of American poets who remained all but unknown while alive because they were unpublished or published too little—Taylor, Jones Very, Tuckerman, Emily Dickinson, Trumbull Stickney, Weldon Kees, Henri Colette, Dick Barnes, and others. We owe a debt of gratitude to Ohio University Press for making it more possible for Gerlach to win his readers now.*

*Harry Thomas*

