

STARING DOWN THE BARREL

Local writer Pat Newson releases *An Object in Motion*, a book of poetry centered on gun violence

When I first met the writer Pat Newson, he was a bent wild man, part satanic elf and part hobbled saint, and his whole being bled black ink and raw, embryonic desire. Newson and I were part of a local writing collective, the Stonecutters Union in Eugene. We were a ragtag band of miscreants united by a furious urge to turn our chaos into pages of prose. We howled. We drank. And we wrote.

I'd just hit my 40s and Newson was in his early 20s. I immediately identified something precious and endangered in the short stories he wrestled to the page: a true writer's voice, tender and brutal and wise, something that can never be taught but which bubbles up from the primordial gunk of being, a pearl burnished by the jagged edges inside all of us.

Some years have passed since those heady, heartbreaking days, and now Newson has emerged from the belly of the whale with a new poetry collection, *An Object in Motion*, published in a gorgeous edition by Nomadic Press out of Oakland, California. It is a staggering work. It took the wind right out of me, in the best way possible. It zapped me awake.

The collection is anchored in the theme of guns, much in the same way *Moby Dick* is anchored in the theme of whaling: Not didactically or ideologically, but rather as an intellectual and spiritual flashpoint, a flare that lights the way to an investigation into the totality of our American experience. These poems are intimate and vulnerable, by turns warmly nostalgic and violently alarmed, and their confessional nature expands out into moments of tender, terrified reckoning with the cursed soil we all tread.

Listen to this, from the poem "(What We Talk About) When Someone Draws a Gun":

*Staring down it or somebody
isn't that the expression?
Surprise. And then it's back
in your pants, brandished
and tucked away. Every
time I see one, even if
I know it's coming, I
recoil just a bit;
I'm not in
charge, the gun is, and
I'll do what I can to handle
an offer or a threat.*

I mention Melville, pointedly, but echoes of other early American voices come to mind when I read Newson's poems, like the peripatetic gnosticism of Whitman and, even more, the slant truths and mortal reckonings of Emily Dickinson. Not that these poems are all

An Object in Motion



Patrick Newson

woo-woo and fancy flight. They are forever grounded in the real, the meat and bone of lived experience, whether that is the writer's outdoorsy Northwest childhood or his more recent years residing in the battle zone of Oakland's urban core.

The poems in *An Object in Motion* might be called narrative free verse, in the manner of versified storytellers like Charles Bukowski or Denis Johnson. They simultaneously break from poetic tradition while, ironically, goosing it with a needful new vitality. Too often, poetry speaks from the twee heights, but Newson's voice is familiar, demotic, like the voice in your own head, full of reminiscences and misgivings that tangle up in whispers of loss and alarm. And beneath it all pulses the red stuff of love, anemic and longing for the plasma of real human connection.

The truism "guns don't kill people, people kill people" is as stupid as it is true, and Newson's collection puts the lie to our whole sick gun culture — which, after all, is less about bullets than the lust for brutality that breathes itself into every stitch of our national fabric. The work is neither pro-gun nor anti-gun; rather, with Whitmanesque acceptance, he stares our violent, unhinged culture in the face, and reports back unflinchingly, with grace and courage and sadness. In taking his pulse, he takes ours.

It has been said that all art is political, but the best of art sublimates politics to the level of pure spirit, transforming all our ideological babel into something cosmic — a prophetic warning, an implication of collective guilt, a plea against madness. This is the universality of art. But it would be pie-eyed to deny

that *An Object in Motion* does not also speak back directly to our very real national disaster, in a voice that is no less defiant for being exhausted by it all.

As with this, from the final stanza of the collection:

*I have
been a
pale coward but my mouth is open, and though
my thumb is back, I'm not going to
pull the trigger. I'm going to slowly
remove my finger from my throat
invite my neighbors for dinner
and point this weapon at the country.*

Yes, mortality and disaster haunt this collection, but in a 21st-century kind of way — in the form of bloodlettings impending, triggers pulled or not pulled by pistol-packing strangers we don't see coming and the ones we do. It is equal parts dismaying and disarming and shot through everywhere with wounded humanity. ■

Pat Newson celebrates the release of *An Object in Motion* with two upcoming free events: A reading and signing 8 pm Friday, Oct. 19, at the Old Whiteaker Firehouse, 1045 W. First Avenue; and another at 7 pm Wednesday, Oct. 24, at Sundance Wine Cellars, 2441 Hilyard Street. The book is available at Black Sun Books or nomadicpress.org.



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