Nathan Neely

Splurge

Gilbert Allen, *The Final Days of Great American Shopping*. Columbia,

SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2016.

Gilbert Allen's *The Final Days of Great American Shopping* plots the trajectory of about a hundred years' worth of time in the age of domestic pop culture consumerism. The tone of most of the stories, while grounded in reality, veers into the surreal and grotesque: a little girl loses an arm in a car crash, a woman makes statues of fetuses for no reason, people choose to take their own lives and be buried in their luxury cars. Characters often reappear, weaving together narratives across storylines, making the compilation feel more like a novel than a short story collection. As would be expected from the book's running theme, the motivations of each of Allen's characters revolve around a material object. One character is obsessed with a celebrity pheromone-enhanced line of designer shoes. Another risks his life to fly a helicopter he has chosen to keep rather than sell. A stylist rear-ends every Porsche she can find, trying to find a well-to-do mate. Yet Allen's book subverts the tired axioms surrounding materialism by exposing both its iniquity and usefulness. Either way, we're left with characters learning about who they are, what they've lost, and what they think they need.

Allen seems to have started his collection at the onset of mass American consumption in the digital age. Throughout, Allen creates product brand names for technology, fashion, vehicles, housewares, companies—often complete with their own advertising slogans or jingles. At some points, we are inundated by hectic flurries of these commodities. While sometimes distracting, this conveyance of setting creates a visceral resonance. It is not unlike trying to shop for a pair of shoes or new set of stemware while Muzak or pop music is blaring through the tinny ceiling speakers of a boutique or department store. What seems a deterring annoyance at first, however, ends up coming across as an effective writing technique, cleverly employed to transport the reader into the morass of shopping hell.

The final story skips ahead in time to put a cap on the mass consumerism of the twentieth and (speculatively) twenty-first centuries, summing up a century's intersections with human behavior. Characters from previous stories find themselves in a post-apocalyptic society where sterile and florescent shopping malls serve as the only remaining sources of activity and hermetic shelter. Procreation and natural 115

death are things of the past, world governments have disbanded, and religions have amalgamated. All there is to do is shop for novelty and gimmicky items from a world now gone—DVD's, kayaks, designer vehicles—until you decide to put yourself to rest in your luxury car outside in the oxygen-free parking lots of these shopping centers.

Allen's leap in time is an interesting choice, as we're currently being beaten over the head by forced nostalgia. Marketing has aggressively picked up on society's love for the retro and saturated all manner of products, both practical and superfluous. Fashion, movies, music, sports team jerseys, and even food packaging are peddled as "reboots" or "throwback editions." Whether by trend or by function, this collective consumer mindset has descended upon us, and it is certain that these ploys do nothing more than keep us engrossed in the muddle of supply and demand, life imitating manufacturing. Allen shows us where the obsession of materialism will lead.

By the collection's close all the characters obtain whatever material possession they wanted; "wanted" is the operative word here. What's important to understand while reading these stories is that no one was truly in need of anything. There is nothing at stake for any of the characters—e.g. the professional coupon-redeemer without actual financial need to cut coupons, the wealthy war veteran choosing to live like a hobo, people choosing to die smiling in their leather coupe sarcophagi.

The Final Days of Great American Shopping demonstrates that it doesn't really matter whether or not possessions and wealth beget happiness. Allen creates a future where consumers have degenerated to a point where they drown the difficulties and realities of their daily insular lives in the obsession and procurement of inanimate objects. This behavior is sometimes a boon and sometimes futile. Life still happens. We readers are left to look at where we are right now in time. Are we already too numb, too overexposed to this type of living? Has our behavior become more than a trend? What does it mean to truly live? We're left with the suspicion that someday, if we fail to stave off our desire to fill our lives with meaningless pap, our current lifestyle may mutate into something worse.

Elizabeth Savage

“the elegance of our mistakes”

Robert M. Wallace, *Hawk on a Power Line*, Hammond, LA: Louisiana

Literature Press, 2015.

The poems in Robert M. Wallace’s *Hawk on a Power Line* consider the real possibility that everything humans know about the natural world is made up and that everything humans know about raptors proves it. “And to the Fowl of the Air,” the opening poem, begins as a traditional meditation on the unsuitability of signifier to signified, the facile sound “hawk” failing to represent the “thunder,” “pain,” “indifference,” “power,” and “praise” competing for notice in its flight. By the poem’s conclusion, however, the matter of word-to-thing accuracy collapses into a statement about the inevitability of projection:

Or even something so simple,

So honest like *eye*

With its rising vowel

Which in my heart now means

The hazel iris of curved wings.

At once riddle and revelation, the last line removes the distinction between the speaker’s fantasy of renaming the animal he observes and the human eye/I asserting dominion over language. The final couplet’s softly rhyming “means”/”wings” suggests the hawk’s beauty isn’t in the eye of the beholder: it is the beholder.

A similar dissolution of object and gazer happens in “Starlings,” in which the speaker meditates on “actions not involving reason,/The need to group together, strength in numbers” despite the mass obliviousness to danger created by the birds’ dog-proximate assembly in a meadow. The aphorism about strength in numbers converts the instinctive (or habitual) drive for company into a politically useful human ideal, but the poem reveals this notion to be faulty, a collision of human justification and natural mystery. At the poem’s close, speaker and bird are again conflated:

And when I stand, observing this, my life

Seems as connected to the meadow as that bird’s,

As if my sole desire is landing here,

Hiding among the flock.

Rather than revealing the natural object to be an extension of human vision, “Starlings” lands in a moment of nearly full presence as the speaker’s memory tips over the “As if” and is transformed by what he watches. That elimination of distance necessary for sight and self-containment both undermines the authority of human perception and alters identity.

Swerves into strangeness like this one occur throughout Wallace's plain-style poetry with effective subtlety. Often, poems beginning in the familiar territory of animals and natural settings enter philosophically foreign ground. "Great Snowy Owl," for example, is not about the owl but delivers another scene of reverse personification:

My long-tailed Ford truck flies

Across the ice, winging toward a tree.

Is this what deer mice fear:

The quick pluck and the sharp talons

Embedded inside cold brown fur—

Rising now, not knowing where?

The loss of control leads to a moment of involuntary empathy in which skidding truck becomes owl and driver prey, a wonderfully bizarre gathering of machine and natural elements through which the categories machine, human, and animal slip from their borders. In "The Peregrine Falcon," a similar confusion of roles and identities occurs in a zoo, implicating the institution in the poem's strategic uncertainty. The speaker watches "an injured falcon/Eating a rat some worker killed" and notes it has been "knifed/From throat to tail," like a sacrifice laid on an altar. Through this perspective of "some worker" as servant and supplicant, human-animal relations are again rearranged, and the zoo becomes "misplaced" in a deepening interior of unequal power structures, "Swallowed by courtly mansion after mansion,/Where servants change the sheets on every bed." Imagining the bird freed, restored to its proper domain and healed, the speaker envisions the hunting falcon as a gun,

. . . wings pulled back like a trigger

And the diving falcon shot into a roll

And squawks that rifle through the August heat

And the whap sound, an explosion of duck feathers,

Reveal pointed wings in me and a notched beak.

As falcon becomes gun, human becomes falcon in a fairly shocking, violent image that refuses the expected restoration of "misplaced" zoo and wounded animal king to their rightful positions in the manmade animal kingdom. Instead, the poem shows the speaker to be enthralled by self-serving concepts of nature and animal. We are trapped by our own metaphors, the poem demonstrates, in cages barred with illusions of our own importance.

Wallace's fascinating indictments, however, are tempered by the graceful, equally unpredictable affirmations in other poems. This book's unexpected confrontations also find grace in human errors, in our infinite variations of getting it wrong. One of my favorite poems, "Greek Revival Pavilion," about the remains and history of the Blue Sulphur Springs Resort, is a tribute to the benefits of misperception:

I wonder at the beauty of our beliefs,

Especially the elegance of our mistakes;

The lasting impact of wrongheaded ideas;

The abiding pleasure of some faulty premise.

If this is all that's left of my mistakes,

I want to be as misguided as that surgeon . . .

Far from a brutal collection, *Hawk on a Power Line* persuades us to be "gladly . . . wrong about everything." Instead of struggling to conceal our failures or wallowing in the shame of their exposure, Wallace's poems encourage us to accept them as inevitable and worthwhile—and forgivable, at least sometimes, because they often accompany our efforts to help and to understand.

Erin Hippolyte

Where the Spirit Hovers

William Woolfitt, *Charles of the Desert: A Life in Verse*. Brewster,

MA: Paraclete Press, 2016.

William Woolfitt's 2016 collection of biographical poems is suspended by a series of hands in a place that is hard to see. In the preface, Woolfitt tells of a bus journey from Fairmont, West Virginia, to Bandera, Texas, in the summer of 1997. On that journey, he read Brennan Manning's biography of Charles de Foucauld, desert hermit and missionary, born in 1858 in Strasbourg, France. Woolfitt remembers the reading experience as a spiritual opening toward service and compassion. He writes, "That was the summer the light started to get in."

The collection opens when Charles de Foucauld is a young boy raised by his grandfather, continuing through his schooling and carnal rebellion at Jesuit and military schools, but the majority of the work is dedicated to his experience on the long road to martyrdom through missions to Syria, Jerusalem, and, finally, the Sahara Desert of the Tuareg and Haratin, mainly in Algeria.

Charles of the Desert lives with nothing but faith and meditation among people with whom he does not share a common culture, spirituality, or language. He frees slaves by buying them, when he can, with money sent from Europe. Woolfitt channels de Foucauld's voice to testify to the mystical draw of what is not yet formed, that which cannot be seen. In "Meditation on the Hands of an Ex-Slave," he writes:

He clenches them

like tree buds—never open,

always spring.

The space inside them,

so near his heart,

must be holy—formless, empty,

dark as the face of the deep

waters, where the spirit hovers

before it calls out the light.

The spirit and the potential illumination passes from the imagined hands of the ex-slave, inspired by Charles' writings, to the biographical mediations of Woolfitt. Even so, the enterprise hovers, remains formless and empty as a blank canvas. The reader feels called to hold the book in a state of permanent possibility. The idea of the unfinished project, the gesture of hands, is both the potential and the disorientation of what we are reading. As Charles, we are in the desert with no compass. In the day, the surroundings physically challenge the unprotected body. At night, we don't know how to read the stars. During the fleeting moments at dawn, when Charles rises to pray and meditate, the mission comes closest to a feeling of fulfillment.

Language is the medium that communicates this experience, but it is also guaranteed to fail, with hands taking over as the composition of gesture. Woolfitt writes, “Language cloisters me./I am a novice of desert tongues. We must draw/figures in the sand, or gesture. Our hands become/strange birds, pulling new shapes from the air.”

Later, the Tuareg women are amused by his writing project, as they gather in a goat skin tent. Woolfitt imagines Charles’ life as a poem that will be transmitted orally, passed along by the women whose hands sewed the tent:

. . . They laugh

as I scribble. Why write? We remember.

We always have. I give the grandmothers

safety pins, milk powder, the only food

I can provide. How will I tell them

Bread of Life, Pearl of Great Price?

Let my life be a poem, repeated

among them through space and time.

In these poems, the mission of Charles’ dedication is served in a way that is both insufficient and everlasting. In an extension of this dynamic, Woolfitt transmits the observations he imagines Charles making about the Tuareg men’s nomadic lifestyle. Several poems recount how he only sees the men from behind, as they are riding away. Charles stays back with the women, accepting their invitation to squat beside them in the sand as they show him how to produce food and shelter out of nature’s sparse materials. There is the persistence of that which cannot be mastered or fully known.

The collection concludes with a poem that sharply reverses this dynamic of riding away and paints a devastating finality that leads to Charles’ martyrdom. In 1916, the Senussi uprising leads to his murder at the hands of Tuareg and Haratin raiders. The final poem leads us to 121

believe that he sees their faces:

and I fling open my door

it isn’t the man who brings my mail

but men with guns my neighbors Haratin

and Tuareg joined in a fellagha rezzou

they wrench and tie my arms slam me against

the wall ransack my little fort unbind

and fling

my Tuareg dictionary

my sheaves of Tuareg poetry.

His project to decode and transcribe the language and poems of his neighbors is undone with the violence of invasion. Have they taken special retribution on his faith in the written word and on the spiritual audacity of his professed kinship with them? Or is he a casualty of circumstance? In the end, none of his learning can save him on this earth. Woolfitt writes, in the final lines:

I feel the breath and the burn

as my lips form the word I choose

and my pages scatter in the wind

The words scatter on the page in this concluding poem, not even a period brings closure to the last line. The pages scatter to be found by someone else, somewhere in the world, just as Woolfitt began reading of Charles of the Desert, doubting himself and his direction, on his way to be a witness to his faith at a Christian summer camp in Texas. Hands clasped in prayer hold something we cannot see, and gestures and stories passed on fill the space of the silence of writing. The reader, as the spirit, continues to hover in the beginning of light.

Kathleen Cox

Moving in Circles

Elaine Fowler Palencia, *Going Places*. FutureCycle Press.

Elaine Fowler Palencia's chapbook *Going Places* is a counterpoint to the literary admonishment that you can't go home again. Her poems suggest that, whenever we go elsewhere, we are actually moving toward the time and place where our lives started and developed, as if life entails an implicit promise that if we go places, what we will find at the end is home. Not only can we go home again, home is really the only place we will eventually arrive.

The grandfather in the title poem returns from a trip he took at eighteen with the knowledge that hard work is the answer to getting what he wants:

He was now a man who had seen the world.

But if he really applied himself

to clearing the pastures, timbering

milking, haying, and raising corn

he would never have to leave home again.

What he wants is the means to build a home for himself and his family; Grandpa chooses to return and stay home, but in "Home for the Night," death inevitably follows home in a journey of human mortality:

Ahead, on our street

night had fallen

Caught in the radiant present

my back warm with last light

I saw before me

deep in shadow, my home

already cloaked in the past.

and understood for the first time:

I and

everyone I love

will die.

There is no escape

and nothing to do

but keep running toward the dark.

These two poems reversed my perspective that seeing the world is a good and desirable thing; however, in “Going Places” Palencia follows the ideal of being worldly with the telling word “but”: Grandpa hopes if he works hard he won’t have to see any more of the world. And, unlike Dylan Thomas’ “Do not go gentle into that good night,” “Home for the Night” encourages us to run toward death rather than resist or rage. If life is a journey toward death, we should engage and commit to making the trip, by running a good race, by going places.

When home is the destination of all journeys, time and space no longer obstruct connections with family or childhood places. Through memories, stories, and family histories, Palencia’s poems move through the past to talk with the dead or to walk through places far away. The poem “Home Visits” transcends the limitation of time and space as it follows the spirit of the speaker as she visits her childhood home:

I’m there at all hours

more and more often

as I get older

unbeknownst

to the current owners

who have never heard of me.

Even death cannot block the paths carved out by Palencia as demonstrated in “An Only Child Tours the Library in Whitesburg, Kentucky,” in which a dead baby brother reaches out to his sister across the years from his birth record, “His tiny hand waving at me through lines of print.”

Despite expectations of its title, *Going Places* charts the sights and landmarks anchoring the speaker to her family, her history, and her geography. The erotic imagery and humor of “Scandalous” illustrates how a traveler from Appalachia carries with her the place that made her while traveling through the flat landscape of Illinois. At the same time, the mental presence of home creates a physical desire to go back: “I’m not used to this abandon./I’m from Kentucky where the hills/know how to keep their knees together,” and later: I can see eternity from here./It is empty./I want to go home.

In the opening poem, “The Big Woods,” Palencia makes use of the second person point of view to describe a stop at a flea market:

A flea market stands

along the old road

edging the woods

you played in as a child.

The choice of “you” and the setting perfectly open the chapbook. In these poems, I found bits and pieces of forgotten or discarded memories of my own family and my own home. Palencia helped me find these lost treasures and give them value and a place in my life again.

Palencia's restores to the expression "moving in circles" one of its oldest, most sacred meanings. Instead of futile efforts that go nowhere, the circles in her poems are expansive and are drawn through all the many places she takes the reader. These journeys are not bound by roads that go from here to there or journeys that begin now and end later. The circle completes but never ends. It is always connected to and connects the past and the future, the near and the far, home and away.