

# CROW REVIEWS

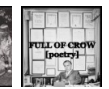
Discussion, Essays, And Analysis

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## “White Vases” by John Swain

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“White Vases”, John Swain. Discussed by Elynn Alexander for Full Of Crow Press.

Poets navigate with labels. It is just a part of the deal as people try to make sense of their associations and perhaps figure out their own sub-sects. What we find, however, is that poets surprise us and like all artists, poets evolve. We have to challenge ourselves to suspend the need to define one another because when we do, we stay open to a fuller catalog.



To put Swain’s work into a box (nature) is to minimize what he is doing, what poets do, and doesn’t speak to the question of WHY he brings up nature or birds or anything else. It ignores the scope of what he accomplishes, and constitutes a cherry picking of themes that is a common practice with poetry and poetic criticism, this pursuit of labels and categorization. It keeps the reader in periphery, and ultimately leads them away from “White Vases”.

As a reader of John’s work for years now, I would like to encourage people that read his work to resist the temptation to typecast him and to force associations. I hope that I can at least make the case for the rewards of digging deeper, as there are few poets on my radar that bring me to the point of study the way he does. The beauty of his writing makes me want to sit with his poems; their resonance makes me want to understand why they touch me.

Their brevity fools me into thinking that they are simple and then I embark on an experience that becomes more layered with each read and with each book I find myself taking what he is willing to

share and adding it to the experience of him, and when you have that relationship with a poet's work it is an appreciation that is difficult to convey.

I may lack the words to convince you, but I won't stop trying.

*Nature*: Yes, there is that. He brings a keen eye to the world that he observes and there is no question that he does so with diligence, honoring her disposition and indeed, her subtlety:



But as Swain pans out from man to his surroundings, he brings the reader back to man in context. Man is not aloof; man is grounded, but bears a distinction that is of his own making, separate in solipsism. As poets like Jeffers (in particular, *The Double Axe*) sought to reject anthropocentrism, here Swain positions man instead as reaching in humility toward a greater awe that becomes both the basis of the passion instinct, and the alienation that comes from that inability to reconcile the stature of man in the foreground he asserts against such an overwhelming scope.

The sea, therefore, "recedes from white vases". ("White Vases") "I whittle hidden symbols" ("The Shutters") "I fell into the sea / like your wild throne" ("The Color Of Air") The sea is what is elusive, where man is lost, whose power reminds, whose retreat is inevitable unless you join her.

Man is both present, bewildered, and astride. ("Neither Eating") Claws, talons, the tools of acute otherness and love- 'the world like a claw/was too red' ("Blackberries Ripen") 'entangled in talon like a lover'. ("After The Path")

Swain refers to the path, the sun, and the sea in cycles of returning and subsequent loss, but renders loss without pessimism, but rather as inevitably cyclical, water as defiant of containment. Love is a transcendent ideal not necessarily rooted in immediate circumstances. And yet, love can be a burden that tethers man to forced grounding, or else beset by passions parallel, a force to reckon with biology.

*'Impossible day/ we placed ancestor skulls/ in a limestone cave.'*

*'Red silk and perfume/ covered the tomb,/ I knelt into/ our locked arms'*

("Arise")

Release and captivity, ambivalence, the weight of this is commanding and painful. We are driven to connection as we are simultaneously driven to seek connection with that which lies remote, so removed from our purview, the stirrings of each; broad and then narrow.

*“Thorn”*

*I trace*

*Of fed*

*Sewn*

*Down*



*Smoke from your mouth*

*Wrote a psalm*

*As I plea for release*

*And endless captivity*

*In this room*

*Where you bare yourself*

*Holy in darkness,*

*We knotted like thorn*

*Forehead to forehead*

*Over our bent arms.*

The communing of instinct comes together most in “Astrolabe,” the title referring to an inclinometer, and here he directly refers to slope, ascension, and in choosing this instrument as metaphor, it seems that he is directly acknowledging his pattern of moving in to the individual and then moving out, this changing context of man from the immediate and more tangible world and human inclinations to insignificance, broad scope; the astrolabe a gage of levels.

*'The act below/ a birth above, / I wailed for / the sun and moon / without children / in the fountain'*

And again, dual and competing allegiance: *'like a man torn / between worships'*

The lion crawls upon the hydra, assumed to refer to the multi-headed water serpent although in my first read, I admit that I took it to mean the constellation. But why? The lion seems suggestive of the cruelty he refers to directly 'you were cruel/ taking our findings to the church' and reminds us of the talon, but the hydra is suggestive of composite; multiplicity. This is an exception to Swain's often detached treatment of vulnerability. This is a common finding when we have all but written off sentiment. We often come to layers that reveal that the "acceptance" that we originally perceive is anything but: there is no neutrality here. Swain's poems are, at their core, brutal, tragic; anything but

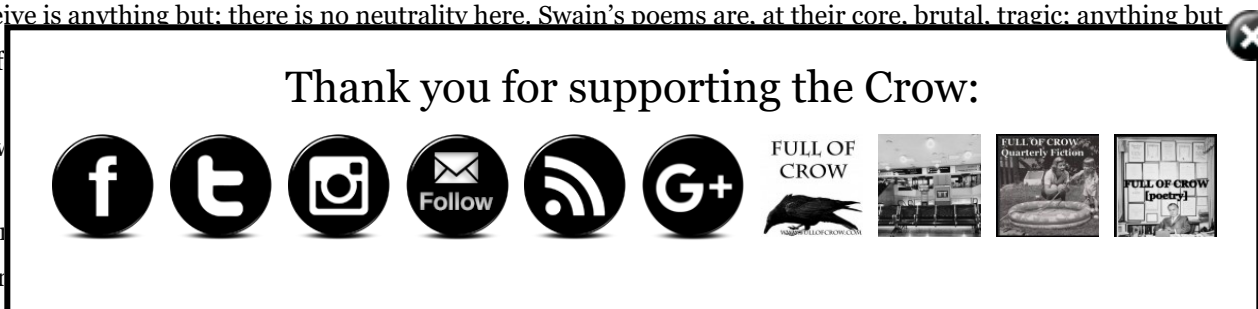
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The last poem that I want to mention is "Synchrony Lens" where parallel, multiplicity, circumstance vs. sublimation- all conspires, and the speaker connects:

Synchrony Lens

*Nightfall uncalm and hiding*

*I took comfort in splinters*

*And the bricks of a chimney,*

*The summer bed grew into moons*

*Below the honeysuckle.*

*Pinned like red silhouettes,*

*You were invisible as me,*

*Fireflies lanterned the road*

*Beside the traveling stream*

*I jumped from a high rock*

*And the water let me become you,*

*Then I saw your daughter*

Singi

With

There

navigating not an ocean but a stream, lit by memories, rain perhaps- or acknowledgement that much about the course is not our own.



John's work is vivid and dense, at times imagist and ideogrammic (arguments welcome) and he is consistently compelling. "White Vases" is a strong, cohesive collection. It features cover art by Steven Smith, distributed by Crisis Chronicles Press in Elyria, Ohio.

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The Non-Herein, Michael McAloran

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Metamorphic Winters: A review of Confessions by Marcus Reichert

On Crow Reviews- Interview By Karen Lillis

“White Vases” by John Swain

“Dinosaur Ditch” by Tim Murray

Watch The Doors As They Close, Karen Lillis

Elevators: Rena Rosenwasser

“Handing The Cask”, by John Swain

“Seriously Dangerous”, Helen Losse

“All Her Father’s Guns”, James Warner

Sunshine In The Valley, by Kyle Muntz

Somewhere Over The Pachyderm Rainbow

SF Poet Steps Up: Jazzbo Wind

Apostle Rising, by Richard Godwin

This Reality Of Man, by Michael Aaron Casares

Twenty Stories, Kristin Fouquet

“Forked Tongue”, by Craig Sernotti

On “Epigonesia”, by Kane Faucher and Tom Bradley

“Watching The Windows Sleep”, Tantra Bensko

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Noise Difficulty Flower, by J.D. Nelson

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