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## About Me



### Ben

Benjamin Myers is the author of two books of poetry: *Lapse Americana* (New York Quarterly

Books, 2013) and *Elegy for Trains* (Village Books Press 2010), for which he won the 2011 Oklahoma Book Award for Poetry. His poems may be read in numerous literary journals, including *The Yale Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *32 Poems*, *Nimrod*, *The Iron Horse Literary Review*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Christianity and Literature*, *DMQ Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Devil's Lake*, and *Measure*. He also reviews poetry for several publications, including *World Literature Today*. He holds a Ph.D. from Washington University in St. Louis and is Crouch-Mathis Associate Professor of Literature at Oklahoma Baptist University.

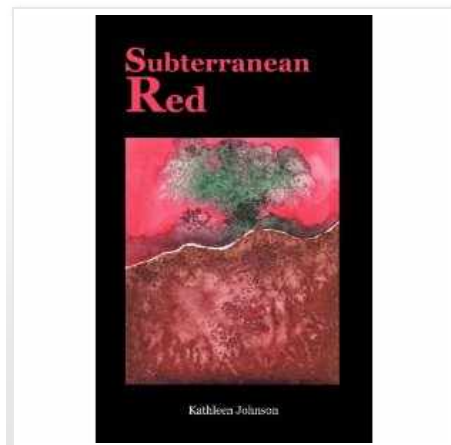
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Friday, December 28, 2012

## Spots of Time: A Review of Kathleen Johnson's Subterranean Red

Kathleen Johnson, *SubterraneanRed* (Mongrel Empire Press, 2012)

Kathleen Johnson's *Subterranean Red* treats of memory in the form of murmur and of snapshot. Like a character in a gothic novel held captive by a ghostly lover, the poet is haunted by a past she would rather escape and yet, despite herself, courts in her imagination. This past is often evoked visibly in the series of family photos that accompany the text, a technique reminiscent of Jeanetta Calhoun Mish's very successful *Work is Love Made Visible*. Rather than bringing back the past, however, these pictures and the poems which they accompany serve to remind the reader that what time has broken can never again be made whole, that memory is always a matter of arranging and rearranging the fragments. Remembering is imagining.

The theme of the past's constant murmuring in the consciousness of the poet is established in the collection's first poem, "The Apothecary of Minerva Best." As throughout the book, memory presents itself as both desirable and painful:

I'm left with an ache as faint

and elusive as the sound in

a conch put to my ear.

The ebb and flow now

no more than a murmur

or a memory.

The image of the conch summarizes well the way in which memory is sought as a pleasure yet remains elusive and painful. Johnson adds to this theme by the use of internal and occasional rhymes throughout the book. The faint rhyming becomes a form of echo, of murmur. Take for example these lines from "Three Generations of Cherokee Women: A Portrait," in which she describes her great-grandmother:

She's seen them come and seen them

go. The stories she could tell

I'll never know. But her hands look like

they've wrung a thousand chicken necks.

There is enough ghost of the iamb in these lines to accent the rhyme of *go* and *know*, but the line breaks skillfully work to half bury the rhyme. This effect is even more powerful in the beautifully evocative "Wild Sand Plums":

Roadside sunflowers face the sun,

sway in the wind.

Near the cornfield, I bend

to pick up a mottled feather.

The rhyme is of course both aural (*wind* and *bend*) and visual, the figure in the poem bending in rhyme with the top-heavy sunflowers. Enacting the way imagination constructs the past, the poem builds itself from echoes and murmurs. Johnson's poems are this carefully constructed throughout *Subterranean Red*.

Many of the poems in this volume are written in the psychologically frank fashion we have for over half a century now referred to as "confessional," but these poems nevertheless recognize, as does the best work of Robert Lowell, the role of imagination in framing and shaping memory. The accompanying photos rather than representing proof of a definitive past are offered rather as self-conscious constructions of family history. At times, the photos, like the poems, represent an effort to remake that history, as in "Granddad Scott":

On my wall I keep a picture

so I won't remember him just as a cruel man:  
in a white dress and turned-up cap,  
he is a blue-eyed baby  
grinning  
on his daddy's lap.


At other times they are emblems of something more like negative versions of Wordsworth's "spots of time," as in "Father's Day":

And I realize that the line from my dream  
has something to do with  
this picture, that even in sleep I cannot  
rest, but must forever watch  
him falling off that fence,  
falling to pieces.

In both versions, be it dream or wakeful and willed effort, the photo represents the activity of the poet's imagination. The pictures, like the poems, don't capture the past: they shape it. As Johnson says in "Following the Red Hills Home," "the imagined is as real as the rest of it." It is Johnson's sharp imagination, along with her artistic presentation and self-consciousness, that keeps the poems about, for instance, her father's philandering from descending into the sort of cheap latter-day confessional poetry that relies on shock and attitude rather than on craft and rumination.

In "Raven Mocker" Johnson gives us the raven as an image of, among other things, poetic inspiration, something beautiful but also dark and dangerous. Such a bird is a fitting mascot for these poems, alive to the point of tense contact with death itself, earthly scavengers yet transcendent in flight. *Subterranean Red* is a poignant, powerful book of poems that will be reread for many years to come.

Posted by Ben at 10:38 AM

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