

Welcome Additions

Karen Kelsay. *Of Omens that Flitter*. Boston: Big Table Publishing, 2018. 88 pp. Paper: \$14.00. ISBN: 9781945917264.

Javen Tanner. *The God Mask*. Kelsay Books, 2018. 96 pp. Paper: \$17.00. ISBN: 9781947465558.

Reviewed by Edward Whitley

Karen Kelsay's *Of Omens that Flitter* delivers on the promise that lyric poetry has made since at least the nineteenth century to let readers overhear the musings of a thoughtful, deep-feeling person as she reflects on her life experiences. Kelsay is a particularly gifted formal poet—the third-stanza turn and rhyming final couplet of the sonnet are some of the sharpest tools in her kit—and her free-verse offerings further highlight her ability to employ a range of techniques to shape and contour the experiences she records. Two related poems on the topic of her father's aging and death, one more formally structured than the other, illustrate this tendency. The sonnet "Hard Hat Diver" is about her 85-year-old father's reluctance to give away the by-now-antique diving helmet that he had used in his youth to explore the ocean's depths.

He keeps his diving helmet in a shed.
The memories that it buoys up, aren't dead—
that heavy hat of bolts protects his pride.
He seldom ever has to look inside

the wooden crate beneath the old work bench,
where all his man-things: chisel, hammer, wrench,
as if in dry dock, wait to be reused.
His wife told him to toss it, he refused.

Eight lines of tight couplets paint a portrait of a very specific era of American masculinity that Kelsay's father is made to embody, while at the sonnet's turn in the ninth line, Kelsay gives us what we could presume to be a woman's voice—either her own or her mother's—yelling in italics, "*You're eighty five, you'll never need that thing!*" Unbowed, he keeps the helmet. Kelsay closes out the poem with another couplet whose precise rhyme and meter belie that uncertainty is the new normal for her soon-to-be dying father: "The chance is slim, but yet he still regards / an abalone dive as in the cards."

Kelsay knows exactly what she's doing with such formal turns. So when she shifts to free verse in a poem about her father's death in a hospital bed ("Freedive"), the imagery of deep-sea diving plays out with less irony and more melancholy. "In the hospital, he floated on a foam mattress / while an eternity of wavy lines rolled across the monitor," she writes.

He angled through his options.
He said he wanted to go home.
He said he wanted to go fast.

Then he removed his oxygen mask
and began a freedive.

When Kelsay abandons the formal constraints that she holds herself to elsewhere in the book, the contrast is often, as in the differences between "Hard Hat Diver" and "Freedive," stunning. Laying aside the effects of surprise and delight that rhyming couplets can offer at the end of a poem—effects that Kelsay consistently uses to her advantage—allows her to let an emotion land with real force.

Javen Tanner's *The God Mask* opens with "Genesis," a poem that brings together Tanner's thoughtful meditations on faith with his knowledge of the Bible (Shakespeare and the Greeks feature prominently in the collection as well), his playful approach to storytelling, and his articulate sense of loss. "In the beginning there was a dark pool," Tanner

writes. “And God said, ‘Let us take a swim in the beginning.’” Tanner’s embodied God “flipped his wet bangs out of his face” before declaring “it was good.” From there, Tanner’s creation story takes a series of left turns that follow the cadence of the biblical account but offer none of the familiar content.

God saw that it was good. And in the light he mused.
And the greater light he called heartbeat, and the lesser,
blackbird. And the heartbeat raced, and the blackbird bruised

its wings until the inner torso let it go.
And God called the torso earth. And the earth began
to turn. (This was about six thousand years ago.)

Cheeky nods to creationist theology aside, Tanner is much more concerned with the power of faith to comfort weary hearts than he is to parse the wheat of doctrine from the tares of either culture or myth. As such, “Genesis” ends on a note that Tanner returns to throughout *The God Mask*—the persistent sense of loss that accompanies every aspect of the human experience, including joyful swims in dark pools.

Then God sat on the shore and considered the cost
of all that had been lost. And he wept. This is how
it was in the beginning: everything was lost.

Such melancholic reflections on loss appear throughout *The God Mask* but are often twined with moments of play. “Economy Domini” combines the myth of Charon the ferryman on the river Styx with the story from Matthew 17 of Christ finding a coin in the mouth of a fish. “To hell with Caesar,” says Jesus as he hands the coin to a man on his way to the underworld. “Forget the fishers of men. You’ll need this if you’re crossing with the boatman.”

More somber moments appear in poems such as “Blessing My Father in the Emergency Room,” which describes the contemporary Latter-day Saint experience of trying to channel the power of godliness in the face of fear and confusion. “I’m never sure / where my desire ends / and the

will of God begins,” Tanner writes. “The prayer is short and quiet; / I do not dare command the winds / to crack.” Following the blessing,

We embrace and wonder
if God has heard. Through the thin veil
of the bedside curtain,

a man weeps,
a soft voice says,
“This is going to hurt.”

Rather than the voice of God being heard in the words of a priesthood holder, it is an ailing patient in the adjoining bed whose voice emerges “through the veil.” His message echoes that of the God of Tanner’s “Genesis”: “This is going to hurt.”

Both Tanner and Kelsay understand that not only are feelings of loss and suffering central to the human experience, but that we have the obligation to process those feelings through creative use of language. *The God Mask* and *Of Omens that Flitter* are welcome additions to the archives of literature that strive to do precisely that.