

A SORT OF ADAM INFANT DROPPED: TRUE MYTHS

by R. Scott Yarbrough

(Ink Brush Press, 2013. 98 pages. \$15.00. ISBN 978-0-9883839-5-1)

A review by Jerry Bradley

In Old English texts, before the protagonist gets down to business, he declares his origins and lineage. So, too, Scott Yarbrough's new book wants to tell us something of who he was and who he has since become. With the past as prologue, the book's title appears in the first poem, "This Little Piggy," where, in diapers and confined to the car with his older brothers while his mother buys groceries, he is dropped on his head to retrieve a dollar outside the car: "a sort of Adam infant dropped / on asphalt left to noun my new terrain. / This little pig knew then, I was all on my own" (22-24).

Yarbrough, the son of a Methodist minister father and a mother of Chickasaw descent, is a writer and musician who teaches at Collin College in Plano, Texas, and his life from dropped infant to Piper award-winning professor suggests the confluence of many streams. His was a childhood full of remembered pleasures—found money, homemade ketchup—and quotidian horrors. In time its simplicities gave way to the entanglements of adulthood—infidelities, alcoholism, and suicide—and its anxieties transformed into various incarnations of domestic unhappiness. The immaturity of youth evolved into the immaturity of middle age:

After I turned thirty, it was
as if I were intoxicated, cursed
with some horrible secret, standing
alone in a crowd of sober people. ("Halloween: for the Sake
of Tradition" 18-22)

But the protagonist's burden is to remember—as if the past

might enable him to make some sense of himself: “Strange how one random story can swirl back school desks / and black rimmed glasses and hollow pumpkin heads and disguises” (“Vein-Faced Doll with Eyes” 6-7). Memory not only makes the past accessible but immediately so. At times it also makes one’s past seem even mythic, and Yarbrough casts his experiences in light of those mythic characters he has studied and taught: Tiresias, Gilgamesh, Adam, Oedipus, Niobe, Medusa, Charon, Pandora, Persephone. The troubled child becomes the troubled parent who worries in turn about his own five-year-old daughter’s sleepwalking (“The Restless”). The cycle becomes age-old, eternal. He cannot know her secrets, but he can imagine them and remember his own. His joys may seem fleeting and his misery perpetual, but his experiences are common to past and future generations and to those mythological characters whose own remote struggles nevertheless give his life dimension.

Many of the recollections in Yarbrough’s solid collection are painful, but he knows there would be pain in forgetting, too. In either case it’s not as though one has a choice: “that’s not how it works. For some / reason, God gave us too much memory” (“Your Analyst’s Speech He’ll Never Give” 18-19).

For Yarbrough, memory seems both a blessing and a curse, and the issue at stake in many of these poems is whether memory, like cancer, is likely to consume its host. This conflict is manifested in the volume’s penultimate poem, “He Once Asked Why I Teach Mythology,” where he plays golf with a cancer-ridden friend. While he resents the intrusive reminders of his friend’s suffering and his own mortality, he is nonetheless comforted by the knowledge that he is a part of humanity. It is memory that enables him to endure the awareness of his predicament. No matter how private his pain or limited his joy, he knows that his is a common lot. He recalls life’s comforts and humiliations and concludes it is best not to try to out-wit the gods:

Religion and myth
are as certain as cancer. We will all wake some morning

dead, to our Gorgon mother with writhing head
and slotted green-ice eyes. To stone will we
return. We will all calmly be rowed certain
in that ancient wooden boat, honed smooth,
polished only by human handling evanescent from body to soul
as Charon's fingers' bones click our teeth to take
the silver coin from beneath our babbling tongues. (38-46)