

Powell's poems create a ravishing and ravished landscape, and the ravished beings that inhabit it. Like Petrarch and Shakespeare, his masters in the art of erotic lyric, Powell's metaphysics of love concern poetry itself as much as beloved persons, and his *ars amatoria* embraces an *ars poetica*. From the first, short poem, "Almonds in Bloom," he plunges us into a world of Stevensian plenitude and Shakespearean echoes ("Sonnet 29" rings in Powell's line, "Yes, she really

recondite words, and happily strews his verses with words like "knopped," "duodenal," and "axillary." And, like Ashbery, Powell sometimes swashbuckles in literariness, reversing syntactic order in costume-party archaisms: "then curious / seemed the stars" ("Bidwell Park," 5-6).

All this gorgeousness would be in danger of collapsing into mere style, a foppish Mannerism, if it weren't for the emotional

USELESS LANDSCAPE, OR A GUIDE FOR BOYS, D. A. POWELL

REVIEW BY ROSANNA WARREN

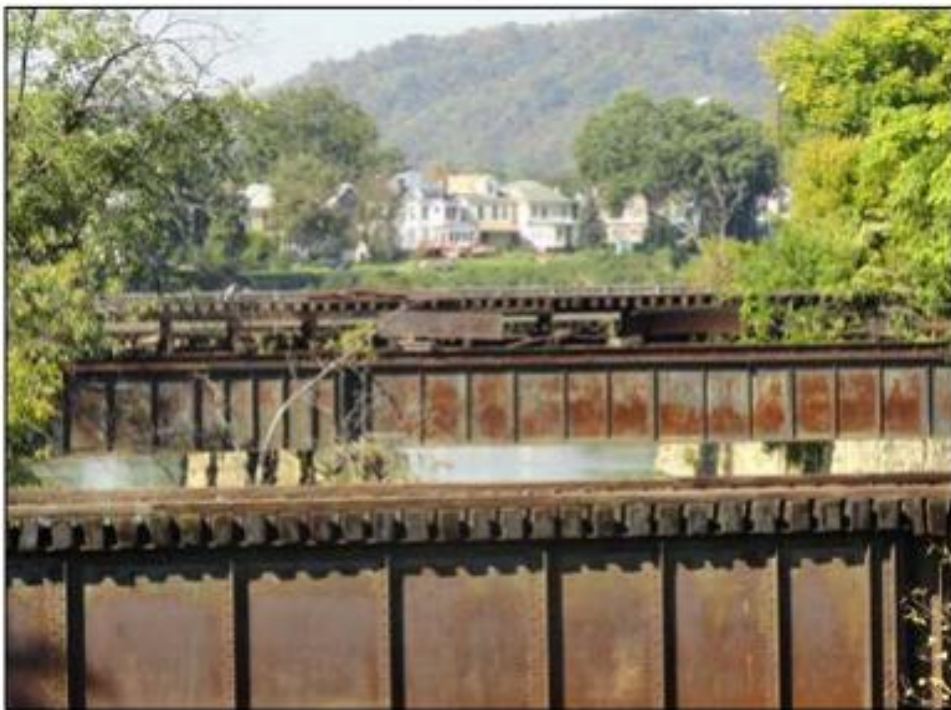
troubles heaven with her deaf singing" [line 12]). At the same time, a tough contemporary realism intrudes, warning us that the book we've opened may hurt: "Just when we think we've been punished enough..." (8).

Like John Ashbery, another child of Wallace Stevens, Powell opens his poems to the deep thrum of poetic tradition and plays against it in savvy dissonances. Pentameters often hold the bass line from which other cadences stray, as in "Tender Mercies," where we find "the smack the rain plants as it smudges past" (8), or "it almost welcomed its own ravishment" (41). This is sensuous writing, licking its lips over assonances, alliteration, rhymes, and near-rhyme, and winking at its own indulgences; in "One Thousand and One Nights," "All fields catch fire. / That's not so dire" (12-13). And, "That's the gamut, dammit" (21). Powell also loves

and ethical drama driving these poems. For one thing, he observes the world around him, and his seeing is convincing as well as playful, as in "Ode to Joy," when he describes the procession of headlights of passing cars as "a thread of yellow ore" (4), and then describes himself describing them: "They are the lights of *of*" (3). More fundamentally, this is a book of love elegies in a large sense; the speaker in many of the poems, and the characters he portrays, seem wounded and ill. It is a specifically erotic damage, linked to the trashed landscapes of cheap motels, vacant lots, and garbage. Sex in these poems veers between trauma and longing, and the trauma starts early, in the third poem, "Cherry Blossoms in Spring," with the stark announcement, "I wasn't the first / kid you raped" (10-11). Later poems do not spare the reader glimpses of a bleeding anus, splashes of cum, and threats of AIDS in "Platelet Count Descending."

Powell doesn't revel in these hells, and they are only one strain in his complex harmonics. "Hell is the most miraculous invention of love" (43), he proposes in "Panic in the Year Zero" (a wise assessment of Dante's theology). What emerges most forcefully in this book is its imaginative exuberance, a transformative power and wit that can turn catastrophe into fuel while not disregarding its costs. In his own way, he sings the blues with all the lavish inventiveness of that art, announcing, in "Transit of Mercury," "I've got a heat-seeking missile for heartbreak. / & so do you."

The poem "Landscape with Sections of Aqueduct" shows Powell at his best, evoking but skirting the central fact, a suicide, a man found hanging from an aqueduct. Details of that event leap out—the man's t-shirt "knotted, so tight it had to be cut off his neck with a penknife" (5)—but the



poem's major method is oblique, starting with a lush and whimsical hexameter: "If the crown of the day is not gold, then it's a marvelous fake" (1). This is an apt description of Powell's world, one in which gold does gleam, beauty and love flash upon us, but they are always put in question. A starker idiom runs in counterpoint to the golden line: "They have taken him away and I do not know where

he is laid" (9). After a photorealist view of the graffiti on the aqueduct and the trash around it—ways of suggesting the longings and desolations the suicide may have suffered—the poem concludes with a view of cabbage moths flickering among flowering weeds. Delicate and beautiful, they seem a displaced version of the soul, and they open into a hymn to creation, a sacrament acknowledging transience and perpetuity, that mystery in whose light we all live, whether we know it or not. The moths

bore the pain of creation for a little yellow dust, a smear of light
 on their fidgeting legs and the sudden buoyancy in updraft.
 Ruin, by the wayside, you took as sacrament. You, abiding rock.
 (22-24)

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