

# The Inconvenience of Poetry

Rhonda Pettit

*Mindseye's Consort* by A. D. Fallon. Self-published through  
[www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com), 2013. 73 pgs.

*During the Recent Extinctions: New and Selected Poems 1984-2012*  
by Richard Hague. Cincinnati: Dos Madres Press, 2012. 278 pgs.

The title of this publication, *Journal of Kentucky Studies*, suggests Kentucky-related contents or works by or about Kentucky authors, and its co-founder Danny Miller insisted on a strong Appalachian presence. As the journal undertook this mission, it at the same time published works by authors outside of this region who had national reputations, such as Diane Wakoski and X. J. Kennedy, and its new Facebook page invites subjects and authors of all persuasions. Nevertheless the journal's origins and name imply a subtext; its contents pirouette above the question, What is a Kentucky author?

This review examines two very different books, by two very different authors whose work has appeared in the *Journal of Kentucky Studies*. Neither poet is from Kentucky, though Fallon lives and works here, and Hague has Appalachian roots. Are the poems in these books similar in any way? Do they tell us anything about the nature of Kentucky or Appalachian writing? Are these questions important? Reading these books for this journal led me to consider these issues.

*Mindseye's Consort* provides, as its book cover states, an exploration of the "elements that permeate all things," of what physicists understand as "a universal order, a connection, between everything in our universe." In other words, Fallon is exploring what scientists seek but haven't yet found and may not be knowable. A less poetic transcription of the book's title would be Imagination's Companion—and who would that companion be? The reader? Humanity? The thoughts of the poet? A muse? In two of the longer poems—"Werner and the Gremlin" and "The Vision of Rocks"—it's a gremlin, and what better figure for an unknowable condition than an imaginary fiend? Echoing John Gardner's observation that all art is proceeded by a wound, it is the gremlin, not the feminine muse, that inspires Edmund's writing in "The Vision of Rocks," and that breaks Werner out of his self-persecuting stupor in "Werner and the Gremlin." But reader beware: the muse Fallon creates is no angel either. A surrealistic line of narrative drives these and other poems, such as "Fiona Verbogen's Room" (a poem linked to Werner) and "One Day at the Deli."

Elsewhere, Fallon uses other approaches to her subject. The book's opening poem, effectively titled "Embody the Ineffable" (How would we do that, though somehow we must?) states by way of not stating what science seeks. A short poem, I quote it in full:

It is more than flame  
which candles the skin's  
flush. It is more  
than desire that prisms  
light in the eyes  
that makes palpable the shining  
invisible tensile filament  
that pulls us to love.

Fallon's title lets her off the hook; the poem can't tell us what the "more" is because it is the "ineffable," but isn't that the point at which we expect the poet to imagine it? Fallon's refusal to do this here might be a problem for the poem as a stand-alone entity, though some readers might remain satisfied with the irony alone. As the book's opening poem, however, it sets the stage for exploring the phenomena of living through the effects of, and wanting to know more about or to name what is not yet knowable or nameable. Perhaps this is why ten of the poems pose questions that aren't always answered.

Verbal play and humor become inevitable because it suits the postmodern subject matter. The irony of knowing you're influenced by an unknown, perhaps unknowable force (Is it a force, or something more subtle and elusive?) is an absurdity of existence that invites laughter. Fiona's last name—Verborgen—echoes the German *verboten*, and she does indeed live a life of denial. Puns and alliteration punctuate "God's Folly Falls." One of my favorites is "Ambush," where symbolic characters populate a western cowboy setting. A less preferable and less intelligent response to our condition might be the existential nihilism that Fallon avoids.

Fallon uses other strategies appropriate to her subject: listing and list poems ("Pause in Perpetuity"), including poems that use a series of phrases that play off each other for cumulative effect rather than construct a linear lyric ("Like a Fish in Coral" and "Creation of Speed"). What holds these poems together, allows them to proceed? Something more ineffable than pure logic. Allusions to science abound, and Shakespeare echoes in the character names Edmund and Iago. "The Art of Fishing" suggests Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish" and "One Art." When I read "Where You Are," with its line of connections between seemingly disparate people and items, I was reminded of John Hartford's song, "I Would Not Be Here."

Two Petrarchan sonnets appear in the book. In "Elusive Promise: Hope," the speaker seeks "a word" that "beckons blessings from out of the wrecked / and ravaged beds of prior passions you haul / to each new love" (3-5); that would be part of a "renovation," and—in these wonderful lines—a "step to repair the less than perfect / luck that has laid your bed sheets cold" (7; 10-11). The poem—of course—doesn't provide the word. Sonnets are not surprising here given that the book's epigraph is the octave of Gerard Manley Hopkins' sonnet, ["As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame"], with its closing line—"What I do is me: for that I came." Fallon's postmodern response to this occurs in the last stanza of the free verse poem, "The Faltering Edge": "the future occasions itself to us, / the ever-changing team of who / we become" (8-9). Each individual is a process—at this historical moment—not a singular entity.

The nice thing about not knowing is that it leaves us room to wonder, wander, and explore. *Mindseye's Consort* does that ("where" is the first word in the titles of four of the poems) and allows the reader to do that with joy and hardship. I would like to have seen the book divided into named or at least numbered sections, but perhaps that would have negated the ineffable connectivity the book explores. Still, sections or groupings, not just individual poems, can be (and, of course, should be) usefully connected to poems, to the other sections, and to the book as a whole. The layering effect this could offer might have been useful.

*During the Recent Extinctions: New and Selected Poems 1984-2012* by Richard Hague offers an arc (not *the* arc) of a poet's work at mid-career. It includes generous selections from four of his poetry volumes—*Ripening* (1984), *Possible Debris* (1988), *Mill and Smoke Marrow* (1991), and *Alive in Hard Country* (2003)—and closes with a group of forty new poems which lends its name to this anthology's title. It leaves out representations from three of his full volumes and several of his chapbooks.

This selection is clearly driven by the concern of Hague's new poems: not the extinction of life as a long-term, natural process of evolution, but the more rapid extinctions that are occurring as a result of human greed or carelessness. Or, as the section's epigraph by Wendell Berry puts it, "To the offer of more abundant life, we have chosen to respond with the economics of extinction." The book as a whole, however, acknowledges all kinds of extinctions, many of these occurring in and around Ohio.

The opening poem from *Ripening*, "Going Back the Hard Way," refers to an 1892 lynching, and the numbing effects it continues to have on those who hear about it now. Throughout the book, other individual human deaths occur, whether by accident ("The Body of a Man Washed Up," a drowned girl in "Fishing"); suicide ("What Katy Did," "Jefferson County Suicide"); or age ("My Grandfather's Mandolin"). The hardship and decline of Hague's coal- and steel mill-driven hometown, Steubenville, Ohio, is captured in a number of poems, such as "Fire in Steubenville," "Near What Was Once Harmon Creek," and the seven poems in "Mill Suite." One of these poems, the sequence "Shooting Nine-Ball at T.R.'s" set in 1963, explores from an adult perspective the speaker's youth during the Vietnam War era. Using the refrains "I don't know that then" and "I don't see that then" (as well as variations of these), the poem flashes back and forward, allowing us to see the gritty innocence of a 15-year-old boy who works at a butcher shop and shoots pool with his friend Dominic. His actions seem harmless compared to what the Vietnam War will later do to Dominic and the country. Taking for granted the violence around him, he doesn't perceive "how the darkness grows from within" (4-6) while he continues to cut meat for customers. The speaker in retrospect, however, realizes that by then

... I have already come into it  
like a secret inheritance,  
that I am part of it now,  
as I plunk them down on the counter,  
those slabs and slices, those skillful lacerations,  
provisioning, for pay,  
the world that will be  
bought and sold,  
and killed and killed  
and eaten. (11-20)

This kind of honest pursuit—this use of the poem to explore, discover, acknowledge—is typical of Hague's work.

The recognition that he is part of, not apart from, a world of violence, and that violence is a necessary part of the natural world occurs in many of Hague's nature poems as well. In "Sparrow Hawk," for example, he checks his sympathy for the field mouse caught by the hawk to face "the plain hard fact / of hunger" (14-15). His deep and abiding love for the natural world is most successful in poems like this one, and in poems where a commercial interaction with nature sends him pondering: "How have I come to this, / engaged in the labor of glaciers?" (15-16) he asks in "Hauling Gravel from Newtown," not knowing if he is the "dupe or accomplice" (18) in his task. In the apologetic "Penny," however, Hague is the perpetrator, his neglect at fourteen leading to the death of a pet rabbit.

Both *Ripening* and *Possible Debris* contain many poems set in late summer or autumn, those seasons of a year leading toward closure. Both titles and their poems suggest stages of extinction: following ripening is decline, and debris is created by such breakdowns, becoming the feed for geological hungers. His range of debris is animal, vegetable, mineral, and mechanical. I've already discussed the debris associated with humans and mill towns; he also includes the bizarre ("Root Fence") and beautiful ("Shore Glass, Cincinnati").

These selections overall, as well as the early "An Unsent Letter of Darwin's" which opens with "When it closes down, / the world of forms, and it will" (1-2), set the stage for the book's final section, "During the Recent Extinctions." This section begins with the accusatory sequence, "Outerbelt Elegies," which lists the damaging conveniences we take for granted (stuffed animals instead of real ones, "Mickey D's" (11) instead of healthy food), and the substitutions for substantive living (amusement parks and outlet stores) we uncritically embrace. The losses being lamented here are not the items named in the poem, but the unstated (hence missing) items they replace—clean water, healthy woodlands, nurturing communities, joy that has no price tag attached.

As the section title predicts, other poems pick up geological themes and Ice Age extinctions: "Archaeopteryx," "At the Turning of the Age," "A Venus of Carved Mammoth Ivory," "Song to the Last Mammoth," among others. Loss as a natural process is prevalent, but all is not glum. "Glacial Erratic" and "Moraine" offer vividly rendered meditations about the many attributes of stone (read the poems to find out what these are!). Poems about books and poetry are here, as well as poems about fathers and sons. Hague might be first known as an Appalachian or nature poet, but he is also very much a poet focused on the difficult lives of men: their hard work, bad luck, curious turns, and lust for women. These themes in combination are demonstrated in several poems throughout the book, among them the powerful "Eric Fischl's 'Grief,'" a poem as beautiful in language as it is in form. Hague is also a poet of the city, both past (mill towns like Steubenville) and present (Cincinnati).

A reader could nevertheless ask: Does Hague repeat himself? Why the emphasis on loss and extinction? In "Moraine" Hague answers: "Ruin always draws us. / We gape and weep and learn" (10-11), learning being the operative word here. Isn't this another version of Fallon's gremlin? In a time when politicians and school boards reject the evidence for evolution and climate change, when a nation will repeatedly trade clean air and water for a short-term economics, when speed and information are valued over wisdom, we need the inconvenience of poetry. We need to slow down, take in the details, listen to their multiplicities of joy, song, and warning.

And we need this from poets like Fallon and Hague who, from different perspectives and poetics, examine our existence—its knowns and unknowables—while keeping science and nature, singularity and relationship, love and loss, in mind. Does this have anything to do with Fallon and Hague being "Kentucky authors"? No, but this

in combination with their craft has everything to do with being poets we all should read, no matter what they—or we—call home.



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