

THE MAIN STREET RAG

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Beth Cagel Interviews
Charlie Bondhus,
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Local News from Someplace Else

by Marjorie Maddox

Wipf and Stock (2013), 92 pages, \$12.60

ISBN 978-1625640949, Poetry

Disasters that reach beyond the bounds of the imaginable are courageously imagined in Marjorie Maddox's latest collection, *Local News from Someplace Else*, a deeply reflective meditation on the violence that has become so pervasive in our daily lives. The title poem presents a world in which catastrophic news from elsewhere is now the stuff of our local experience. When forest fires, armed robberies, school shootings take on such forced familiarity, the props that bolster our sense of safety collapse:

*Today, someone's
floods will rise up
past the screen, our remote a small boat
of numbers, helpless with no
SOS in the making.*

In an act of witnessing, the poet goes on to catalogue a series of "uninvited" calamities, both man-made and natural: Flight 93 going down in Shanksville on 9/11, "lightning's long finger tapping" its victim like a malevolent god. And in an extended metaphor, in which natural threat takes on the added weight of premeditated crime, the debilitating winter cold is personified as a mob stealing past the double-bolted door to pin an old woman to the floor.

Given that we inhabit a world where "what is safe lurks / nowhere near," it becomes clear that our secure parameters have come undone. The hills surrounding the field in Shanksville appear false in their beauty; gas streetlights representing the comfort of a former time now seem "silly in retrospect." It is no

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longer possible, the poet asserts, to trust in naive perception when, after the explosion of Flight 800 that killed sixteen Montoursville students, the clouds overhead can suddenly appear "in the shape of confetti in the shape of airplane / bits and shrapnel." The poet's disillusionment is especially apparent in those poems that feature children, her own included, whose initial wonder is contrasted with increasing grief and loss. Even the lessons of our schools, formerly taken for granted, can now tear apart our psychic geography:

*Which lessons heal?
Which blast open old wounds?
At fourteen. My daughter.*

Woven throughout this collection are poems that constitute a more authentic "local news." Here Maddox is able to speak from immediate, unmediated experience about the joys and toils of motherhood, the promise of a new morning, the poignant delight of seeing the world through the eyes of a child. In "Goldfish," a poem about rescuing a fish from its leaking tank, the issues of safety so jarringly present earlier in the collection are resolved 'in small,' within the microcosm of her son's aquarium:

*What can fifty dollars buy
if not security? A tank, plastic ferns,
a fantasy castle, . . .
the hum of this new machine
the medicine that lulls me to sleep
peacefully in the postponement
of death.*

But such resolutions are merely temporary. It is in the wake of loss, both tragic and mundane, that poetry itself emerges. Here the connection between loss and the imagination is made explicit in "Ithaca Winter" where the poet describes a difficult personal transformation. Imagining herself stepping out of an old skin into the snow—"an old name and sorrow" buried at the bottom of a drift—she discovers poetry: "When I stopped shivering, behind my teeth were words." We are grateful for her words. They help us navigate an increasingly uncertain world: "the dark mine of

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tragedy / that keeps collapsing / around this tunnel of a country." They are signs of our collective spirit celebrating "even a candle-glow of rejoicing" as it taps its way along corridors that lie "untelevised, deeper down. . . ."

Marjorie Maddox is Director of Creative Writing and Professor of English at Lock Haven University. She is co-editor of *Common Wealth: Contemporary Poets on Pennsylvania*.

—Karen Elias

Colony Collapse Disorder

by Keith Flynn
Wings Press (2013), 103 pages, \$16.00
ISBN 978-1-60940-294-5, Poetry

In the preface to *Colony Collapse Disorder*, we learn that the title is a name given to the affliction that, in 2006, wiped out one third of the bee colonies in America. There was no single cause for the collapse, but rather, a combination of viral, fungal, and parasitic infestations that struck the hives more or less simultaneously. Author Keith Flynn seized upon this phenomenon as "an ideal metaphor for our current global circumstance." He cites the effects of colonialism as especially problematic, but extrapolates well beyond geopolitical concerns to many of the social, ethical, and economic problems of our times, all leading us, potentially, to the collapse of civilization. This is the unifying theme of the poems in this collection. The preface also describes the "abecedarian" structure of the book. For each letter of the alphabet, there are two poems, corresponding to places whose names begin with the designated letter: a total of fifty-two poems, ending in Z for Zanzibar.

First stop: Atlantic City, New Jersey. In "On the Boardwalk," Flynn describes Atlantic City as a place "where the soul, clenched in its shell, admires the body's muffled heartbeat, / trailing the dribbled potency of the moment / like cheap perfume." It's a place to buy inexpensive souvenirs, get laid, lose your money and call it fun. Theologians might call it sin. Flynn actually uses the word "prelapsarian" in the poem, referring to the period before the fall of humankind, i.e., before Eve bit the apple, thus tacitly admitting that our descent into collapse and disorder has been underway for quite a while.

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