

reviewed by Ron McFarland

***Making Landfall* by Paul Lindholdt**

Encircle Publications, Farmington, ME, 2018, 81 pp., \$15.99

Consider this alternative definition of the acronym IPO so familiar to those who follow the world of high finance: Initial Poetic Offer – the poem that opens any given collection.

Why do poets decide to open their books the way they do? Surely, I've long presumed, they must assume the potential buyer of their book will read the opening poem and quite plausibly decide, sensibly or not, whether to pursue the matter any further. If my premise is correct, quite a lot depends on that opening poem. Reaching back to the Renaissance, poets commonly offered up a prefatory verse, "To the Reader," or perhaps "To the Gentle Reader." Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) opens notoriously with "Au Lecteur," something of an anti-dedication in which he lashes out at the reader as a fellow hypocrite prey to that worst of monsters, ennui. Billy Collins playfully (of course!) dabbles in mock dedications at times, mentioning Baudelaire in the first line of "Dear Reader" in *The Art of Drowning* (1995) and opening *Picnic, Lightning* (1998) with "A Portrait of the Reader with a Bowl of Cereal." Readers who take up Baudelaire's or Collins's books based on their positive reception of the supposed dedicatory poems will be neither surprised nor disappointed. In a similar vein, W.S. Merwin begins *Travels* (1993) in Baudelairean fashion with "Cover Note": "Hypocrite reader my / variant my almost / family," lamenting the decline in the readership for poems and his lack of "the ancients' confidence" that posterity will understand "our true meaning."

Viewed from the perspective of 20/20 hindsight, some poets have begun their books with what now appear to have been prophetic decisions, selecting poems that would be oft anthologized in years to come. Robert Frost introduced readers of *North of Boston* (1915), his second book, with the eight-liner, "The Pasture," which surely comes across as an invitation: "I'm going out to clean the pasture spring," the two-quatrain poem begins, and

each of the quatrains ends, “I shan’t be gone long – You come too.” The initial poem of what one might consider the body of the text is “The Mending Wall,” with its refrain, “Good fences make good neighbors.” The next year he opened *Mountain Interval* with “The Road Not Taken.” His 1924 Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *New Hampshire*, begins with the rather long title poem, which is not one of his finer efforts. One wonders whether he could have anticipated the great popularity of two short lyrics from that book, “Nothing Gold Can Stay” and “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”

Now, I intend the foregoing as my way of embarking on Paul Lindholdt’s masterful first poem,

“Traveler to the Colonies,” from *Making Landfall*. The 63-line poem set up in four sections or verse paragraphs initially appeared in *Sewanee Review*, as did three other poems in this collection of 46. His count in the author’s note at the back appears to be a little off – not just 24, but 27 of the poems have been placed elsewhere, including such respectable journals as *Chicago Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. The poem begins paradoxically: “It was like being forced to live / a new death with each fifth breath.” In the opening section the speaker comments on the torturous ocean voyage, and here we enjoy ample evidence not only of Lindholdt’s seamanship, but also of his keen ear:

Our mizzen shroud lines flapping,
the stern mast cracked and fell
across the capstan until the master
pressed a mate to hack it free.

The assonance of flapping/mast/cracked/capstan/master/hack produces a harshness appropriate to the near disaster.

In the second 16-line section, the traveler reflects on the hyperbolic promises of the “sly promoters,” and here the softer [eh] assonantal cluster appears to suggest their cunning, smooth-tongued promises:

Fish of all kinds leapt to net.
So it seemed from what we read.
So this place seemed
from what the sly promoters said.

Of course, the key verb here is “seemed.” But note how Lindholdt uses non-schematic rhyme in this case to effect a transition to the third section of the poem: “Instead we sleep in canvas shacks / hemmed close by ruts of mud / frozen.” The word “sleep” assonantly looks (or listens) back to “seemed,” and we acquire aural pairs like canvas/shacks, close/frozen, and ruts/mud. In this new world they hear “the wilderness all night / howling for our souls.” Note, too, Lindholdt’s confident use of line breaks: shacks-hemmed, mud-frozen, night-howling. These technical achievements indicate the work of a craftsman.

The last section of the poem opens with a rhetorical question: “How many travelers before me have you / enticed from cozy fireside to try / your surface, flattering sea?” Note the long [i], diphthong: enticed/fireside/try. The line fairly shrieks at the “sly promoters.” While the other three sections of this poem run 16 lines, this one runs only 15, as if the traveler were cutting himself off in anger:

I shall build a cedar cabin
at Hell’s Gate and rest there
cloistered from your strumpet ways.
I shall write the truth about this land
and warn my countrymen to guard their eyes.

But, fanciful as this might seem, perhaps the 16th line constitutes the “truth about this land” that the traveler writes in the other poems that make up this collection.

The remaining poems of this book pick up individual accounts, many of which claim historical origins, as indicated in the half dozen pages of endnotes. The epigraph for Brooding Season, the first of the five parts into which the book is divided, is drawn from John Berryman’s *Homage to Mistress Anne Bradstreet* (1956). Historical figures who make important

appearances in the book include King Philip (1638-1676), the Wampanoag chief who gave his name to King Philip's War; Thomas Morton of the Maypole of Merrymount fame; Puritan minister John Cotton (grandfather of Cotton Mather); Governor John Winthrop of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) whom he banished from the colony; Increase Mather and his son Cotton, who would play a major role in the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692; Governor William Bradford of Plymouth Plantation; and Jonathan Edward, the noted sermonizer of The Great Awakening during the 1730s and '40s. Nathaniel Hawthorne would likely have appreciated these poems, but I must confess I rather missed any reference to Michael Wigglesworth and his notorious *The Day of Doom* (1662).

A few poems in this collection, while solid enough, do seem rather out of place. In the first part, "Song of Salmon," translated from Franz Boas's accounts of the Kwakiutl in the Pacific Northwest, seems to be imposed on the world Lindholdt has created here. Similarly, I'm more distracted than edified by "Tenochtitlan," which opens the third section and follows an epigraph from William Bradford. And then "Crossing Arbon Valley," a few poems later, is located on the Fort Hall Indian Reservation in southeastern Idaho, so I'm thrown off again. But when I next come upon "Moll Gone," which recalls (to me, at least) Defoe's eponymous Moll Flanders, from his 1722 novel, I do get back on track, so I'm only momentarily distracted.

The implicit question posed by my focus on the initial poem of this book is this: Do the poems live up to the promise of that first poem, that IPO? Axiomatically, I believe, not all the poems by any poet in any collection will be equally compelling. But in some ways that first poem constitutes a sort of promissory note. It offers that the poems that follow will read at least comparably well, and I think they do. The best of them are dramatic monologues, like "Famacides," "Sarah Hawkridge," "Homage to Mistress Bradford," "Rebecca Glover," "The Glare of Her Awareness," "Kit Gardiner, Banished," and particularly the paired poems, "Magistrate" and "Marianne's Quarters." These dramatic poems speak to me, often with a blending of the familiar with the exotic. We know these characters (some historic, some not) and are at least generally familiar with their circumstances, their

dilemmas, but Lindholdt exposes us to some of the darkness and depravity that lurks beneath the Puritan piety. Not necessarily recommended for underage readers.

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