



Moist Meridian, *Henry Hughes*,
Mammoth Books, \$11.95.

Henry Hughes grew up on Long Island, New York, moved to Oregon in 2002, and won the Oregon Book Award for his first collection, *Men Holding Eggs*. To each endeavor he brings a sharp acuity and sustaining belief in poetic imagination. Reviewers have noted the frank sensuality of a book entitled *Moist Meridian*, but I am struck by the cataloging of the day's detritus that we see in poems like "The Place of Grace":

We eat and love our supper
while compost worms away
our folks. In mineral heaven
they raise their castles, ringed
with jack-beaned gardens,
splashed with goose-packed moats.

"Worms away" and "jack-beaned" are typical of Hughes's verbal and adjectival compressions. Linguistic effects run through the book, illustrating the poet's commitment to poetry at the most fundamental level: "The sweet bass / bubble-twist in the Fry Daddy's steel cage." "I spend my life / beer slung." "Axing advisories, I followed her." "A whole murder / tarred the lot of my dream." And from "Singles at Seventy," "we mayfly / over the glittering floor," "There's no more pleasure / in excess, but no time like now / for excessive pleasure." In "Retaining Wall," the poet asks, "Is it enough? Sentences tangling / such a soft mound of mind."

Little wonder that such a sustained vision of the ineluctable alliance of language, imagination and the Dionysian principle finds allegiance with Melville in a number of poems, including "In the Bronx with Melville," "About the Shark," "Slippery Dick," and "Sperm Whale"—"give me that big, long / beautiful read, slip-fitted on the word shuddering / wave, / gushing

foam blossoms.” We hear connections also with Hart Crane who likewise bridged the sea with words, with a similar linguistic compression, exceptionally visual and aural, but nonetheless essentially imaginative and conceptual:

Oh, sweet reader, all the love in the world
won't keep us young or famous, though sadness
sings softly for our loss, I think, lying
before the blank scroll of Melville's headstone
in the shelled calm he cannot hear.

Lucky are those occasions where “[t]here are lazy latitudes where lovers linger and sex is excellent,” “[a]fter a good day sailing / the moist meridian.” Lucky indeed when the soft, ephemeral pleasure of touching the world finds safe, lasting harbor in words that stay with us.

A word has to be said about this edition, with its striking and sensuous cover, a nude in black ink lines, with pale copper and soft forest green watercolor washes, by Richard Bunse, whose eight interior ink drawings inaugurate each section of the collection. There is poem dedicated to him, “Giant,” in the seventh, “Firewood,” section, a paeon to the twelve-inch giant Pacific salamander captured decades ago that still fires both their imaginations—the sheer unimagability of that early gift of nature—“A purple bike tire pumped with jello.”

This edition from Mammoth Press also is a gift, welcome in its uniformly handsome design, in which the small press embraced the opportunity to provide a place for author and painter to collaborate, to spend the paper and ink on enhancing the pleasure of eye and of reading. It is the best twelve bucks you can spend, and your personal library will thank you for it.

DONALD WOLFF