
**The New Naturalism and the New Nature Poet:
Ralph Black's Lyric of Doubt
by Kevin Clark**

Kevin Clark

Essay: Ralph
Black



Ralph Black's unusually emotive, lyric book of poems, *Turning Over the Earth*, appears at an intriguing philosophical moment in American poetry. Black's widely-admired, philanthropic publisher, Milkweed Press, has a declared interest in publishing "high-quality books that place an emphasis on environmental stewardship..." Certainly, the role of the environment in our metaphysical lives is the central theme of Black's book. But, like sex, politics, and religion, such a subject is attended by aesthetic and theoretic perils. In fact, Black is fully aware that the question of the environment and our regard for it has long been linked to religion: In the eighteenth and nineteenth century the argument often turned on whose God owned the land. In the later twentieth century many ecological activists were not necessarily enthralled with the parameters of that argument. Following the sometimes undisciplined spiritual pursuits of the Sixties, they became uncomfortable in assigning nature's stewardship to one group's god, or to any god at all. Now, at the outset of the 21st Century, Black has established for himself a verse project in which the old question of dominion becomes a private inquiry into the validity and efficacy of god.

In his verse explorations, Black is clearly

cognizant of three groundbreakers who examined the relationship between the spiritual and natural worlds: Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, and Galway Kinnell. Stevens turned to the natural world for sustenance, simultaneously granting sea and earth and flower a kind of aesthetic power while recognizing that the power came directly from his own imagination?and from no other realm. A deeply religious person might also be swept away by the powerful scent of waves and mountains and petals, but that person would more likely grant the power to God. At the same time Stevens was developing his atheist's polemic, Frost was developing his own more agnostic perspective. As Randall Jarrell pointed out, Frost didn't know what if anything was behind the beauty of nature?and he wasn't going to grant hidden powers to anything.

Not long after Frost's death, the young Galway Kinnell was among those such as Gary Snyder and Robert Bly who were reinventing American transcendentalism. Kinnell is a kind of Romantic throwback who believed that he could make out the signature of a divine force in the face of the hills around him. In *Turning Over the Earth*, Black clearly places himself between Frost, who saw the natural world as both intricately fascinating and darkly inscrutable, and Kinnell, who has always viewed nature as a kind of primal text signifying an otherworldly paradise. Neither of these approaches serve Black adequately. Occasionally the hope of an anthropomorphic deity and a human afterlife break through the lyric of doubt, but then throughout the book this longing inevitably succumbs to the narrator's own brand of naturalism, one infused by both a materialist's fatalism and a lover's whimsy.

What results is not abject skepticism nor 19th Century spirituality but, rather, a deeply felt affection for nearly the entire organic world. Such regard is expressed more in tone than discursive statement. While *Turning Over the Earth* renders an imagination primarily inspired by the immense beauties of the American forest, Black's imagination is simultaneously engaged by the lush landscape and bounded by a secular suspicion that

there is no other realm fore-ordained in the wondrously complex mountains and river valleys. This suspicion and the counter suspicion that he may be wrong, that the world may in fact be driven by divine force, create the wonderful tension that drives so much of the book and creates its alluring tone. For Black, existence offers the potential for beauty and richness, which inspires him to recognize the possibilities of his own human making, even if aspects of that making--children, poetry, the passion of marriage--are limited to a universe that may not be governed by a divine force.

So, Black's poems derive great strength from a playful, unpredictable imagination, his contemporary agnosticism, and sometimes an ambrosia of conversational language. In the book's opening poem "The Muses of Farewell," we are asked to "suppose" a sequence of events in which an individual is sitting in a room listening to music when snow begins to invade the house, threatening imminent death. It is the 2nd person reader who is threatened, who is asked to imagine one last imagistic thought: "Kafka walking the streets of Prague / in the middle of the some dismal February night." We're told Kafka may hold the key to our survival, but he can't help because he has walked off:

So you are left at the end to the
muses of snow, who are the muses
of
seduction, who are the muses of
farewell
and this roomful of weather you
have
nuanced, like all of us, out of your
life.

Thus the book opens, prefiguring what's to come: poems that will explore the metaphysical fright of modern, contemplative life and which will employ the imagination as a tool to step outside the ordinary conventions of contemplation.

In "Triangulating Home," the narrator is climbing a mountain beneath a red sky, attempting to slough off the distracting detritus of ego and

daily musing:

I climb for hours out of the sun,
out of the earth-light,
climb for hours into
the cave-cold heights
of unlearning, into blue rain
blackening and blackening
all the broken bodies
laid out to forget themselves.

The bodies may be the different competing aspects of a self wracked by an existence that drives human beings away from healthy knowingness into excess self-regard. In such an existence we become an unhealthy host of competing emotions. The resulting disillusionment is made all the greater by the narrator's irresolute feelings about purpose and value: "I reach back to where the mulch is / cold and wet in my hands, / certain of no certain thing..." If we're "certain of no certain thing," then what's to be done?

Black's stunning inventiveness lies in how he approaches this kind of question in poem after poem. In this particular poem, he chooses to acknowledge uncertainty as the very agent that can produce positive change. As the poem goes on to say, that point of uncertainty is the point at which "my body builds and builds / itself over again" until it becomes like a "planet." Most poets would stop at this point, having transformed the image into a small epiphany. But in "Triangulating Home," the second stage of insight is derived by a remarkable act of imagination. The narrator attempts to shed his human consciousness and take on the beingness of earth itself. By doing so, he is temporarily, provisionally offered a haven from quotidian inanities. In his earth-like consciousness he witnesses birds that "carry / the whole damned weight of the sky / balanced and nearly beautiful / across wings of unutterable wood." Because the narrator wants the world to be infused with a transcendent beauty, the modifier "nearly" is heartbreaking, but, because he's attempting to vacate a state of self-directedness and white noise, the word "unutterable" is saving.

By employing poetic language rich with alliteration, assonance, and repetition, as well as myriad references to poets and musical composers, Black increases the narrator's distance between what is longed for and what is known to be real. Because his lush language is typically associated with love poems, it's not surprising to find Black often conflating his near mythic regard for the natural world with his near providential love for his wife. Here are the opening two sentences of "All Morning about Love" (dedicated to his wife Susan):

I've tried to write
 all morning about love,
 a fable of this married life,
 as though it were a trophy
 won against glimmering odds
 and what we ought to do
 is hang it spotlit and shining
 by the phone in the kitchen.
 But I keep coming back to talk
 of the season, the glissando of
 rain coaxing the last few million
 leaves from the last few
 thousand
 limbs that still bear them.

After the plain expression of the first few lines, the poem begins a restrained but steady efflorescence into a sound that renders human feeling as close as contemporary readers will get to swooning ("glimmering odds," "spotlit and shining," "glissando of rain"). Against all likelihood, long-term love has succeeded and the narrator is compelled to see it in terms of nature's laws. Frost would never have spoken so intimately nor so sumptuously about his own love life, but we can recognize his like compulsion to explain the inner human world in terms of the outer natural world.

Soon the narrator explicitly links the situation of his marriage to the couple's taking a walk along a river, flowers blossoming, a time when they were camping in the Rockies and a cougar circled their tent. Toward the end of the poem we feel as if Black is about to have a Siddharthan moment: "I

know so little about it, love, / as young as I am,
stupid and inarticulate. / Rivers know much more.
Rocks / the rivers gleam over know. I think / we
should listen to what they say." Has the agnostic of
"Triangulating Home" become an upper and lower
case romantic mystic? Maybe, but, despite the
whimsy and the romance, the poet is cagey. After
three pages we discover that the narrator is away
from home, that he won't be returning for a week,
and that the poem is actually a letter to his wife.
Apparently the point of the poem all along is praise
to her. The method has been to acclaim her
essence and their love by praising elements of the
natural world that are the metaphorical correlatives
to the best aspects of their relationship. It's thus in
a love poem that Black admits to an occasional
certainty he didn't have in the "Triangulating
Home."

Earlier in the book, the poem "Slicing Ginger"
nearly sings of the relation between the human
body and the "sacred earth." Asserting that the
sensation of ginger slices pressed and sliding on
wet skin is "Not sex, but sexual," the narrator
describes "the earth of it"?he cuts his finger. The
bloody slices of ginger eventually hit the cooking
iron "with / a singing of fire on / wet wood, and the
tiny / suns exploding there: / huge and redolent and
/ almost human." Bits of blood and root become
little suns that are (very nearly) the specially
animate substance that makes us human. In Black's
imagination, all kinds of alchemical
transformations are possible.

Throughout this book Black renders his very
human desire for an a priori world, a
transformative realm behind the face of nature. His
supple expression is enhanced by frequent
references to poets who are often reverential in the
way they approach and praise the things of this
world. Employing an unusually educated sense of
classical music, Black sometimes joins these poets
to composers such as Brahms, Haydn, and Mozart.
His poetry, in fact, plays mostly in the style of a
fluid adagio, interrupted every so often by a
sudden linguistic surge that accompanies a crisis in
the narration or a reversal in the narrator's
assumptions. In "Waiting for the Bus," the narrator

has imagined a way to defeat the quotidian void; he's "drunk on making the day up" while he waits for the bus. Baudelaire, Yeats, Clare, Neruda, Whitman, and Brahms all appear in delightful, whimsical arrangement. The narrator is not home but he imagines being there as his wife comes in the door: "My wife's eyes will gleam with tears when she / walks in the door, telling me how the cellist in the subway / rocked to the pitch of Sixth Avenue, and of the deep, / resuscitating sadness of Brahms." Here and elsewhere, Black believes that sadness can be an occasion for an imagined transcendence, if not the actual thing.

This poet's typically elegiac sensibility, then, is regularly intensified by his recognition of the limits of both metaphysics and human perception. Unlike the formalized relentless neutrality of Frost and the contemporary transcendent eruptions of Kinnell--or even the bemused appreciations of Stevens--these poems demonstrate human feeling deepened by a world that is circumscribed by a metaphysical uncertainty and the unpredictable horrors nature itself can afford in the form of predation and disaster. (In "Letter to Hugo from the Upper West Side," for instance, he remembers being at "Savage Creek," where he watched "a thousand steep acres burn fast / as a held breath.") Black is not a poet concerned with the attenuated voice of post-modern inquiry nor with the hyper-paced sound offered up by poets attempting to preserve an enlivening chaos of human feeling. Resigned but not fatalistic in outlook, Ralph Black wants to transform our felt need for poetic song. To that end, *Turning Over the Earth* asserts a revised pastoral romanticism, one that acknowledges the materialist realities of contemporary thought while expressing the depth, desire and spectrum of the human heart.

Click [here](#) to read Ralph Black's poems from *Turning Over the Earth*

Click here to [read](#) Jacqueline Marcus' review on Kevin Clark's debut book of poems, *In The Evening of No Warning*.

Kevin Clark's poetry has appeared in *The Antioch Review*, *The Black Warrior Review*, *College English*, *The Georgia Review*, and *Keener Sounds: Selected Poems from The Georgia Review*. He is a recipient of the Charles Angoff Award from The Literary Review. The Academy of American Poets selected *In the Evening of No Warning* for a publisher's grant from the Greenwall Fund. His critical articles have appeared in several journals and collections, among them *The Iowa Review*, *Papers on Language and Literature*, and *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Clark teaches at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, where he lives with his wife and two children.

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