

From "Southern Humanities Review"  
 Fall 2010 (Volume 44, Number 4)

*Again*. By Lynne Knight. San Francisco: Sixteen Rivers Press, 2009.  
 96 pp. \$16.00, paper.

Though interconnectivity in no way guarantees a successful poetry collection, it never hurts. The poems in *Again*, Lynne Knight's fourth full-length collection, build on each other's phrases, symbols, themes, and sentiments without drawing obvious attention to the fact that they are doing so. Lyric energy gathers subtly over the course of the book so that, by the end, one recalls not only individual poems but also a whole experience.

Many of the poems focus on relationships that are at various stages of ending, mediated through landscape, myth, and visual art. The prologue poem wastes no time in setting the mood with its two central lines:

And you, my father, so long dead, why  
 should I not expect you to be everywhere. . . .

Indeed, grief and mourning are everywhere to be found here, in images that are delicate and ethereal—and, in spite of their apparent fragility, penetrating. Take the poem "In a Time of Mourning," where we find toward the opening: "She began to swim / from her body like dreams she had lost // years ago." And later, "She swam until houses / fell through her hands like water." Here we discover a kind of mourning that is at once sensual and immediate but also vast and dreamlike in texture. (Think of Dickinson's "I can wade grief.") The poem closes, "The earth / was mostly water, and she swam." This is a typical handling of a poetic subject in this book: a word is introduced—say, "swimming" or "water"—then the word gains resonance as it gradually recurs until finally capitalizing on the accumulated multiplicity of meanings to stir us in a way we could not have predicted before the poem began.



[Poet/Persona]      No one gathers narcissus into her arms  
                               without thinking death  
                               has been hurried, all for the eye's  
                               insatiable pleasure.

The final section of *Again* is a series of ekphrastics which pivot a contemporary perspective against the paintings of De Kooning, Wolf Kahn, Bonnard, Sébastien Stoskopff, Renoir, and Matisse, in some cases employing amusingly anachronistic language to delve into the world of the art, as in "Is she lying asleep in a field / or just hoping to get laid?"

The best way for me to illuminate the cumulative way this collection works is to take a symbol that recurs again and again and follow its evolution. There are quite a few, but the one I think best typifies the interconnectivity is "door." The first poem in which "door" appears is titled, conveniently, "The Door," and is an ekphrastic based on *Taos Doors*, a photograph by Heather Holston. The poem begins with the image of "[o]ld doors, that had opened / and closed thousands of times, though now / the houses were gone." The woman who, in the poem, is trying to sell these doors compares their behavior to the behavior of her own body with old lovers: "opening, opening, then // staying shut. Not out of malice or even lack / of desire. Just time. Time at work until the doors / sound like wind."

A few poems later, in "Ghost Sailing," we encounter a woman who leaves the bed of her lover after a "pointless argument" (Knight occasionally and, to great effect, slips plainspoken phrases into otherwise lyric language) and observes a ghost ship. The boat "bang[s] like a door / against the rocky shore." Here we find a second hingeless, houseless door. This time "door" is used in a simile for the motion of a boat and not the body of the persona—or so we think until the poem ends, "He would stir when she slipped / back into bed, reaching out // as she did now, wanting / to feel the boat's skin / but sensing it too cold / and not, anyway, hers." This is quite a complex layering of association—the motion of the boat is compared to that of a door, then the boat/door imagery comes to suggest the failure of lovers ever to fully possess each other.

In the final section there is a poem entitled "The Deepest Blue," after painter and pastel artist Wolf Kahn's *The Deepest Blue of Maine*. The poem begins, not at all innocuously, with "The deepest blue has ice at its core." The persona, over the next few couplets, imagines what it would be like for a "body struggling to keep / enough heat to

live, let alone swim—.” I should point out, since the poem delves later into a kind of mourning, that the verb “swim” recalls the earlier poem, “In a Time of Mourning,” mentioned above, as a way of negotiating grief. The poet then challenges us to imagine ourselves struggling to survive in this deep blue ice:

suppose you had to, suppose  
the boat you were in disappeared from

under you the way love sometimes  
does—when rage overtakes you,

or your heart goes empty as a room  
whose door is loosely hinged—

I find the comparison of a heart from which love has disappeared to a room whose door is loosely hinged deeply compelling. Let me add that the emotion, by this point in the collection, heightens as we realize that the boat from “Ghost Sailing” is back with a vengeance to make us revisit the isolating effect of our betrayed and betraying hearts. Moreover, this “loosely hinged” door brings to an apex the helpless and yet self-wrought entrylessness of the earlier doors, where the romantic heart in question seems always to linger.

I don’t want to reduce this book to a sort of pyrotechnics of recurring symbols. I do want to stress that, while each poem brims with gorgeous language and is worth reading for its own merit, the connectivity of the collection subtly but profoundly amplifies the passionate lyricism. The people in these poems are real and they matter. They are bound to a carefully constructed work of art, but one which sees them, as in the poem “Dust,” as “wanting to escape the fate that’s written / into every breath before it’s taken.” Mythological unfortunates Narcissus and Echo are endowed with such humanity that we feel for them as if they lived next door. Conversely, figures who seem to come from our own contemporary, everyday world are sprinkled with myth-powder so as to lend them a sort of *sfumato*—a timeless, trancelike vastness. Knight allows us to remain in this sort of in-between nether-door of myth and the everyday—a “blur, a yellow house, many windowed, / where the dreamer lives / on bright fruit constantly replenished.”