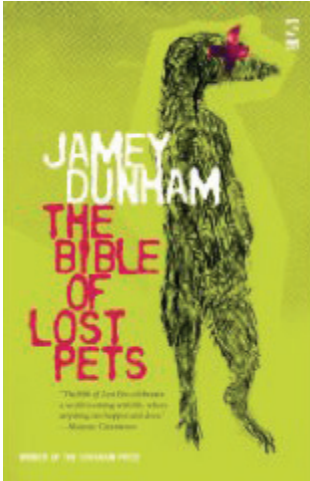


No Contest
The Online Magazine from GenPop Books

07 DECEMBER 09



Jamey Dunham
The Bible of Lost Pets

Salt Publishing, 2009
Poetry, paperback, 96 pp
ISBN 9781844715633
\$14.95

Reviewed by Charles Freeland

At the school where I teach, the creative writing students, through close contact with Jamey Dunham's work, have been for some time filling their prose poems with all manner of small animals doing cute and/or zany things. I hope this will stop. Such superficial emulation does not so much stunt the student writers' growth as threaten to rob Dunham's accomplishment of its power. It gets everything wrong.

Dunham, whose debut collection, *The Bible of Lost Pets*, won last year's Crashaw Prize from Salt Publishing, and whose work has appeared in such lauded anthologies as *The Best American Poetry 2005* and *Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present*, is most obviously a fabulist, teaching us like Vishnu Sarma, Aesop and La Fontaine lessons about ourselves with the assistance of meerkats and possums, lemurs and (for some reason) a lot of wolves. Like his fabulist predecessors he is decidedly populist, writing unapologetically for an audience that doesn't consist primarily of other poets. In this regard, he reminds me of such otherwise dissimilar talents as Beth Ann Fennelly and even Billy Collins. This is a tendency I admire in Dunham's work because it exists side-by-side with a semi-experimental, semi-*de rigueur* surrealism inherited from the likes of Max Jacob and Henri Mischeaux. He is serving up escargot at Burger King, only the snails talk to you before they slide down your throat.

Dunham has admitted he is as much influenced by Chuck Jones as he is by any of the European or American forefathers of his chosen form. You can see this in almost any of the poems in the collection, a cartoonish immediacy and love of impossibility depicted with child-like glee. The following is from “Stand-Off in the Kitchen of the Angry Sun”:

The rest of the eggs are quite normal, as is the milk, and the butter, and just when I reach for an onion to liven things up, three mice appear from behind the toaster. They are dressed like Mexican bandits and they demand my cheese. They have little sombreros, little pistols, and the one in the middle has its whiskers waxed into a handlebar mustache.

This is straight out of Warner Brothers animation and those of us who grew up on it find it mostly irresistible. The Mexican stand-off ends (like it is supposed to end) with a sudden movement, and the promise of the standoff degenerating shortly into genuine mayhem. And here’s where everything changes with Dunham. Chuck Jones would have shown those mice and the speaker blasting away at each other. The chaos would ensure nobody got hurt. That’s not the case with Dunham. We are left with a final, frozen image:

No one moves. The only sound is the slow suck of hot water through coffee grains. Just then the toaster goes off and we are all struck by the image of hot toast framed against a window full of angry sun.

The joke rests, of course, in the idea of the likes of Speedy Gonzalez and his partners transported suddenly to the cinematic world of Sergio Leone and, after him, Quentin Tarantino. It’s this sort of poem that might get Dunham a reputation for trivial tinkering, pop culture allusions and a certain easy surrealism. But there is more to it than the joke, and that is what differentiates Dunham from those who would emulate him, if not necessarily from the popular, mainstream poets mentioned earlier. The poem ends with the simple image of a piece of toast ejected from the toaster and silhouetted mid-flight before a window. We have to stop there because what comes next, Dunham suggests, is too awful to contemplate. And then he invites you to contemplate it anyway. Despite all the mice and the funny sombreros, the cartoon logic of their demanding cheese, what we are left with is the reality of mutual impending slaughter.

Two of the more persistent clichés of contemporary poetry, particularly of the mainstream sort, insist on the author’s ability to find the extraordinary or sublime in the “everyday”, and to offer some secular version of redemption, of hope, by the end of the poem, no matter how dire the outlook that otherwise informs it. Dunham’s work represents an all-out assault on these clichés. There is nothing “everyday” about the situations one is confronted with in *The Bible of Lost Pets*. Weathermen accurately predict the apocalypse, geckos hitchhike in leisure suits, and the Native American Trickster, Coyote himself, attends a writers’ retreat. Dunham has no intention of letting us feel comfortable in our pre-conceived notions of what poetry is and what it should be doing. He is not the least interested in living in the “everyday” world that is depicted over and over again by the more staid and respectable practitioners of our art. And as for the second cliché, Dunham is ruthless in its elimination. If “Stand-Off in the Kitchen of the Angry Sun” mitigates, if only momentarily, the impact of its final image with the antics of the cartoon mice leading up to it, a poem like “Watching Jimmy Die” sweeps almost all clowning aside and leaves us with Dunham’s overriding vision at its most elemental and its most brutal. Jimmy Hardcastle, we are told:

... falls asleep smoking. Within minutes the flames are upon him. A crowd gathers on the sidewalk, watching Jimmy burn down. Jimmy is yelling for someone to bring him an ax. He thinks if he had an ax he could hack off his legs, cut the fire off at the knees, but there is no ax and soon the flames are waist high.

By the end of the poem, when it becomes obvious that no measure taken by the fire department or anybody else is going to save Jimmy from his horrifying fate, those who have crowded around try desperately to spin the reality of what they’re seeing into something at least manageable, something that might not keep them up at night:

Echoes of “Jump” rise from the crowd as the firemen unfurl a parachute but it is a saint-hearted display; there will be no leap to safety. Jimmy is going all the way.

That “all the way” indicates a strange kind of admiration, as if Jimmy has chosen this fate, as if burning to death were an art form or a sporting event Jimmy is in the process of perfecting. He is seeing it through, accomplishing something in the face of enormous odds and unpleasant consequences. This echoes what the

members of the fire department decide earlier in the poem when it becomes obvious they are impotent in the face of the flames. “They say Jimmy wants to burn, they are almost certain of it ...” There are elements of Kafka here, particularly “A Hunger Artist”, in which the artist ensures his own destruction as a necessary part of pursuing his art, but if the spectators are allowed to redeem the scene before them, we are not. If anything, Dunham’s vision is even more unsparing than Kafka’s. At the end of “A Hunger Artist”, Kafka famously places a panther, slick and powerful, its mouth when it roars full of what the narrator deems “freedom”, in the cage previously occupied by the hunger artist, now starved to death, wasted away and buried with the dirty straw on which he used to lie. The irony is palpable, but at least it contains some measure of what I have termed earlier secular redemption, something new and alive to hold onto, even if the reader doesn’t know precisely what it means. But Dunham’s conclusion, while deeply ironic as well, offers the reader nothing to hold onto, nothing to bravely spin what we have seen. The reader’s “all the way” is of an entirely different magnitude now than was the spectators’:

Jimmy stands paralyzed, peering over his nose at the crowd below, then retreats deep within himself. In the morning all that will be left is a charred spot on the corner where Jimmy stood.

Frequently, Dunham finds the perfect balance between the surrealist antics that keep the reader entertained and the merciless vision that lurks beneath the surface, and what results are small masterpieces. Perhaps the most remarkable of these is “Walking the Bat”, which opens with a narrator preparing to end his life by throwing himself off the “Jefferson Street Bridge”. He is pulled up short, though, along the way by an ad in a window for a store that sells seeing-eye dogs. Offended by the wording, he marches inside to scold the owner, but the owner has some pertinent information for the speaker:

“Our dogs aren’t just for the blind,” he says.

“Well who else would they be for?” I ask, somewhat snidely.

“Lots of people,” he says. “People who’ve lost their way or aren’t sure where they’re going. People like you.”

Of course the narrator chooses one and what follows is, quite literally, a day gone to the dogs. The previously despairing narrator throws off his humanity and finds not just solace, but out-and-out joy in following the lead of his new

companion. “The remainder of the afternoon is a glorious barrage of asses, smells, squirrel chases and garbage.” Dunham is laugh-out-loud funny from cover to cover of this collection and he uses his humor to cunning effect, making us comfortable in a world that seems, on the surface and at first, to be something wholly alien to our own. Otherwise, we might not stick around long enough to realize it is our world he is ultimately painting and the realization is almost always startling, and frequently, as previously stated, horrifying. Here is the end:

The day proves to be an unexpected triumph, a celebration of the senses and I spring into bed with the satisfaction of having lived life, for once, to the fullest. Today was an epiphany, a high water mark. Tomorrow: the bridge.

The front cover of *The Bible of Lost Pets* sports a blurb by Maxine Chernoff that claims the book “celebrates a world teeming with life, where anything can happen and does.” This seems to me to miss the mark. Yes, there is a feeling that anything might happen in these poems, but what actually happens is almost always determined by what actually happens to us. I’m not sure it’s life that is “teeming” here. What makes Jamey Dunham so remarkable an artist is his steadfast bravery in depicting a vision of the human condition that isn’t cute or zany or even particularly helpful. His fabulist predecessors – Aesop and LaFontaine – give us animals that are in reality people and we are to see our own foibles and shortcomings and, to a certain extent, our dignity in them. As near as I can tell, Dunham has done something entirely new within the fabulist tradition. He reverses the ordinary procedure. The animals are no longer people; they are animals. The weasels are really just weasels, even if endowed with the ability to speak. The mice in their sombreros are not stand-ins for you and me. They are mice in sombreros. And the wolves are just wolves. More to the point, though, in *The Bible of Lost Pets*, the people have all become animals as well. We too, Dunham reminds us, are subject finally to the abattoir.

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