Throwing Light on the Dark: An Interview with Greg Brownderville

craft talk by Elijah Burrell

Greg Brownderville

Elijah Burrell: First of all, Greg, I just want to tell you congratulations on your new book *A Horse with Holes in It.* Let me share with you what I wrote about the book on my Facebook wall back in November:

> **A Horse with Holes in It *shook me, played tricks on me, haunted me, and busted my gut. It's the kind of book that feels outrageously confessional in ways one doesn't anticipate. Though Greg and I are the best of friends, it always surprises me—and delights me—when I read his work and realize in so many ways we are also constant strangers. Those of you who've had the good fortune to read his work—or even shared a conversation with him—know how imaginative, funny, and charming he can be. Those things are all well and good, but I can say this: No other poet on earth is like this one. A wager: It will be a long time before you read a book that affects you more than this one will.***

So, good friend, constant stranger, there's the full disclosure. I think when *The Tishman Review* approached me to interview you they thought this might be a chummy affair. I want you to know I'm going to Barbara Walters this thing. I'm not going to be satisfied until the camera holds your face under supple light, tears streaming down your cheeks (soft as snow). By the way, the beard looks good on you, man. How does it feel to have the book out in the world? I know you're traveling around a bit in support of it. Can you gauge the general reaction to the book? What sayeth those who read poetry?

Greg Brownderville: Good to sit a spell with you, bud. I very much appreciate your take on *A Horse with Holes in It.* So far, readers have responded favorably to this book. Jen Hinst-White wrote a beautiful review, and I tell you what: The blurb from Abe Smith is good enough in its own right to win an award for best prose poem.

EB: Glad to hear it. About five years ago in *Gust,* you wrote about Sharon Weron spinning across the high hills of South Dakota inside a tornado. You wrote, "She can muster not a solitary sentence of description." You said, "There's something unsayable there." In the years since *Gust,* you yourself have been shook up and whirled around. The poems in *A Horse with Holes in It* indicate geographical movement (to a big city) and emotional disrepair. The unsettled speakers in these poems find themselves detached from the familiar. You grew up in the poorest region of the country—the Mississippi/Arkansas Delta—and over

the past few years have found yourself existing bizarrely in metropolitan Dallas: "In case you wonder what's become of me: / all of a weird sudden, I'm city slicked / in mega-world" (from "For Tess, From the Blue Door Tavern, 2010"). A Texan, Greg. It's as if you're the eye of the twister, and all your speakers—fragmented, detritus—enclose around you.

Unlike Weron, though, the speakers in your poems such as "Honest Gospel Singing" and "Welcome to the Old Cathedral," though confused, strive to tell what their conditions feel like. Is this a kind of bottomless anti-memesis where a poet's life and commentary imitate the art he or she once made, which imitated another's life? Can you talk a bit about how you thread your own experiences into these poems? Also, have you bought a belt buckle in the shape of the Lone Star State, or is it a shining razorback hog?

GB: I'm very happy and lucky to be at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. Texas has been all kinds of kind to me, and I'm all kinds of thankful. But let's face it: I'm no Texan. True Texans have a feeling for their native state that non-Texans will never fully understand.

You asked how I thread personal experience into *A Horse with Holes in It*. Not to go all Aeolian harp here, but serious business: There's not a lot I can say on the subject, reason being I wrote the book in a blur. I barely remember anything about it. (Which is fitting, I guess, for a book that's partly about spirit possession.) What I do remember is like flashes from a fistfight. Not just any fistfight, but one of those childhood enders. Dream-like and sinus-cracking real, all in one brutal moon-gong of a moment inside my head.

Many a time I've wondered: How did the writing happen? What was going on with me?

EB: Let's get to the bottom of that. I want to explore some moments in the new book that might be a little uncomfortable. Your speakers find themselves in different states of existential crisis. They wonder, at various times, if they are even present in the world around them—whether they've been absentees in the relationships they've shared with others. They wonder if these bewitchments have snatched their very freedom. We see this in poems like "Easy." Established in these poems is the pattern of women (bodily and spiritually) building up then destroying the male speakers' egos and senses of self. These women act, in ways, as Sibyls—oracles and priestesses, but the power they hold on your speakers exceeds anything we've seen from those Greek mythologies.

This is clearest in "Prosimetrum 1: Assorted Heads" where Sister Law is "making a boy" from driftwood and a scuffed baseball. We see it later in "Prosimetrum 2: Body Shots" where Gladleen creates an uncanny version of the speaker from mannequin parts and photographs. In "Sweet Tooth Homeless," Gladleen, now the speaker, masochistically builds up—then destroys—the now frayed-and-afraid man. But even as Gladleen works her sexual demolition, there's a sense she's rebuilding the spirit of the lost man. You've presented each of these moments as "art experiments." First, would you express how your Pentecostal upbringing (and the strange magic that saturated moments from your childhood) might lead these men to

wonder if they've been cursed, possessed, "commandeered" by ominous spirits? Also, one of the real triumphs of *A Horse with Holes in It* is how you made the workings of the spiritual realm (both dark and light) so entirely accessible. How in the world did you do that?

GB: Your wording of the question put me in mind of a passage from Bolaño's "Sensini" that describes a "feeling like jet lag—an odd sensation of fragility, of being there and not there, somehow distant from my surroundings."

The central women characters in *A Horse with Holes in It* are based on people I've known and admired. I was close friends with the self-taught sculptor Sister Ethel Leona Fitch Law. (I just got a letter from her son the other day reminding me that it was her birthday. She died over a decade ago at the age of 101.) Sister Law—her wondrous sculptures fill my office at SMU—was an important artistic and spiritual mentor to me. Gladleen is important too. Likewise Tess.

You asked how I "made the workings of the spiritual realm (both dark and light) so entirely accessible." I think it has something to do with the particular spiritual worlds I was writing about: Pentecost and the Mirror Saw. Both are quite bodily. In church, as little kids, we had memory verses, and I remember one that went, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, 'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.'" Pentecostals don't back away from that one bit. Christ is body. Church is body. Worship is body. You can't worship Pentecost-style if you're a person of gelid reserve. Don't give me no Michal. You gotta get out there like David and romp half-naked with the handmaidens around the ark.

The Mirror Saw, a multiracial hush-harbor society in the Delta, did a form of magic and mysticism seemingly compounded of Haitian, West African, Celtic, and Native American elements. In the Mirror Saw, the spirits were called *lowers* (sometimes spelled *lores*), which in the non-rhotic accent of the Delta, is pronounced *low-uhs*. Lowers were lower than gods but higher than humans. Lowers lowered themselves into our world and set their feet down in our dirt. Almost always the central event of a Mirror Saw gathering was a possession. Once a lower mounted a human body (called the "horse"), the lower would walk among the people, talk, eat, drink, crack jokes. The spirit took flesh. That poem "Easy," in which I write about marrying a lower named Easy Lee during early adolescence, mentions that Easy likes milk cake and mimosas because in my experience she does. There aren't too many religions whose spirits are so knowable.

All of this bodiliness is good for poetry, I do believe.

EB: Not every poem in *A Horse with Holes in It* forages for a clean, well-lighted place. Although the work deals in big-city isolation and what it feels like to range over the dark mountains of age, the poems also contain droves of humorous moments.

One of my favorite lines in the book happens during your long poem "Welcome to the Old Cathedral" when the speaker says, "One time, when 'Fields of Gold' was playing, / she looked up at the speakers / and said, 'O Sting, where is thy death?'" It's a great quip built around the famous verse in 1 Corinthians ("O death, where is thy sting?"). The first time I heard that line you were reading it in St. Louis to a crowded room of people that—in the moment—didn't get it. I remember my surprise at my solitary laughter

and thinking the joke would *slay* on the page. I think I was right in both respects.

You wrote some funny poems for *Gust* (most memorably "From a Nationally Televised Press Conference Starring the Poetic Sheriff, Joseph Kilpatrick Conway, After a Van Gogh Painting Is Stolen from a Little Rock Exhibit and Recovered in Monroe County"), but the hilarious flourishes in *A Horse with Holes in It* seem even funnier. Is it that they've got more edge to them? I've known so many writers with an incredible sense of humor that cannot, for the life of them, get it onto the page. When you write it, I don't merely feel entertained, I feel smarter. What's your secret?

GB: Regarding the differences between the ways I use humor in *Gust* and *A Horse with Holes in It*, if the comic element of the latter has more edge to it, the reason might be that humor occurs in the newer book mostly as momentary flickers within dark poems. Sort of like accidental sparks from the poems' main frictions. Some of the poems in *Gust* are comic from start to finish, which might make the humor feel less like chance moments of hilarity and more like stand-up (maybe?). To my mind, some of the most hilarious moments in life and in art seem accidental, unstaged. No one seems to have planned them or meant them to be funny. "I Remember" by Stevie Smith has that quality for me. "I do not think it has ever happened, / Oh my bride, my bride."

Have you ever seen a weeping human burst into strangely loud laughter at something that isn't even that funny? Poetry can yield a similar phenomenon, I think. If a poem has wakened huge sorrow or terror, and suddenly a funny moment happens, the autonomic arousal behind the heavier emotions gets instantly reinterpreted as comic feeling. Suddenly the reader's laughing harder than if the humor had arisen in a less grim context.

You are generous to say the humor in this new book of mine makes you feel smarter. In all sincerity, though, I want to turn that compliment back on you. I'm lucky to have friends, such as Eli Burrell, who are magnificently witty. Y'all sharpen me every day. As a result, I find myself writing keener poems, comic and otherwise.

EB: You do a lot of research when you write. In fact, sometimes I think you might just be researching every thing and person you encounter. In the last poem of the book, "Prosimetrum 3: The Fireworks," a poem I think should win every award in 2017's America, you present as evidence research into your family's past (most notably your grandfather Herbert Edward Brownderville). The form of the prosimetrum works so well in this particular instance, and sets up your love song to art-making and writing and friendship and the idea of what it even means to be a man in a 2017 America where at least one other poet believes you should win every award. Tell me why you chose this form (which dates back to antiquity) for some of the most important poems in the book. Also, can you talk about how research is as important to poets as it is to prose writers?

GB: Many thanks for the good words on "The Homemade Fireworks," my friend.

I do love fieldwork. I like hearing the raw, unedited stuff of poetry in real human voices with their rasps and murmurs and lilts and just-right rhythms. Also, I like being a detective, or maybe an anti-detective, tracking down the magic clue. I say anti-detective because I'm here to deepen the mystery, not to solve it. The local mystery is always also the cosmic.

You asked why I chose to use the prosimetrum. I had been reading Shakespeare and thinking about the form of the play, how it perfectly satisfies all of his creative impulses. He gets to tell stories, draw characters, and explore ideas, but never at the expense of the first, best thing: namely, the kind of poetry that runs on pure word-bliss. How does Shakespeare do it? How does he manage to give us such great lyric poetry, blazing and beautiful and free of narrative responsibility, within stories as complex and satisfying as the greatest novels? One thing I kept noticing is that Shakespeare rarely does his most difficult narrative spadework *within* his most lyrical soliloquies. That's done by more pedestrian, utilitarian lines elsewhere in the plays. The stories are there, with all of their drama, all of their implications, underneath and all around the soliloquies, imbuing them with meaning, giving them extra lyrical launch.

The prose sections of a prosimetrum allow me to set the stage, to get my narrative work done, and then break free into lyric. I can avoid the narrative-lyric compromises that are right for some poems but terribly stifling in others.

EB: I think I'll fold that anti-detective answer up and stuff it into my pocket so I never forget it. In "Prosimetrum 3: The Fireworks," your father, Alton, tells a story about his boyhood family horse, Buck. Buck decides to eat from the neighbor's side of the fence, and the neighbor open fires on him. Either you or Alton then plays the words nicely with the line, "Looked like buckshot to me." You write:

> ***So the horse, out of panic, ran at a full gait back up towards the house and jumped the fence that separated our backyard from our pasture, and run into the front yard where Daddy was. And the blood was just shooting out—I don't know—fifteen or twenty feet, it looked like, every time his heart would beat. It was pitiful. And he had so many holes in him that there was no way to save the horse, but Daddy couldn't shoot him. Just couldn't pull the trigger. You get attached to animals, especially when you make a living with them and depend on them. And looked like the old horse's eyes was, you know, 'Do something to help me.' And there was nothing to do. It's funny how animals have a—I think they have a sense that they're hurt really bad.***

So this is the titular horse with holes in it. Later, in the "The Song" portion of the poem, you repeat the bit about how animals have a sense they're hurt really badly. This hurt carries through the entire book, Greg. It's in "Prayer to Isis" when you write, "The lava scorched / my throat, and now— / to drop an old-time eggcorn— / I've got me a horse in my voice." We read it in "Prosimetrum 1: Assorted Heads" when "Mister Good Day used my body as a horse for better than three hours. Danced up on the women and even on the men." Mister Good Day and the Mirror Saw divide your speaker into different selves. They possess him or "mount" him—which seems to imply the inherent component of sexuality of the situation too. These equine references occur throughout the book. Please tell me just a little bit about why you think this division of self, this "mounting" of identities, works so well when employed by a poet unafraid to spread a myriad of voices across his or her own work. John told the world that Paul was The Walrus, Greg. Can I tell them that you're The Horse?

GB: The other day, after I gave a reading, a woman in the audience—let's call her Kate—said something cool about one of my prosimetra, the one called "Assorted Heads," which was first published by Roy Giles and Chase Dearinger in *Arcadia* (thanks, fellas). Kate said she had recently read a review of *A Horse with Holes in It* that presents "Assorted Heads" as the heart of the collection. The review in question, an insightful piece by Peter Simek, says that "Assorted Heads" is "about an old woman who makes a kind of voodoo doll for a young boy, interchanging the heads so often that the glue no longer holds. It is a metaphor of a confused or fragile sense of identity that sustains the rest of the cycle." Kate said that to her way of thinking, the "interchanging [of] the heads" is actually a metaphor for my multiple possession experiences in the Mirror Saw and Pentecost. The "confused or fragile sense of identity" is a *result* of those experiences. She pointed out that while the speaker in "Assorted Heads" does ask for prayer, his overall tone suggests hopeful wandering, playful experimentation and exploration. What Kate found surprising is not that the speaker's sense of self is so unstable, but rather that the poem, the poet, and the speaker all seem to be okay with that—actually not just okay but *excited* about the accompanying sense of freedom, possibility, and adventure. I liked the way she put that. Might be something to it. ♦

Greg Brownderville is the author of *A Horse with Holes in It* (LSU Press, 2016), *Deep Down in the Delta* (Butler Center, 2012), and *Gust* (Northwestern University Press, 2011). At Southern Methodist University in Dallas, he serves as Associate Professor of English, Director of Creative Writing, and Editor-in-Chief of the *Southwest Review.*