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on William Pitt Root

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We knew nothing but the felling of trees and the planting of grain and the killing of Indians, and time and again were we felled ourselves in the dollar wars that we could understand as little as the Indian understood our loathing of trees. . . . That is why, like cornered beasts, we have lied, cheated, stolen, murdered, raped, destroyed, and driven those natives to this land from it. *We had no goddamn where else to go!*

In an appeal to "reason and mercy, of forgiveness and understanding," he asks the jury to "hand down kindness . . . to those who have wronged us and, in turn, beg such forgiveness . . . from them for our home."

After deliberating five minutes, the jury, too angry to accept either the Marxist analysis or the Christian solution, finds the Indians guilty. But the strength of *Lords of The Plain* does not lie in its politics or generalizations, which we have heard before, it lies in its particularities. Even the plot falls away in insignificance — battles and romantic encounters, forced marches and a broken marriage — against "the great wall of the *llano estacado*." Like Crawford's cavalymen, we ride into uncharted space "mesmerized by its grandeur."

Even those of us who had come upon it before gazed in wonder as this fortress loomed above us, like a bank of stone clouds. The colors were those I had never seen in nature or art: the sloping canyon walls were a fiery brick red dotted with dark green clumps of brush, the caprock escarpment mottled yellow and white, the sky behind . . . a curtain of black blue pierced by a bright solitary star mockingly luring us forward.

We come away from *Lords of The Plain* feeling as if we had been there. And that's as good as it needs to be.

—Annick Smith

William Pitt Root
Invisible Guests
Confluence Press, Inc.
Lewiston, Idaho
1984
\$5.00

In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, the philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote, "Everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem." William Pitt Root, in his most recent collection, *Invisible Guests*, recovers some of that "used-up" poetry. *Invisible Guests*

collects poems spoken in the voices of waitresses, truckers, painters, a wrestler, a weight lifter, an hermaphrodite, and a "shy phenomenologist," as well as poems dedicated to or written about a similar cast of characters.

Among these "invisible guests" is Coot, the cantankerous old prospector and homespun philosopher, certainly one of the most memorable characters ever to turn up between the covers of a book of poetry. Root devotes the first section of the book to Coot, and the old codger lays down the rules. A self-admitted "buggywhip / in a world of powerbrakes," Coot is part-mystic, part pragmatist. He values words and measures them carefully, unlike the "strangers" who are moving in on his territory: "You listen to most people talk / You try to taste their words: / Storebought." Elsewhere, he claims that the strangers speak "Book."

In Coot, Root has created a character who reminds us that speech is rooted in land and custom. He lives where language still has its feet in the dust and rip-rap, speaks "Bear" not "Book," and knows about "the kind of gold there is / still in the wilderness / that no man can haul out." When the town he lives in becomes a skiing resort, Coot laments the loss of any connection to the land for the strangers who've moved in: "Not one," he says, "knew what / the thirst is / a star quenches." Coot's confrontation with the modern world does not shake his own values; he maintains his beliefs and speaks them with a primitive, often comic, eloquence. After reading an article *Cosmopolitan* called "What To Tell You Husband If You Put On Weight—While Having An Affair," Coot responds tersely:

Whatever it is they tell her
she should say, she'd need
to learn to pronounce it in shotgun
if she was mine, cause
that's what she'd be talking
into the ears of.

Not all of Root's characters are so self-assured, so firm in their convictions. In the second section of the book, Root lets some of the homeless "strangers" speak: the inner-city black who defines himself in different terms—"I was no one / until they made me / afraid"; the "Quiet Citizen" that the government ignores, for whom language is ineffective, whose complaints are "accurately recorded"; the "Retiring Executive" who "For // profit . . . would come into his office blind"; the father who loves without "a full knowledge of love," who gives his diabetic child a sack of candy—"things / to be put in love's place." Throughout this section, Root sees how we fail to love and how, too often, we learn of our failures too late. In "Words For The Dead," the speaker addresses the deceased: "We are astounded // Now that you are dead / we cannot do enough for you."

The tone in the final section of the book is more meditative, more optimistic. Good humor and gentleness predominate; people endure, celebrate, dream. Some of the poems in this final section are more clearly "literary," and announce themselves as such. This is a bit of a let-down from the apparent—though no doubt hard-earned—artlessness of the preceding poems. Still, some wonderful poems are included here, among them are "For the World's Strongest Man," "In the North Wind of Le Pouldu," "Passing Go,"

and "A Shy Phenomenologist Breaks the Ice," This last poem is short enough to quote in full:

Where there was nothing
but your silence waiting

now there is a green skull
jeweled by green eyes

breaking the reflection
of cloud on a pond.

A fly darts down, disappears,
the face submerges.

Cloudlight heals the water
with its stillness

as our faces reappear
upon that surface, gazing

deeply into themselves
in search of the argueable frog.

And things are as they should be.
The cheek-to-cheek. The mystery.

Through *Invisible Guests*, Root and his characters speak poetry, not "Book." Yet Root and his guests also avoid the flatness we often associate with "plain speech" poetry. The characters' respect for silence and distrust of "Book" leads them to speak clear, sharp poetry. Coot's poems, for example, are interruptions of speech out of and into a valued silence. Without straining after poetry, Root creates it, employing a wide range of strategies, from "found" poems to rhymed poems, from long-lined free verse to prose poems to poems that are much taller than they are wide. All of this adds up to an energetic collection of poems that are moving, thought-provoking, sometimes funny, and always pleasurable to the ear and eye.

If, as Czeslaw Milosz puts it in an epigraph to *Invisible Guests*, "the purpose of poetry is to remind us / how difficult it is to remain just one person," then these poems succeed grandly. They reveal the multiplicity of the self, a multiplicity we all share. In reaching out, in hearing well these voices or finding them within himself, Root discovers himself and, in discovering himself, discovers these others, these guests whose sufferings we suffer, whose joys we rejoice in. The poems in *Invisible Guests* awaken us to our own lives and the lives around us.

—Jon Davis