

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 19 *CutBank* 19

Article 37

Fall 1982

On Harold Rhenisch

Greg Glazner

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Glazner, Greg (1982) "On Harold Rhenisch," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 19 , Article 37.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss19/37>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

Winter

Harold Rhenisch
Sono Nis Press
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia

Winter is Canadian poet Harold Rhenisch's first book. Like scores of other first books, *Winter* displays well-crafted, carefully controlled language. But Rhenisch's best poems convey his need to confront what he writes about, giving his work a sense of importance which is too often lacking in contemporary poetry. *Winter* is inventive, original, and enjoyable, but it sets itself apart from books which merely entertain by creatively addressing central human issues such as time, death, growth, and love.

Throughout the book, two impulses move the author—a sensuous love for the land, and a restless intelligence. "Dream," the first poem, embodies both of these impulses. The first stanza places the persona in contact with the land, the second stanza withdraws into an abstract consideration of memory, and the third unifies these two impulses through metaphor:

I remember pruning apple trees,
frozen wood sharing
my descending sky;
a small, dark shape
plodding through drifted snow
and frozen earth.

Memory is not a matter
of knowing anything or nothing:
how much can I give up my words
for sky, trees and soil,
and choose the curve of this land,
when all are moving into vacancy?

Wood extends beyond wood, words
extend until something other
than words is left, a voice, a
channel pulling with the sea
into our rites of passage
where we never pass.

The closing stanzas of “I Wait” embody the poet’s deep attachment to the land, his first and most natural impulse:

In these rift valleys,
in the farthest direction, stars
spin out

like leaves in endless wind.
My hair tugs at my head—into the dark.
As I walk I hear only
a loud, warm rustling,

so loud I can hear
only one word:
in the grass,
and that all about me, that word:

stay.

The muse figure, present in many of Rhenisch’s poems, is linked to this love for the land, as these lines from “She Stands in Old Grass and Laughs” illustrate:

She stands in the heavy couchgrass
beneath the old linden.
She bends to smooth the grass.

Over the deep creek, the red-throated
ring-necked pheasant
creak at wind and the yellow fern.

. . .

She stares, and cries into the darkness
beneath the linden,
Do you hear the snow coming?

Hello?

. . .

Seeds burst into the wind
from the thin pods. She laughs
and bends to smooth the grass.

The poet's rare ability to unify the sensuous world with the world of ideas is at work in the poem "The Mill":

In a fluid darkness
bent by stars,
all direct lines
are curves of stone
cracking on the river bottom,
shudders of light
learning wetness, flesh,
stone turned inward
to learn the hardness inside stone.

I held this truth once.
Do you want truth?
Myself, I have stopped
asking for truth
but ask for simplicity
and it confounds me.

We fall, straight, hard,
into the sun of where we've been,
and come out flesh,
not space, but yielding stone, earth.
It is a flying leap.

The vastness of the first image (which sounds very much like Einstein's space-time continuum), "a fluid darkness/bent by stars," contrasts nicely with the final image of the first stanza, the hard inwardness which the poet has come to reject. The simplicity which Rhenisch now asks for is "hard knowledge," the knowledge against which every person must weigh his existence:

How far have we come or gone?
It is cold.
I throw a stone into the current.
It drifts.
What is time to us?
We are time,
the most difficult answer.

. . .

The leaf falls; the body rots;
the moments end.
This is not a truth
but something every man
must stand against

in his own time.
Hard knowledge:
only love brings life
to fallow flesh.
Such simplicity confounds me.

“We Live on the Edge,” a central poem of the book, succeeds in unifying Rhenisch’s love for the land and his need for ideas:

The August air swims outside my
window and settles into the pale blades
of grass nodding as the wind
bends them down and is still.

I must acknowledge the winter
in these hot stones, in the hillsides,
in our eyes. The vineyard is gone.
In these dead rows, only the valley
remains, pushing, cracked
and thick with weeds.

There is no name for what we are.
Sure, we farm, we count off split
vines shaggy with dead bark, but names?
Gravel ridges spill
in long arcs through the tan soil
of the vineyard: burnt or icy,
this summer’s stones are death, are hard,
are in me.

...

Maybe you do not want
to talk about gods;
maybe you think a blade of grass
is not a stillness I give to you;
maybe you say the land does not
steam off from our skin,
that we do not walk,
in spirals of mind, back,
and forward in our doing back,
in heat, that heat is not stone,
that we do not touch ourselves
from stone to flesh. Maybe
you do not want
to talk about gods.

Rhenisch handles his different stylistic approaches well. In "Forgetting," short lines are skillfully enjambed in a way which allows the rhyme pattern to enhance the poem's musical quality without calling attention to itself:

All winds are skin
against the thin
edges of the mind;
all my dead speak;
all my days haze out:
and what I seek
I cannot find.

I walk through birch—
a bared, grey arch
beneath the stretched skin
of yellow dusk;
I walk, ruffled, cold,
the soil a husk,
the sky resin

and the thin whine
of blood, a line
of cold breath and sight,
the trees pushing
at wood for their leaves—
the old humming
collapse of night.

"Mill Road, 1930" is approached, stylistically, in a very different way. No punctuation stops the eye anywhere in the poem, except after the last line, but the use of lines which are broken at the end of short phrases stops the momentum which normally carries the reader from one line to the next. The result is that each line seems to float in place, suspended in time, like the gathering of people beside Mill Road:

The hour of breezes
In green orchards
Water smells
Laughter

Men track down cliffs
to women
in shallow water

A dog barks
at a shirt left
hanging over a branch

And he will bark all night

Water swilling the day's end
Closing eyes of men and women
around a fire

the barking
regular as a tolling bell
in another country

They have come
as far as they need to be
years a rustle in the reeds.

Rhenisch's impulses toward sensuous and intellectual experience are present throughout *Winter*. As he addresses, in poetry, the issues which are crucial to him, he brings these impulses together in many shapes. The result of this process is a fine book of poetry in which fresh imagery and inventive language speak through the force of ideas and the feel of the land.