

FROM RUIN TO REBIRTH

Seth Abramson. *Northerners*. Kalamazoo, MI: New Issues, 2011.

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Nearly half of the 50 poems in *Northerners*, Seth Abramson's second book, are narrated by a variation of first-person. While the collective perspective retains the possibility of inclusivity, first-person singular poetry is often questioned: is the work too insular, the moment too exaggerated? Abramson's usage of the singular first-person is much wider than most, resulting in a welcome paradox for the reader at the conclusion of *Northerners*: individual poems that exist as absolute moments, and yet speak with narrative breadth toward a cohesive collection.

The book begins mid-thought with "Ruin," where "and backwards go / the men into the garden." The poem introduces some of Abramson's main concerns in the text. This is a book about men, and sometimes boys, and their existence within a larger genealogy of masculinity. The masculinity of *Northerners*, though, is comfortably malleable, existing within the truths of "Bronx Flyweight in Drag": "Finding your form / is not a form of discipline." Men arrive and leave here, mature and revert, and the recursivity of identity is reflected in Abramson's dynamic usage of repetition. The application of that poetic trope is certainly obvious in this book: words and phrases loop backward, arriving in new connotations to create a layering of thought and image. Repetition occurs within lines, across poems, and also between different sections.

"Ruin" is repeated: both the direct word and the concept. "Thursday with Borderline," a poem comprised of only the reported speech between a couple, ends with the lines "They say / you will ruin me. Yes. Yes. I am ruined." The connotation of ruin here is good, for the poem records the bartering of love: "I will sleep with you / when you have ironed your shirt for work. / We have a deal. You cook and I will bring home sugar." I am reminded of Aimee Nezhukumatathil's usage of the phrase "wrecked with love" in "Baked Goods": the sense of the beautiful mess of domesticity. The first-person pronoun is split between two people in "Thursday with Borderline," a clever and successful representation of how the individual self disappears in a relationship: a difficult decision, but one done for both practical and emotional reasons. Ruin is again intimated in the final line of "First Genesis, As Told By Himself and Gardening." Abramson does not push the Edenic reference in an allegorical sense, but the inevitability of the

Fall grounds the poem, and what has “ruined them” is “thought and experience”—essential components of a reasoned life.

Northerners reads as the work of a poet concerned with the connection between this “thought and experience.” “A Man and Boy or Two Boys or a Horseman” examples Abramson’s process as poetic product. The poem begins with a four-line introduction, blurring the reality and memory of the encounter that follows:

He was sorry for how he’d sat
 a massacre in the guise of a man
 at a party for a boy he didn’t know,

This unknown guest is noticed, and yet, for some reason, not rejected. He is described as “a man / who sees the real hue of things,” and the poem hangs on the word “hue.” This is a poem about shades, of unnamed “chemicals,” but most importantly, about the perspective held at the end of a life. Here, at “the majestic tail of his life,” the man instead plays “horse / in a game of Knights.” The game ends quickly, but the moment stretches: the man “put a hand on the boy’s head / and said, / I am your horse.” That final phrase is repeated three more times in the final two lines, a promise and statement as refrain. It might be unwise to parse a poet’s vocabulary across works, but a reader thinks back to the conclusion of the initial poem of the collection, which ends “Ponies cannot love / children. But O, those ponies. Those ponies.” In the same way that animal and human may be herded in ruin, so is man and boy wedded in the mystery of emotional interaction across generations.

Abramson is absolutely not a devotional poet, though he clearly has a foot in the archetypically religious: *Northerners* operates not completely within the vaulted syntax of the King James Bible, but shares the translation’s heightened tenor often distilled through the mundane. “First Genesis, As Told By Himself and Gardening” connects to the earlier, commanding pieces. The final sentence of the poem is an exercise in poetic revision of the comma:

There had never been anything so
 horrible,
 and so the vine spoke, not horribly,
 or the life of a god, and of the ground a god is
 loved above, and of the dead the endtimes
 plough beneath, and how between those two
 is only thought and experience
 and always—(this ruined them)—both at once.

Abramson corrals his images with these heavy commas, and the Biblical content is refracted through the lexicon already established in *Northerners*, including the concept of “ruin” as a necessary step toward rebirth.

The heightened sense of the male in these particular poems is not the only reflection of masculinity in the collection. In “The Last Inch,” “gentle men are in a bad way / tonight” and “some hearts are trembling.” The separation of “gentlemen” almost feels like a lament for some lost masculine past, for in this same night these men “sweep women from their work-spaces” where they will “whisper face to face with the long longing / breath of children—.” The final lines are reported speech: “Please God / let us be good to one another.”

Abramson embeds speech in several poems in *Northerners*, with “Thursday with Borderline” being the most agile of the applications. In that poem, Abramson eschews quotation marks and opts for an unbroken pace, and the result is a well-controlled work. The contrast between this poem and “First Genesis, As Told By Himself and Gardening” could not be more apparent, and yet not a single work appears out of place. The same welcome disparity exists between poems set in rural and urban areas. The final section of the book is largely city-based—the collection ends with the elegiac “A Time for Cities,” where “men are chased / from the cities / and their own selves” — while scattered poems through the book are solidly pastoral, and yet with a curious touch. “Show Me State” begins with “chickens...on high alert,” and the comment that “Few animals in the yard have never tasted / their own waste / and been surprised in an animal way / at how little / it defiled them.” The words and elements repeated in the poem—chickens, fox, man, fear—cast a positively Faulknerian shadow, seemingly in direct lineage from the first paragraph of his 1940 story, “Was.” Abramson moves in his own literary direction, though, ending “One town to the north, / a prayer service floating on its own exhaustion.”

Several poems reflect Abramson’s past profession as a public defender. “Three Cuts” is the best of these poems. The poem’s general tone is reminiscent of his pastoral work: there’s the play of intelligent writing that does not take itself seriously to a fault. At this barbershop “there are attorneys / in the first three chairs” and “One of them is a virgin / with a head like tumbleweed.” That attorney mentions his areas of focus, but Abramson follows the declaration with an undercut: “all the barbers know / he’s a virgin.” This light-hearted lament ends with smooth lines: “And maybe / the taxes are the only thing that / ever gets finished, and it hurts.”

The “hurt” and “ruin” of *Northerners* does not lead to a depressing read. Rather, the text arrives as the accumulation of learned experience: offerings,

perhaps, of poetic wisdom. “Hands Are Wood” is a microcosm of the book: palpable detail channeled through a powerful voice. “Come see the wood-pile behind the cannery” is certainly a command, but it is also the presentation of a history, “a short history of commotion.” The lines move toward ripe description that feels descended from James Galvin:

Come wait for the heavy trucks to arrive,
 the men in dusters cutting the twine,
 loading the long ghostly planks like ballast
 into iron barges.

Descended is probably not the best word. If we consider TS Eliot’s “Tradition and Individual Talent,” Abramson’s application of the individual feels appropriate and reasoned: his poems certainly have a “historical sense,” his “I” is removed from minutia and yet graced with empathy. One might draw a line from writers such as Galvin to Abramson, but that line should be dotted, and finally broken at a point: *Northerners* is a new work that is built on, but not indebted to, great poetic ancestry.