

The Bull Calf # 2.3

Wedding in Fire Country by Darren Bifford and *A Brief History of the Short-lived* by Chris Hutchinson

Reviewed by Melissa Dagleish

Two collections released this spring by Nightwood Editions, *Wedding in Fire Country* by Darren Bifford and *A Brief History of the Short-lived* by Chris Hutchinson, share similarities both superficial—publisher, trim size, page count, price—and substantial. Both collections attempt, with varying degrees of success, to present a poet’s-eye view of the world that is slightly askew—just off-centre enough to force the eye to refocus, to see differently, to glimpse the world that exists underneath and behind the world that we see because we expect it to be there. As Bifford notes, “There is no true world, wrote Nietzsche, / unhappily. What you believe to be true / is just what is true” (37). However, both Bifford and Hutchinson hold out the possibility that there is more to the world than that, that we “might go on to dream in the early hours / of a new and divine way of thinking” (37). But where *Wedding in Fire Country* too frequently gets mired in the mundane, exchanges the unexamined every day for the extremities of the imagined, *A Brief History of the Short-lived* is immersed in this early-morning dream, and models, with more precision and grace, this new and divine way of thinking . . .

. . . In his third collection, *A Brief History of the Short-lived*, Chris Hutchinson similarly encourages his readers to revisit that which they are immersed in until it becomes unfamiliar enough to warrant scrutiny—much as repeating a word like “fork” over and over eventually makes it taste strange to the tongue and sound odd to the ear. Hutchinson suggests that it is the artist who most fully possesses the skewed vision that can reveal the many worlds around and beside and beyond the one we take for granted; in “The Poet in Middle America,” he invites us to “recall the artist” whose “sunburned eyes unreel/ To chase hieratic scripts blazed in neon across/ Embankments, culverts” (53), eyes that transform graffiti into something rich and strange. But, as he warns in “Committee Report” (tellingly dedicated not to, but “~after Adrienne Rich,” whose active advocacy for the importance of the arts ended with her death in March of this year), that vision is in peril: “the keys a pianist’s / Hand stumbles down in a drunken attempt at bravura” are “the only /art forms we will finance or publicly / Support” (59) and tomorrow the artist will be replaced by “Scores of *artistes*” who “will line up and beg /to decorate.../our dinner table with fashionable trinkets” (59).

The feverish child of Hutchinson’s collection, the time-travelling son of a historiographer, stands in (as he does for Bifford) for the potential to see, or at least imagine, beyond the limited vision the superficial world encourages: he sees the seemingly level “horizon / Sloping, gently rolling / The moon across a frost- / Blighted field towards a fissure / In the cosmos” (13), and the possibility of the line of time, which appears to march forward into the future, folding and bending to allow him to go back and become “*Precambrian/ Stone, or...a sparrow/ In preternatural flight*” (13). But this childhood potential is brief and short-lived: Hutchinson’s image for the verdant energy of nature and creativity is a tree that grows like “a leafy bulb screwed into the ground” that “no one notices” (30), and in its middle “There’s a sanctuary no

one can see: / A self-enclosed poetics: a twofold dream” (30), the doubled dream of the visionary—the artist, the poet, the child whose vision has not yet narrowed—that is hidden from the world. Hutchinson, like Bifford, seeks to reveal that which lies beneath and beyond that which we take for granted, but his search extends beyond just what we see and into how we express it. While Bifford occasionally gets mired in the mundane—of life, and of language—Hutchinson’s turns of phrase sweetly swerve and startle, rarely succumbing to the lure of the common or the easy: the eyes of a stock trader are “the half-closed eyes of a nursing infant /...twin stars gone / Milky, nebular” (9); childhood wears a “crayon-scrawled grin” (75); words are “figures to be cast from the white-hearted lead” (51).

Both Hutchinson and Bifford seek to shake the world from its complacency, to give readers access to moments where we might pursue a “new and divine way of thinking” (37) that has the potential to transform reality even as it creates it. In the end, what each poet seems to truly want is for readers to become artists, to attain the double-sighted poet’s-eye vision that can see more and see differently. Chris Hutchinson has the truer gift of sight, but with his first collection, Darren Bifford provides enough glimpses into that other world to suggest that his own vision is developing apace.