

Made Flesh
Craig Arnold

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Reviewed by Christopher Doda



Since American poet Craig Arnold's first collection, *Shells*, was selected by W.S. Merwin for *The Yale Series of Younger Poets* in 1999, much has changed in the style of his work. *Shells* was an assured debut whose most notable characteristic was the linguistic conflict between Arnold's use of fixed stanzas and his jarring poetic rhythms. I reviewed *Shells* at the time and ended my piece hoping that he would eventually expand his subject matter to match his technical skills as a poet. In the intervening decade that he was writing *Made Flesh*, I have got my wish to a certain extent.

artists

Made Flesh is certainly a more ambitious work. Arnold's accomplishment in his sophomore effort was to take stories from classical or mediaeval mythology and domesticate them in a contemporary setting, all the while maintaining their most unsettling qualities. Comprised of seven long poems, *Made Flesh* is, at its core, a book of love poetry, one not so much concerned with chronicling any specific love stories or affairs but one that seeks to understand and define the nature of love itself.

For instance, "Couple from Hell," a sequence on Hades and Persephone, opens with the poet apologizing to the 'Queen of the Underworld' for her capture not only by Hades but also in her narrative

I would unlock for you
the gates of horn and ivory
that keep you in the underworld
for better or for worse
I would walk you through
another story

because she is as trapped by the endless repetition and reinventions of her myth as she is by her husband, the Lord of the Dead. A few pages later Hades is introduced, addressed as

'you' (in opposition to Persephone who is 'she' throughout), at which point the poem becomes a sort of love triangle between the mythic couple and the poet rendering them into verse. The poet and Hades jostle for her attentions though neither can truly win. As they settle into bored domesticity, she laments her former joys, her freedom, but moreover she longs to step out of her story into another, any other, myth, ideally that of Daphne who was transformed into a tree to escape Apollo:

If only some other god could come
and with a touch transform your limbs to tree
and harden your skin to bark better to be
tormented with the ache of bud and blossom
a green twig twisted and not breaking

Persephone and Hades are only able to gain freedom from "the world you talked into a prison" by stepping out of their shared mythology: "the story lies open between you/You could pick up where you left off/and soldier on," thereby perpetuating the mythic arc of their endless existence

Or like two kids who suddenly agree
the game is pointless and no fun
you could quit playing without regrets
without reprisals saying simply
Let's get out of here Yes let's

The introduction of childish thinking as a mode of escape denotes a forced simplicity onto life's innate complexity, which has serious implications to myth. The foundational mythological stories of Western culture have been reinvented by a multitude of successive generations, their weight crippling the present day. To Arnold, escape requires a child's mind to sidestep their history and thus their collective burden.

For Arnold, love is also tied to notions of personal identity and what constitutes the 'personal core' of human beings. In the opening poem, "Incubus," a young woman brings home a man whose attractiveness she can barely fathom, alcohol and intuition having brought her to this point. During their lovemaking he literally possesses her body and they switch souls, a possession that continues for seeming months. Beneath the gender-bending of the body switch is a poem about how identity is compromised, both willingly and unwillingly, in the muddled area of love when the nature of that compromise is not always clear. By poem's end, the anonymous 'she' has found a limit to the flexibility of her personality and how much of it she is willing/able to give to her demon lover. She finally decides "that it can stop, and go no deeper."

The flipside of the assertion of identity in love is explored in the book's strongest poem, "Hymn to Persephone," an ode that is actually more about the quintessential poet-figure Orpheus and his doomed wife Eurydice. Persephone has taken Eurydice into the Underworld to strike a blow at Orpheus, a sweet-talking playboy, "a man who would play fast and loose with Love," because she is offended that he "swore he'd never/let Love knock the wind out of him." The story continues as one would expect: he entering the Underworld to gain her freedom with his song only to lose her by looking back and returning alone to sing his grief. The narrative is designed to teach Orpheus about love itself. Unlike the myth, where Orpheus' sorrow is so strong at Eurydice's death that he pierces the Underworld to win her back, here he merely goes below to retrieve what is his because "grim determination/came to him more easily than tears." Back on the surface,

Orpheus achieves a “self-effacing/surrender of love....lost in the joy of self forgetting.” His personality is ecstatically erased and he is returned to life to sing of the day “his heart had been spilled” (a notion echoed in “Asunder” where love amounts to “seeing through/the idea of you to you”). At this point, he becomes a true artist, rather than a talented dissembler of words.

As I was composing this review, Craig Arnold disappeared while hiking on the volcanic island of Kuchinoerabujima in Japan at the end of April 2009. He is now presumed dead, which makes rereading *Made Flesh* an unintentionally sombre affair. It is a powerful collection; of the seven poems included, five are of a high quality (only “Mistral” and “Made Flesh” lack the depth and emotional heft of the others) and that makes for a seriously solid second outing. Arnold’s contemporary recasting of mythical stories and carefully crafted meditations on love, a mixture of high culture subject matter with mournful language, which had set the stage for a promising poetic career has become an unfortunate swansong.



Christopher Doda is a poet and critic living in Toronto. His first collection of poems, *Among Ruins*, was released in 2001 by Mansfield Press and his second, *Aesthetics Lesson*, appeared in the autumn of 2007.