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Ballyhoo

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Ballyhoo

by Hastings Hensel

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Ballyhoo. Such a halting word. It makes you stop just to say it again, to let it roll off your tongue just so you can taste it again. If you were to look up this delicious word, you would find that it means an extravagant noise—an excessive fuss with no real reason. While that may be the word's more well-known connotation, a fisherman will tell you a ballyhoo is a baitfish common to saltwater sportsmanship.

Hensel's collection finds a home in the conflation of these meanings. Many of the poems deal with the dual nature of things. It tackles the dichotomy, the two sides: the laugh and the cry, the bellying up to a fight and the taking the punch with a grin. And we, as readers, are drawn through the comedy and tragedy the same way a magician talks you through a magic trick. He points you where he wants you to pay attention, then in some sleight of hand you may or may not catch, he flips the card, and lo it's yours! The trick is complete, and we come away wowed and satisfied. Maybe a little irked that he was indeed too fast for us. But isn't that what we want as readers?

I was fortunate enough to hear Hensel read from this new collection at the Sewanee Writers' Conference this summer (2019). During the reading, Hensel drew our attention to the dedication, "For Biddy, in on the joke." I include the story Hensel related to us because its hidden humor sets the tone for the collection. And—because I read this collection in light of this information—it seems only fitting to include the backstory here. You see, Biddy is not so much a person as you and I would figure, but rather an imaginary character from Hensel's mother's childhood. Biddy became the scapegoat of various misbehavings. One day, Hensel's grandmother became so fed up with Biddy's shenanigans that she announced Biddy was dead, and they were to have a funeral for her in

the backyard. And thus, Biddy was put to rest accompanied with a prayer. The fact that Hensel's collection is dedicated to his mother's childhood imaginary friend is just a tongue-in-cheek glimpse of what's to come.

One turns the page from dedication to an epigraph from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* citing the exchange between Viola and the clown. This is not the last we'll see of the clown. From the title and dedication to the epigraph, the entire collection seeks a laugh and gestures to performance of emotion and expectation. And yet, it is in the removal of the clown's makeup, the suggestion of what's under the mask, that we as readers find insight into the trauma of our own inner landscapes.

Hensel—clearly aware of the duality of his title—tackles the idea early on in the collection with the second poem, "True Story, No Joke":

> *What's so funny? What's so funny?*
> the man screamed as he slammed
>
> my head again, again, again, again
> against the cinderblock wall.
>
> What I was trying to spit out,
> blood-choked, I've long since lost.
>
> But all the friends I have left
> say it sounded just like *ballyhoo*.
>
> Ballyhoo? The silvery baitfish?
> The bombast of the bs'er?
>
> Well, hell. I guess I'll take it. (1–11)
>
> [. . .]
>
> *What's so funny? What's so funny?*
> the man kept screaming while I

could not stop laughing, saying
something not (but kin to) *hallelujah!* (19–22)

Here, Hensel touches on humor and violence all while evoking *ballyhoo*—the belly-laugh, gut-wrenching expulsions of "laugh or cry." And, at this point, *ballyhoo* is a coping mechanism as the speaker reverts to habits of his childhood to survive a current trauma. At the same time, however, the laughter serves to further incite the attacker, almost as if participating in a death wish. Through this act we see the thin veil between passions of laughter and rage. However, by the end of the collection, the laugh has transformed from the defensive position to a release. You'll find these ideas embedded in the fish poems, the second ballyhoo. While the first ballyhoo held the violence of excess, the fishing poems guide the reader to laughter's new meaning: "let me teach you now what laughter / has meant for me: forgiveness, / which is release" (16–18). Then the reader is taken to learn about "Throwbacks": fish you don't keep because they are

Plainly: trash
to throw back,
a valid act,
all spasm and thrash,
as with the past
to practice, thus,
the art of release,
to let shit go. (18–25)

Release is the second side of the laughter coin and the fulfillment of ballyhoo. It is the sock and buskin: comedy and tragedy. One cannot exist without the other, and the two coexist and provide the backbone of this collection.

Moving beyond laughter, Hensel flexes his wordplay muscles to keep us dangling with lines like these from the bleeding title "What We Need Here Is a New Dialect Noun":

For the way the strange stain's shape and shade,
on carpet changes in late summer light,

that act—*burmba,* maybe?—when morph isn't right,
or metamorphose, or transform, or fade—(1–4)

He reminds us that in the absence of the perfect word, we invent new ones. Words like *burmba, colivirun, warnitort,* or *harpnim.* He introduces us to words seldom used and rarely in the ways we'd expect. He is master of the craft and king of turning words on their heads—in turn reminding us that within us all is a Shakespearean need to find the right word, to find ourselves explained and understood. Hensel doesn't stop there, though, and proceeds to leave us grappling with the highfalutin as in "Freud in 1939," which brings in Lear, Balzac, and the Greek chorus all while detailing the destructive habits of the famous neurologist. Yet he just as easily finds voice in the common man discussing owl pellets in "Thinking I Wanted Country Humor":

Hooters
Cough 'em up, then, *Looks like a turd.*

We always hooted at Jaybo's words—
For what we thought we wouldn't give

To have, like him, grubby fingers
And dirty nails that held the facts

Of artifacts: bobtails, arrowheads,
Intact antler racks. (5–12)

A singing, melodic arrangement of words softens the blow of some of the more tragic moments in these poems. This brings to mind the old bards and court jesters who manipulate the performative self. The writer goes back and forth with the reader, like playing the fishing line. It's a balancing act. In "Scraping Barnacles from the Hull," the uneven tercets mimic the scrape of the putty knife as one "scraped the barnacles that flaked like gray ash." The music of the scraping action occurs in both the audible experience of the words and the textual arrangement on the page, once again participating

in the synchronicity we've come to anticipate from Hensel's *Ballyhoo*.

This entire collection is an observation of our self-destructive needs. How the choices we make fulfill the desire in the moment (maybe) but ultimately contribute to our own downfall. Here, there is sickness. We see the difficulty of family, the strain of everyday life and our inability to cope with it. However, it's not all doom, gloom, and despair because even in the struggle there is beauty. There is the challenge that dares us—even in our darkest hour—to face tragedy and laugh.

—H. M. Cotton