

GRAVEL AND HAWK

by Nick Norwood

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A review by Amanda Claire Eades

Gravel and Hawk is a predominantly family-driven collection of sophisticated, disciplined poems that deliver the story of a family and the generational transmission of a collective memory. Always carefully crafted yet never overly worked, Norwood's poetry is at once as vast as the landscape it recreates, whilst retaining a rich and varied texture that is as deep and, at times, as dark, as the history of the people within it.

Norwood's style is often deliberately restrained—a poetic restraint that crafts the emotion felt in poems that detail grief and loss, such as the tense and shadowed “Haying.” “Haying,” in a style typical to numerous poems within this collection, holds poetic significance in its deep silences and tenable absences as much as in its use of poetic devices. Similarly, Norwood's restraint and economy of diction produces one of the collection's real gems—“Hawk.” A poem that reminds one, at times, of the economy of verse exhibited in post-modern writing, “Hawk” focuses on the stark image of the titular bird of prey that “rose in dreamlike silence, muscled breast / angling up” (7-8) after the firing of the protagonist's “chambered pellet” (4). Concluding with the steadfast image of the gun “rust-lichened, aslant against an oak” (16), “Hawk,” memorializes Norwood's talent for producing concrete, steadfast images that remain with the reader for the entire collection, despite the poem's four-stanza, sixteen-line, deceptively simple form and content.

“Hawk” is atypical of the collection's focus on images that relay memory. However, as much as this collection is about the individuals who move through the pages—the father in “A.M.,” Cynthia

Tucker in “Cemetery on U.S. 271,” the grandfather (“Turn to Stone”), uncle Jack (“Bush Hog”) and cousin Tommy (“Early Hunting Trip”)—*Gravel and Hawk* memorializes the landscape these figures live within as much as the lives the poems play out. Whilst we foremost experience the titular gravel and hawk through the “rhythmic growl” of the poet’s father “scraping paint” (“Moonwalk” 5, 4), the title of the collection works in a far more cryptic and impressive way.

Gravel and hawk—the ground and the bird above—set up the second focus of this collection, one which looks upon the natural world, and the relationship between landscape and memory. As Norwood casts his eye as the hawk (the writer) over the gravel (the poems and their landscape, both figurative and literal) the collection carefully intertwines a relationship between place, memory and individual that explores the importance of memory in maintaining the relationship between person and place.

In the Autumn 2012 edition of *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, Jeff Fearnside draws an interesting parallel between the temporality of place and the struggle to keep it alive, asking

how [can we] ... portray accurately what can't be named,
can't be seen, can't even be found except in our memories,
for inevitably, every place we write about has vanished irre-
vocably before we can pull out our notebooks and lick the
tips our pencils. (768)

The most impressive aspect of Norwood’s *Gravel and Hawk* is its ability to be a multifaceted collection—considering family, memory, grief, loss, and landscape through what is, at the core, a cartographic voice. Through his desire to map out the family and their memories, Norwood is mapping the surrounding landscape. The two dance with each other throughout the collection, the landscape becoming the anchor for the memories, and the memories becoming the fuel to keep the landscape perceived and so “alive.” As Fearnside remarks, “We peer into our memories as scientists into electron

microscopes, fully intending to remain impartial, faithful to truth, but in the end, we can only record what we ourselves experienced and saw” (768). What Norwood “experienced and saw” is delivered through his careful and deliberate reiteration of memory—a process that is firmly anchored in the land that surrounds him.

The gentle hush of “Nostalgia,” which details “my grandparents’ farmhouse sat / surrounded by fields and pastures” (4-5) creates a permeable, highly textured landscape. “[A]... patch planted in cotton / soybeans, maize, ... [with] a tucked-in / look ...” (7-8) echoes the bird’s-eye view of the titular hawk, mapping out the patchwork texture of the farmed landscape and the memory of the grandparents’ house that sits tucked in between descriptions of roads, catalpas, and hay barns (3-11). Similarly, the “Buildings” sequence of poems builds itself on recurring images of structures that pepper various areas of the surrounding landscape: a filling station “... on a corner / lot, one end of town” (“Filling Station” 3-4); the “rusted-tin / monument” of an incinerator, torn down by the town after “sixty years as symbol” (“Incinerator” 5); the “ribbed, rhomboid shapes / of a pair of cotton patches” sandwich a shed that sits with “its back / to the farm-to-market road, its maw / gaped to the furrows” (“Field Shed” 1-2, 3-5).

Yet for its intricate play with the cartographic potential of the poem and the use of the poem as a vessel for memory, Norwood’s collection stops short at the objectivity the titular hawk teases us with. This collection does not give a cast-iron bird’s-eye view of the landscape. *Gravel and Hawk* offers a collection struck by the “observer effect,” the stumbling block one encounters when trying to be faithful to truth but only ever being able to retell what we ourselves experienced, never able to offer an objective “mapping” of the landscape. Yet it is important to remember, when considering the cartographic potential of *Gravel and Hawk*, that Norwood never did promise an objective experience. This is a collection about family. Norwood set out to map the experience and history of people and, as a result, lays bare the landscape the family exists within.

Gravel and Hawk is a sophisticated mapping of personal memories, a map peppered with buildings and places that ultimately give the reader something to anchor their reading to. Norwood's lyrical anchoring affords a wholly satisfying reading experience, anchoring the reader, and the experience of a collective memory, firmly to the ground.