

Story & Luck: Last Poems by W.E. Butts
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Reviewed by David P. Miller

This elegantly produced letterpress chapbook contains some of the final poems of the late W.E. Butts (1944-2013), who, among his many accomplishments, was New Hampshire Poet Laureate from 2009 until his death. As his wife, the poet S Stephanie, explains, Butts was at work on two manuscripts at the time, from which the eleven poems in *Story & Luck* are drawn.

The poetry of W.E. Butts was entirely new to me, and it seemed inappropriate to launch into a review of this slim posthumous volume without reading more of his work.

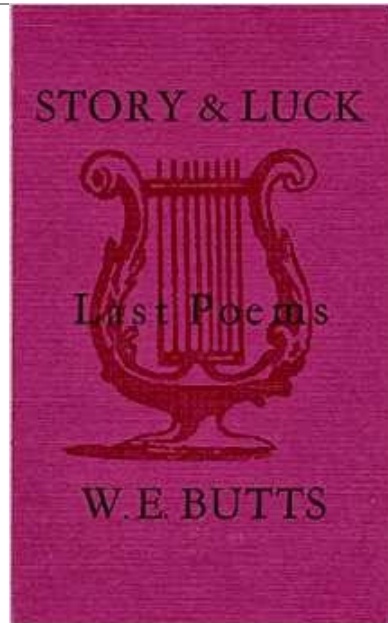
Cathedral of Nervous Horses (Hobblebush Books, 2012), a "new and selected" volume, is the last of his five full-length books. Although this is not a review of the latter book, I recommend it to the reader, in addition to this Adastra Press publication. It provides a broad introduction to Mr. Butts' sensibility and voice. I am taken in particular by his ability to write about the events of his own life and daily circumstances in a way that makes them seem both generously familiar and freshly understood.

Of the three brief stanzas of "Primary," the first poem here, the outer two are rooted in elemental winter imagery: snow and ice, granite, birds: "Wrens perch on bare branches / or swoop for suet. We all have needs." Near the end, "Something certain as granite / must hold us." As simple as that statement is, it's ambiguous as well: is the "must" an imperative or a wish? This is a question because, in the middle stanza, the language becomes more abstract, comparatively unrooted - in consequence of the cyclical invasion of the New Hampshire presidential primaries:

*The politicians gone, again we're back
in a state of grace. Our nominated differences
and collective selves reside in places lit
by what we've come to believe:*

A stanza break follows the colon: does this lead in to the third stanza's affirmation about the certainty of granite, or does the blank line following signal the absence of what is believed in? Possibly both, just as the title incorporates its own double meaning.

"In the Hands of a Graveyard Angel" is a masterful work of a single, albeit complex, sentence. It begins by describing "A gift from my daughter, this sepia photograph / of a graveyard angel", and the daughter's weekly visits to her mother's grave. With a sentence's concentration, the image



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evokes "years of failed marriage, foolishness and youth" - perhaps the poet's own, as the photograph also invokes "a shadow of myself reflected in its atmospheric light." An epigraph from Blake suggests that the "World of Mortality" is a shadow of the "Imagination". And so, this photograph is a work of shadows, an image of the shadow of this poet's own interiority.

In "Statue of Liberty with a Ruined Face," a vandalized municipal Statue of Liberty reproduction provides the central image of a scene of both municipal decay and gender violence:

*Now, consider the school, the factory closed,
the derelict shops.
Adolescent boys
cracked her cheek, gouged her eye,
drunk and climbing to perch on her shoulder,
senseless and pecking,
smashing her face with hammer and rock.*

Even the "unwounded side" of the statue shows "hurt done by the weather." Butts contrasts this present picture with his memory, from the age of four, of ascending "the real her, up the winding stairs." At the top, looking out on to New York Harbor, "I wondered where the world was." This understated experience of the sublime contrasts achingly with the now-normative brutality of a nation conditioned to expect less of itself in every respect except warmongering. I am not suggesting that this is an intentionally political poem, but the parable is hard to avoid.

The final poem in this set, "James Wright's Horses", is dated January 7, 2013, about two months before the poet's death. With his characteristic elegant concentration, he evokes the poignant contrast between being lost or trapped in "those small spaces / we sometimes live in: / prognosis, cancer, treatment, memory loss" and the words that transport us from those narrow places. Citing Wright's poem, "A Blessing" ("Suddenly I realize / That if I stepped out of my body I would break / Into blossom"), Butts concludes "There are certain words / that will transport us / to that other, flowering self" - even when looking point-blank in the face of mortality.

I am grateful for the opportunity to write about this small volume. The act of reviewing can be a haphazard business, depending partly on where you happen to be when the review copies appear and who gets there ahead of you. Having been introduced to the work of W.E. Butts, I encourage you not only to find a copy of *Story & Luck* but to seek out the greater body of his work. In "Some Small Blessing," he speaks of a composer friend who values music as "a composition of activity, / an alchemy, an arrangement of the unfamiliar, / anything there is we're able to feel, a living / organism then." This seems to say something also about W.E. Butts' poetry in general: the simultaneity of "the unfamiliar" with "anything there is we're able to feel" and the shifting between them.

David P. Miller's chapbook, The Afterimages, was published in 2014 by Červená Barva Press.