

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

Steve Ausherman, *Marking the Bend*
(c) 2015 Encircle Publications,
LLC. Farmington, Maine. 55 pages.

Review by Zach Loudin

In the grand scheme of being a published author, the bio at the end of a book is often an afterthought. I picked up a copy of Steve Ausherman's *Marking the Bend* recently, and flipped to the back to get an idea of where he's coming from. Sure, he gets the expected data in his bio, but he throws a few juicy lines in there, too. He's interested in "the grounding transformational experiences that are found in connecting deeply to place" — a profound, poetic statement that sets the reader's expectations high. And, well, with the chapbook's very first poem, he delivers:



*Fry bread, cooked corn, and pink cotton candy.
The desert belly bursting open into blossoming, feathered dancers.
Stars cry wind and icy darkness.
Sticks against skin-covered drums like heartbeats eating memory.
- "Sticks Against Drums"*

Indeed, the full-stop of each of these palpable, scene-painting lines lends pause to the cadence that grounds us in the moment. But that pause seems just as much a pinch in the arm of the author (crackle of bread on the skillet, an infinite backdrop of stars over my head... could this be real!?) than a ploy to impart the imagery's gravity onto the reader.

Marking the Bend — Ausherman's second — takes the reader on a journey through 45 poems written in (or about) half as many locations. The reader gets intimate with New Mexico (each poem is geo-tagged, about half are places in New Mexico) but a turn of the page brings stanzas inscribed with Colorado, Costa Rica, Norway, England, etc. The construction of poems is just as varied, giving the impression that the poet sits down just where he is and lets the breath of the land guide his hand, lets his pen capture the essence of the moment. In "Lone Baptism":

*I immerse myself in your brain freezing cold

You desert of liquid gas, cuffing my imagination in hydrous wonder.
I swim in you, childlike, open, fresh, and emerge trembling and renewed.*

The wonder of the moment comes through clean, not mulled-over and processed. There is, true to the title, a baptismal quality to the meeting of man and the unfathomable gargantuan water (especially beautiful Lake Michigan) and Ausherman captures that moment. He captures it with the voice of clear imagery he uses throughout, one that refrains from abstractions-for-abstraction's-sake, and focuses more on the simplicity of the moment.

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Peppered with road trip buddies, coffee in diners, and beers in bars, *Marking the Bend* nonetheless sings a lonely tune. Ausherman seems more at home describing the flotsam of man: "An outcast, 1970's Camaro lies bent and broken in the belly of an arroyo" ("Driving Rt. 666 (US 491) North to Tohatchi") as the fauna who give humans no mind:

*A dingo hunts down upon the shoreline
For carcass or running beast.
There are Soldier crabs running in herds
That measure hundreds. Their claw-clicking,
Stony-backed, bulging-eyed bodies ramble like searchers.
- "Beasts to Beat Tribal Drums"*

From campsites in New Mexico to street scenes in Copenhagen, the chapbook is a joy to flip through. While it leaves this reader hankering for a stronger sense of agency at points, the wonder of travel, of observation of the external comes through clear. True to the title, Ausherman is marking each bend in the road of his journey – and sharing the moments with us.