



GREG MILLER

# WATCH

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PHOENIX  POETS

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GREG MILLER is professor of English at Millsaps College. He is the author of a critical study, *George Herbert's "Holy Patterns"* (2007), and of three books of poems, including *Iron Wheel* (1998) and *Rib Cage* (2001), both published in the Phoenix Poets series by the University of Chicago Press.

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# ONE

## FROM THE HEIGHTS

My vision is partial, my voice middling, and I do not trust myself to  
the heights  
though everything here below begins to mingle and seem to me part  
of one canvas:  
ego, self-delusion, and pride in an infinite hall of mirrors with  
reflection

mirroring all the old self-deceptions masquerading as penitential  
retractions.  
As I ride the bus up the mountain, the water below is no longer  
white as at dawn  
when I looked out and felt as if glimpsing the hem of heaven's  
wedding dress.

Earlier even, walking before dawn, I heard one bird singing to itself  
and wondered  
to myself whether it was a caged bird on someone's balcony in the  
early cold  
till warbling began to answer in another tree across the street and  
then

suddenly a mounting crescendo of other songs loudly greeting the  
morning not yet  
arrived, welcoming it into light, into the full presence of day, after  
which I hear  
nothing but traffic and the noises that people make going about  
their daily business.

The driver tells me of his town near Spain, north of Toulouse,  
where Louis Treize  
tried to kill all the Protestants, where the former president of the  
Spanish Republic  
was buried during the civil war because he could find no peace at  
home. (Aragon

and Picasso fled to France, as well, Aragon leaving his mother  
speech to sing  
the nightingale's slaughter.) The town still bears the scars of the  
King's bombardments.  
We climb higher and higher. I think of Daourt's paintings, of the  
blue openings

that appear so often in them. The labyrinth of scaffolding in one,  
workmen

transfixed in the middle of their labor, and in lonely apartments  
across the way  
a woman hidden in impossible contortions, and everywhere sad,  
magisterial cats

looking at us questioningly. Even in her studio, the crossing lines of  
light and shadow,  
despite her large, open work space, feels like a spider web of work,  
the rectangular  
blue above and the light caught in a high window—glimpses of  
transcendence.

During the occupation, Daourt was protected in the house of the  
Comtesse in Marseille,  
but after liberation, her mind grew worse until she began to dress in  
newspapers  
and beg in the streets. I climb another hill in Nice to the Chagall  
Museum

where a young Japanese artist asks me (I don't know why) the  
significance  
of the "arc-en-ciel" and whether there's a biblical story. I say that  
God destroyed  
the world in a flood yet promises never to flood the world again. *It  
means hope.*

In the next room, I stand before *L'Exode*. Christ hangs in the cross  
high in the center  
but a flood of people moves up and to the left through fire, a blue  
woman suckling  
her child, hopelessly, buildings falling in fire, an artist, head turned  
unnaturally

backward from the window, framed by the cross in the glass (no,  
this is another  
painting I'm remembering), a spectral virgin floating toward death,  
a mother and child  
born into a sea of floating, drowning faces, and the Christ glowing  
in a white nimbus,

his face dark in contrast. I look back and forth from the slaughter (a  
child put down  
on the ground by his mother beside a little billy goat looking up to  
the hand stroking it.)  
Christ's right eye is gouged, I think. Then, no: *If thy right eye offend  
thee,*

*pluck it out.*

# DIGS

## Marnay-sur-Seine, Champagne

The menhir in a blue field of wheat  
cuts a yellow line of rapeseed and the white  
lips of recycling pits.

I walk to the darkened holes  
of log poles, a long house, Neolithic, the pit  
of pottery shards and bone pits, to the dark  
hardened place that held fire.

Yesterday

I startled a red fox near the road. It leapt fire  
from tuft

to tuft

into a thicket.

I suckle on signs,  
a sparrow hawk heckling a heron,  
the heron spinning slowly before lifting.

Merovingian graves: a mother and two children  
knees to chest in earth ova—and I think  
much more of me may remain than I had thought or hoped.

On the sarcophagus, white waves, chiseled grain  
in wind at an angle, a brass buckle,  
an iridescent vial;

*tumuli*, circles in a circle;

an iron age granary;

a Roman road.

I imagine angles, eyes, who made what's made,  
hands holding stone, bronze, or iron,  
or flesh and bone alone, clutches of people,  
transfiguring spirits and tongues,  
what I speak, eat, and feel made up of bits of them  
so grain's good, birth first, and the fresh fruit sweet:  
it isn't their ends anymore than them I meet.

# RIVER

A loon dives in the swollen river.  
It followed the river first.  
The town lies between it and canals  
Diverted from the river.  
The beak of the loon is orange,  
Its wingspan broader than a duck's.

My father's legs were swollen.  
His once thin ankles barely fit his shoes.  
His heart no longer fed his body.  
Toxins and liquids began to drown him.  
His silly doctors didn't see  
He couldn't breathe.

My father took me to the river.  
We fished for bass and bluegill,  
Sunfish, cats. Fat suckers,  
Their lips like suction cups,  
We put back. Too many little bones  
To catch and make you choke.

I no longer want to go fishing.  
I don't even want to play  
In the water. The boat  
Here has no oars, the current  
Is too swift. In the dark, teenagers  
Discover their body together.

The body feels like a prison.  
I kneel by my father's stapled body.  
He suctions thick liquid from his lungs.  
He coughs to clear them; it hurts.  
He wants more air. He wants  
To live, the heart's valve's parachutes

Opening with oxygen to feed  
The body's healing. A tube  
Empties the chest cavity. He excretes  
Liquids and poisons.  
His shocked kidneys come to life.  
His stunned heart beats. His lung

Opens again. He eats. He poops.  
He walks. He wants to go home.

On the phone, I catch my sister  
Taking him home. It's snowing.  
It's cold. My brother and mother  
Help him climb the stairs.

I walk down the path  
By the shallow canal. I see  
A falcon fishing. The power plant  
Breathes steam. I hope  
The wind won't singe me.  
I come to the falls

Where a little dog  
Barks and bounces hello. His owner  
Smiles and greets me. In the church  
Of Saint Laurence I kneel, I  
Give thanks, my heart jumps.

# EXCESS

after Henri Michaux

I've pushed the door open inside.  
I'm here, already, to give you  
What you've been needing, what you want

So badly it makes you ache. Take  
That sudden illness dropped like lead—  
I lift it. I act. My joy's this

Quick. Cuts, stitched, heal, and fever falls.  
Hair grows back. Food tastes good.  
I stop that superabundance

Of cells. Now only good excess  
Greet you with smiles and ease.  
You sit in the sun. The carafe

Of water reflects the windows  
You can't see, peripheries  
Possibilities opening!

You drink them in the sun, happy.  
You enjoy the company  
Of those you don't know and those

You love, too, here with you.  
There is time. Old voices that say  
You'll have nothing to offer

I shut them all up.  
I show them the door where they will  
Be able to cripple only

Themselves with malice. I free you  
Too from that malice. You pity them.  
You are able to be

Happy in this cool sun.  
Slanderers do not  
Envy you. (You've done nothing

To merit their anger.) Your conscience is  
Light and when able

You've made amends, nor have you

Hidden knives in apologies.  
I give you work with a purpose  
You've chosen. Anxiety

Doesn't keep you up. When the Black  
Ox treads on you his heavy hooves  
Don't teach you the wrong things.

(Without him, are we less?) You welcome love. You grab the lock  
Of the child as he comes and don't

Love Chance's ugly butt.  
You are not impatient in grief.  
Such grief as you meet's a measure

Of love. I wash your future face.  
The logjam's broken.  
Pleasure flows in again

Through these banks more  
Than you thought possible.  
I give you this robin's egg blue

Left in the grass to take. I'll say  
Hello in the morning. We can meet  
Friends and walk if you like.

## NOT PROUD

It's easy after the intensity  
Of tubes, horns, and doctors to think  
Maybe artless misery's what's true.  
Arch Emily seemed to think so,  
Who liked the look. But I give you the lie,  
Death: die, you mere measurer.  
You're mean, and at your best if not  
A sedan at least you're an easy chair.  
We don't know you for what you do but for what  
You undo, and what's true you can't undo.

## **“PAIN'S REQUIRED, SUFFERING OPTIONAL”**

Knowing he shouldn't feel so out of sorts,  
Anxious in crowds, though crowds take little note  
In point of fact, the pain in two small points  
In the front of his head, radiating out  
Making him dizzy, underwater, caught  
Fearfully near the edge (the edge? of what?)

This too shall pass, he's old enough to know,  
But to what end, nothing he knows will show.  
The middle of the road (more near the end)  
With money enough (he can pretend)  
Lucky in love in its various forms  
Spouse, family, friendship, students (life is sweet)  
He needs to find some friend to pull this splinter  
Out of his gray matter and make him lighter  
Again as (mercifully) he's often been.

## GASCOIGNE'S WEEDS

No one has planned  
what grows in this ditch:  
a couple of wild irises,  
dark purple; and lighter  
purple thistles whose leaves  
imitate white rock; and then  
the small, drooping blue flowers  
whose leaves and stems are hairy  
(I swear) and also  
silvery; and wild mustard,  
spindlier and higher than the rest,  
with pale joints like Tinkertoys.  
I'm leaving out the yellow  
dandelion and the strange  
colorless flowers with black  
dots in the center of pale green  
cups that the bees love so  
that they make bee parties  
and get unruly and make a racket.  
(I swear, I had to stop  
and figure it out!)

I say I saw a rock lizard, too,  
flecked black and gray with bits  
of what looked like rock  
hanging from him.  
I looked at him.  
He became a rock.  
So much seems to aspire

to be dry, white, and rocklike  
in the pit of the ditch  
and it isn't only  
the failure I admire.

## WATCH

We pass the straits of the Cape  
where grazing whales gather,  
though they're not, I'm told, social  
creatures by nature.

Alice asks how they can sleep  
if they must think to breathe.  
Cranial hemispheres wink and wake  
and alternate,

so whales are half-awake  
and half-asleep, balanced between each  
of our states  
through dive and breach.

Once on the kitchen wall  
of a dune shack I saw,  
like a headdress,  
the baleen of a whale—

frayed filaments  
run from a thin,  
curled, rib-like bone:  
sieves for the sea.

Like this sickle-moon fin  
“negatively buoyant”  
I sink in sleep,  
but end, I think, where I begin.

Following one as it leaves  
two other whales we see  
suddenly not what we're heading for  
but the asymmetrically

colored snout of a fin whale  
as it rises parallel  
within a stone's  
throw of the boat,

the great eye set back  
water crashing rushing  
to let me see where it ought to be.  
I lose track,

the mottled chin's marble  
veined, swirling  
through its green veil, which  
the top jaw slits.

And then, that's it,  
I think. Nights I'm thrown  
upright from my rest. Brine  
thumps my chest.