

FAILING HEAVEN by Charles Behlen. Lamar UP, 2014.  
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Reviewed by Michael G. Rather, Jr.

Charles Behlen's third full-length collection of poems is prefaced by the poem "Iron Lung." It is a fitting first note in the somber song that is *Failing Heaven*. The organization of the poem into tercets, the syntactical units continuing across line breaks, and the alternation between short lines and longer lines contribute to a sense of breathlessness. It feels like keening or a cry for the Cold War generation. It isn't nostalgia. We move from the image of iron lungs that are both "life-giving" and "coffin-shaped ships" (2) to a father smoking and the stereotypical rides of the County Fair circuit. This evolves into an awareness of Sputnik II and "the small dog Laika/Strapped inside" (19-20), and then we find ourselves with the speaker at school thinking of the older boys who will go to war. We end with Krushchev and barking dogs and breath and television snow. I am moved by all this although I am not sure what I experienced.

*Failing Heaven* as a whole evokes feeling. I suffer along with Behlen's speakers. I know these experiences are profound and life-altering even when they are as common as watching a dog slide across a vinyl floor. But I am uncertain of the unity of things. I end the collection bewildered. Bewilderment is not necessarily an emotion to be avoided. I often tell my students that to be moved by poetry does not mean you enjoy the movement. Sometimes it is a struggle. But Behlen's collection is worth the struggle.

Its poems are collected into groups, sub-sections that are organized around a theme. The poems in the section "The People Grow out of the Weather" are informed by seasons and weather. An example is "The Pimps Must Be Breaking Arms on Broadway." The poem begins with the line "A hot rain blears the tar." This is scene setting. The poem's hookers appear with their white casts in the dimmed waves of the steam rising from the tar. It is a scene that evokes sexual tension, violence, and tragedy. The characters of the poem literally emerge out of the swampy air. "Late Summer Comes to Slaton, Texas" makes the town the protagonist. Its slow decline is the central narrative of the poem. The people that inhabit Slaton seem ghost like. They are giving names and single actions to

repeat for eternity. Jim Butler's rebuilt Triumph in section four will forever plow "lazy eights/on the courthouse lawn" (40-1).

The other sections continue the theme of the connection between the land, the weather, and the people. But they add to that theme. The second section illustrates the smallness of human life in contrast to the vastness of the southern plains. In each poem the natural world invades the psyche, troubles the speaker, and reminds those speakers of the absurdity of living in that region of the world. Bats reappear across poems. Cattle are trapped in the growing presence of humanity. At times the humans become the animals as they do in "The Chimps at Hendler's Welding."

The third section deals with the eternal theme of poetry, mortality. Sometimes a poem deals with the issue directly as in "Ballad of Mackenzie Park." Other times, indirectly. I pondered for some time as to why "At the Food Bank" was placed in this section. Mortality doesn't always relate to the act of dying. It can be an awareness of the shortness of our span here or our dependency upon others to maintain that span of time for as long as possible.

The fourth section is entitled "Roads and Rivers." A number of poems are named after roads. Roads and rivers are named in most of the poems in this section. I have not figured out some of the poems in this section, why they are placed here. "LeOta Hodge Talks About Life" is a good example. There is not a road in it. There is "Daddy's new Dodge" and references to acts committed in that Dodge. There is something wonderful in this poem, and I won't spoil the last two lines for you, but they are some of the best I've read in contemporary poetry. But I'm not sure thematically why the poem is placed here. "Agent Orange" is another poem that seems out of place in this section. A beautiful poem, but its relationship to the section's sub-heading is unclear.

The fifth section "And Then Night Was There" is named after a Todd Moore line. What holds these poems together is even less obvious, unless it is darkness...the night that is in the poems. Each poem relates some loss, some lingering pain, some release. We have the villanelle "A House in the Country" with its dead crow, its small boy, and its mother, and its father. It is a poem whose experience is shaped by what it leaves out as much as what is there. This may be a result of the form itself. The villanelle forces us to return to ideas and to reshape the familiar each time we return to it.

And that could be what the whole collection is about. *Failing Heaven* is the returning to experiences, pivotal moments, narratives that become reshaped with time. *Failing Heaven* is a terrible beauty of a book. A book that will call you back to its darkness over and over again to reshape it.