

The Hanging God by James Matthew Wilson
(Angelico Press, 2018)

Now, though from every bond released,
We're left staring on a hollow mound.

These lines from “After the Ascension” give a sense of the tone of James Matthew Wilson’s new collection of poems, *The Hanging God*. God has come to earth, died, risen, conquered the grave for all eternity, and still we’re staring on a hollow mound. For me, the collection leaves an emptiness that lingers in the soul, so that the image of the Hanging God is not merely one of Christ on the Cross, but of God as the fruit on Tantalus’s tree—glimpsed, desired, but hanging beyond reach. The book is Wilson’s eighth, the previous seven having been both collections of poetry and scholarly nonfiction. Here again he proves why he has been widely honored by the literary establishment, both Christian and secular. Wilson finds meaning in form, and though he liberally weaves together any number of different meters and rhyme schemes—sometimes within the same poem—his work is always characterized by adherence to the classical traditions of poetry.

The first section of the book begins with an epigraph from Blaise Pascal: “there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain [*sic*] to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings . . . And since man has lost the true good, everything can appear equally good to him, even his own destruction.” This theme of longing filled by destruction echoes not only through the first section, but throughout most of the collection. “See, from the hall, the sad men sit, / The television on, but their / Eyes turned from it, / Left aching for an answering stare.” Time and again, Wilson descends into the ordinariness of modern American life to expose its vacuity. From a family eating dinner while the news plays footage of violent protests overseas, to a student visiting his family, and later, a series of sonnets about a man’s love affair with a stripper, the ordinary has been gluttoned on Eden’s sinful apple. The forbidden fruit has turned to ash in the characters’ mouths, and now they long for some new feast they cannot name.

However, the emptiness Wilson portrays is not restricted to modern America, as he makes clear in the second section, “The Mountains of China.” Here—in the Chinese people, outsiders who visit, and those who have been exiled—we find the same longing in a very different culture. “Not long

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All bombs, balloons, and shining gold hair,
The patient's jaw when the scan showed there
Malignant cells or waking life.

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This child lifts his knee newly bloodied,
And that stares down at iced cake muddled,
Dropped during her birthday in the park.

ago, she was a whore. / And now she is a drunkard's wife. / He doesn't come home anymore, / Her bed cold as a waiting knife." Wilson's observations of China do not flow as readily as those of America; they are distinctly Western thoughts about Eastern trials. But the universality of "the world [that] / would carry on indifferent and unravelling" is clear.

The third section, "Wiped Out," is the aforementioned series of sonnets, where Wilson delves particularly into the hunger that causes one man to devour himself, the deadly but delicious sin of lust. Wilson's imagery is not shy: "And when my hand slipped up her leg, I knew / The moist heat waiting where thighs part . . . I carried / Her to her room, hearing the tentative tone. / A whopper: I was the first to make her moan." This section is the most unified in both narrative and form, a single story told in fourteen Spenserian sonnets, and Wilson's ability to distill a story into verse is masterful. As you might imagine, it is not a happy tale. "It leaves us just the hard stone of desire."

The titular "Hanging God" appears most concretely in the fifth section, a series of fourteen poems titled after each of the stations of the cross, all written as tercets in AAB rhyme. I found these to be the most powerful poems in the collection. The subject here is more sublime, no longer concerned only with the decay of ordinary people, but directly confronting how that decay relates to our relationship with God and the crucified Christ. There is no simple, devotional piety here, though the words echo with a deeply-rooted Catholic faith, as in "Jesus Meets His Mother": "But, the authorities speak with one accord: / That heart's pierced seven times by a sword, / And bleeds for being so full of grace." The emphasis is still on ordinary people, but now the Hanging God has been brought closer, so that He may trade places with the ones who sought but could not reach him; it is He who plucks them down from the tree, as in "Jesus Falls the Second Time."

Yet, you lay, innocent beneath your mantle,
These things to you already known.

There is hope to be found—a true fulfilment for the emptiness—particularly in two of the last poems in the book, “Some Will Remember You” and “On This Rich Ground.” It would be possible to read many of the poems in *The Hanging God* as stand-alones and come away with a very dark vision of life. But thankfully, as a collection, the book gives its readers a glimpse of the Light and shows once again why James Matthew Wilson’s star continues to rise.

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