

## God's Bicycle

**Joel Peckham**

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*With subtle nods to writers such as Whitman and Levis, the everyday is beautifully sung in this lovely collection of poems.*

Joel Peckham's newest collection, *God's Bicycle*, maps American roadways, working lives, spirituality, and the constant specter of mortality. These poems trace movement and stillness, small towns and wild landscapes. They explore the contours of solitude with wide-ranging vision. Here, grief invokes the question "Lord, I have wanted to ask you / where you are" to reveal "it is the wrong question."

The book's three sections—"Everything Must Go," "Making Contact," and "Psalms for the Fallen World"—feature honed narratives whose references range from Jackson Pollock to childhood baseball memories. Accidents, a house falling from an eroding cliff, and other violent scenes—sometimes presented as unalloyed facts of life, sometimes expanded into elegant portraits with sinuous syntax, such as the exemplary poem "Fire"—deepen the sense that life turns in an instant. Whether considering fathers and sons, lovers, travelers on a Greyhound, or the weight of the past, the work favors a contemplative approach.

Some poems hint at the profound. In "U-Haul: On Highway 65 North of Louisville, Kentucky," there is a "strange sense it is all too much after all, / that we left something important back there and it is gone / and not gone." In "The Noise We Make," the speaker believes "silence / doesn't have to mean that we're alone, / only that we're listening together." Other poems land softly—"like any / answer or any distant dream / of sleep"—or drift toward the vague: "to someplace or another / just like it."

If the energy tapers on such occasions, poems that remain anchored in the visceral image stand out. The exultant prayer "traveling the corridors of the throat," "the zip of oils // catching fire in the dark" and the "low, long breathing of a boy" are well-earned. Other noteworthy moments build momentum through repetition, including the passage:

*I have been the boot  
that blows the door from the hinges, from the frames.  
I've been the hands held up against the rain  
of blows. I've been the caller and the called.*

Forcefulness and fragility ably merge, complicating the speaker, who may be read, in a number of poems, as the same figure struggling to make sense of a world shaded by loss. Moments such as these reveal a practiced hand confident in the ability of simple words to carry the work.

*God's Bicycle* features passengers in a variety of guises who come alive in elegies and observations. With subtle nods to writers such as Walt Whitman and Larry Levis, the everyday is beautifully sung.

KAREN RIGBY (October 27, 2015)

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