

Hard Evidence

Timothy Liu

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In this, Liu's fourth book of poems, the evidence is the minutiae and banalities that comprise everyday lives; each moment is made extraordinary in its realness, both brutal and beautiful. "Sometimes blood. / Or bruise or death you never know what / kind of love. Even a dream." These lines provide a gay man's evidence of sex. Hard is the image of the evening train as it "whistles past hacked-down fields of corn, / heading towards a boy who whittles an effigy of himself. We go on sleeping / through sirens and crimson strobes / that flash on the remains no one can identify..."

Hard evidence indeed, and this is the strength of Liu's poems. These verses are learned and literary, the work of someone familiar with formal poetic traditions. Readers may make use of a dictionary while perusing some of the poems in this collection, for there is a sense that they are written for the benefit of a certain audience—most likely one acquainted with the ivory tower. While this may be alienating in some cases, Liu earns kudos for being so forthright in his treatment of gay sexuality: not mincing words, but conscious of the lyric, avoiding the gratuitous.

These are disciplined poems that break the rules when the time is right. Lines are occasionally fragmentary, requiring a second or third reading—preferably aloud—to make sense of them. It is refreshing to come across those "break-away" moments: "Left unspoken in the din where the fuse got blown. / Wax fruit piled high an antique cut-glass bowl." Perhaps readers are supposed to be a little disoriented in order to experience Liu's careful view of the images from a new angle.

Exceptionally successful for a poet of the younger generation (he was born in 1965), Liu has received much recognition for his previous collections, including the Norma Farber First Book Award in 1992 for *Vox Angelica*. He has found a way to make his song heard and *Hard Evidence* will be especially well received among readers who feel an affinity with the current American poetry establishment and its players: those who make their rounds in universities and creative writing programs.

HOLLY WREN SPAULDING (July / August 2001)

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