



## Out of Place

**Richard Jackson**

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*Jackson's poems work to reconcile the evil of the world with a poet's life work—how to make sense, how to bear witness, how to give praise.*

This most recent of Jackson's eleven volumes of poetry concentrates on connectivity—between people, the past, literary kin—as well as an uncovering of that one word he has yet to pronounce to his satisfaction: “We are alive because each of us / owns a word we keep trying to pronounce.” Reading Jackson is something of an intellectual grab bag with references to World War II atrocities, the civil war in Syria, the death of Christ, the philosophies of Heraclitus, Leibnitz, William of Okham, and more. These references help to create an expansive meditation on what language can do even as it rests on the palimpsest of history and place.

Jackson has received grants from the Guggenheim, the NEH, and the NEA. The President of Slovenia awarded the poet the Order of Freedom Medal for his literary and humanitarian work in the Balkans. Jackson has also translated and championed Slovene poets. This international perspective helps to give resonance to much of what he writes; Jackson is more than simply American in his observations and references. His interest is global as he speaks of atrocity in Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, etc., wondering how to enjoy the ease of a sunny beer garden while in some parallel time, Hitler makes his “first speech a few blocks away.” Jackson's poems, and the abundance of quotable one-liners, struggle with reconciling the evil of the world with a poet's life work—how to make sense, how to bear witness, how to give praise.

For Jackson, this requires an open scaffold. He sets a scene, a place, an idea, then explores its many permutations through the words of philosophers, artists, musicians, prisoners, poets, and writers. The poems are expansive in their thinking, interdisciplinary in scope. In “Sifting” he writes:

*“Sometimes our words are so many  
versions of Christ, parables no one wants to hear.  
Stevens thought the best ideas were found on garbage  
dumps. Odysseus searched for ten years and never found  
an idea he could love. On the other hand, Newton had to wait  
for an apple to fall. And what about those apostles  
with tongues of flame above their heads? There's inspiration  
for you.”*

Much of the book talks openly about the act of writing, leaving a clear view of the poems' framework. Jackson talks about exactly what he is attempting as a writer, where he suspects it might go, and why he is asking a particular question. Beginning writers receive a gift in seeing how Jackson spins from idea to manifestation, although trying to mimic his movement requires a vast frame of reference.

In addition to Jackson's large political and philosophical poems are more intimate letters, written in the mode of

Richard Hugo's poems: intimate, kind, and warm. Jackson is a poet of large vision and expansive knowledge. His narratives and his musings encourage readers to know more, to learn from the searching voice of this guiding poet.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (Spring 2014)

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