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Black Ash, Orange Fire, Collected Poems 1959–1985 by
William Witherup (review)

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the dust-jacket or the spine, the book can be hazardous to one's ribs, lungs, and diaphragm,—organic parts that can be injured by immoderate laughter. The book is not, however, the complete collection of Barney Tullus, and many fans may be disappointed by the absence of their favorite—mine being “Barney Tullus and the Bosboy.” One hopes that the University of New Mexico Press will publish another collection, perhaps called *The Best of Barney Tullus*.

Both Dr. Walker and the editors at UNM Press should be faulted, however, on their failure to keep abreast of contemporary scholarship. Walker certainly is no longer accurate in his statement (p. 3) that “a critical history of *Barney Tullus* of course remains to be written, although earnest graduate students may already be at work on such a project.” Indeed that project has been completed (see my dissertation in partial fulfillment of the Doctor of Philosophy in English at Metropolitan City's Cosmopolitan College of Fine and Industrial Arts), and I am presently preparing a manuscript for the Western Writers Series (Boise State University) which, through both internal and external evidence, will indeed identify the authors of (first) the academic satires, and (second) the western stories, as well as naming the persons on whom the characters of Barney, Andrew Pickens, Mort, and Sill are based. What I am suggesting in this manuscript is that the Barney Tullus works may be the greatest hoax in American literature since Fern Gravel's *Oh, Millersville*.

PROFESSOR TULLY BARNOUS

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Black Ash, Orange Fire, Collected Poems 1959–1985. By William Witherup, (Point Reyes Station: Floating Island Publications, 1986. 217 pages, \$10.00.)

This intriguing volume of poems reflects its title: some of the poems sparkle fire like diamonds, while some are rather like stones. At his best, Witherup forges striking metaphorical ties to the larger world on topics great and small, as in poems like “Hornet's Nest” and “Lettuce” respectively. In the erotic love poems of the section called “Following the Blind Women,” the fusion of love and locale does not always take and hold, yet there are little gems that sparkle here also, like “To a Salesgirl in Juarez”: “I travel with her still through personal deserts, / my water bag filled with the elixir of her smile, / for even the lizards are sick / of seeing the black, swollen tongue of poets.”

When this metaphorical ability is properly fused with powerful emotions like the anger of “Freeway”: “An infected vein / carrying filth to and from the city; / a funnel / draining a huge operating table. / Even the light here / is the color of pus,” or the satiric disgust of “To the President of the Company”: “that produces pop-top cans / . . . / that turns out plastic rings / for six packs,” the results are first-rate poetic reading.

Not to be overlooked are the echoes of the poet's wide reading and work in some traditional forms like "The Ballad of the Sea Witch" and "A Hybrid Villanelle on a Line by Li Po."

Sharing in the dilemma of all contemporary poets, the perpetual challenge of transforming his private world of feelings and insights into the larger world of shared communication, Witherup succeeds far more than he misses the mark, and when he hits it, the "orange fire" indeed shines forth as in "Running": "My eyes inhale the purple flowers / and swish them around in the skull. / an afternoon cocktail. / Water and fire the petals, / water and fire the heart."

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Break the Mirror. By Nanao Sakaki. (San Francisco: North Point, 1987. 126 pages, \$9.95.)

Imagine yourself looking up a classic U-shaped alpine valley toward the cirque and the high ridges at the head of it. There is a small stream stair-stepping down toward you, left to right, right to left; it drops level to level, over clean granite, slides through a slow, grassy place; the water is clear, clear, clear. Standing here, looking at the little creek, you feel yourself to be touching the real freshness, the real wildness—the world of source. No need to do anything but laugh and enjoy it. It's a gift: "Hold your palms open always!" Nanao Sakaki writes.

Some of the poems in *Break the Mirror* have a surrealistic touch, as if the little stream reversed itself and headed back toward the far ridges. But somehow your eye travels with it quite easily, and you get a bigger picture. The world is not solved in these poems, it is regarded as being alive and in motion. "Tomorrow's wind could be / North, south, east or west."

Nanao Sakaki writes as if he doesn't just go to the wild realm on vacation, but in some sense dwells there, in touch. His poetic world seems to be the same as his daily-life world. It is, as the title of one of his poems has it, "Just Enough":

Soil for legs
Axe for hands
Flower for eyes
Bird for ears
Mushroom for nose
Smile for mouth
Songs for lungs
Sweat for skin
Wind for mind

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