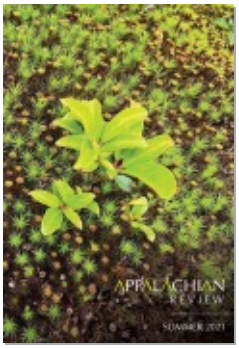
Merciful Days by Jesse Graves (review)

Melissa Helton



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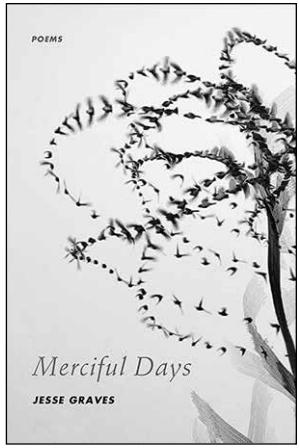
Jesse Graves. *Merciful Days.* Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2020. 60 pages. Softcover. $16.00

Reviewed by Melissa Helton



Jesse Graves's fourth collection, *Merciful Days*, takes us to the poet's childhood, the landscape of east Tennessee, and the lives of his ancestors, both roving and rooted. This is familiar territory for Graves, but readers of his previous work need not worry about the repetition of prior collections. Like Monet creating many singular moments with those same waterlilies, Graves's returning to his family history and landscape illustrates that writers can use the materials of their own lives to lift readers into discussions of belonging, loss, and the broader awareness of our transient part in humanity's story. These poems show that when we come back and meditate on those familiar images, we learn something more, because each time we come back, we are a little different. Indeed, the first line in "History" reminds us, "Every hour changes something forever."

Those new to Graves's work will immediately recognize his poems as accessible—in the best senses of the word. It's possible for the language to be simple because the images and poetic movements do the heavy lifting. Purposely obscure writing might make a clever puzzle, but that locks many readers out from deep interaction, and hyper-analyzing every piece's intent and meaning is perhaps why so many students dislike poetry after schooling. Dissection doesn't often encourage life.

As we gather the images in this collection, we hold mother's gingham dress, road-killed deer, the Challenger explosion, the North Star, a blue tractor. We walk slowly with the poet, ushered without need for dictionary or footnote. These poems are like putting tired feet in the creek, not like being handed a calculus exam.

Another of Graves's strengths is to fully characterize a person or a landscape with a small brush, such as in "Old Man Wandering the Roads" as the speaker describes a grandfather:

> *He left a trail of growing things wherever he went,*
> *and carried a little change in his pockets*
> *to prove he had done his day of work,*
> *maybe not a lot of it, but enough to get around,*

We see this in "Raft" with the succinct recollection, "And then I was different, sitting alone / on the raft of being twelve years old." Or in "Rocks," when the speaker and mother plant the garden while the father is out on the road:

> *We dug rocks with a hoe and a rake,*
> *scooped mounds of soil for bean-hills*
> *only to find more rocks underneath.*

These poems ground us in a specific time, with an object or a gone person, and then zoom us back to before time itself, or forward, past even the end of the poet's life when he becomes a gone person himself. Graves holds us in the verb of the present, but always with that wider context, as in "Mossy Spring" where the speaker drinks, calling forth the first peoples who drank here, then the trackers and farmers:

and now you, looking for the lost
kingdom of your ancestors, dousing
their eternal thirst to be found.

In the end, as folks with corporeal limitations, we experience reality one now at a time, with the past and future colliding around and in us. The poems in *Merciful Days* dance in that overlap between times, that awareness that this now is as temporary as all those past and yet to come. The ending of "Hawks," where the birds hover over a ridgeline "watching me, keeping cold eyes / fixed on all I thought was mine," finally brought to mind the feeling that had trailed me through the collection, the acknowledgement in "Zazen on Ching-t'ing Mountain" by Li Po (701-762 CE):

The birds have vanished down the sky.
Now the last cloud drains away.

We sit together, the mountain and me,
until only the mountain remains.

And if we step back and widen the frame even further than Li Po did, we have to admit even those mountains won't remain. In childhood, things can seem so eternal, so solid. As we age, we learn their impermanence, and our own. Some deal with that through existential dread and a mid-life crisis. Some deal by obsessing over a legacy. Some let go and float. Some drink a lot. Some write poems.

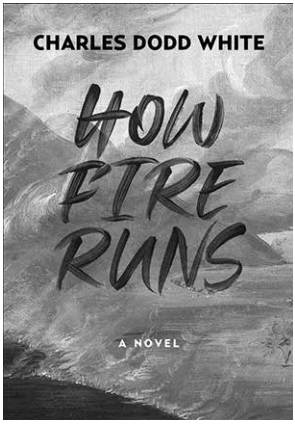
The specificity of these poems, how they bridge a simple hay bale to the wider realities of human time, is a good meditation for us all—and especially to writers who feel they don't have anything to write about. This book shows us that if we have lived a day of life, we have a poem to write.

The poems in *Merciful Days* seem well-digested and polished to the point there feels an insular space between the poet and the readers. Admittedly, I am a greedy, curious reader. I can't help but want to sit with the poet, neck-deep in the messier, less-processed parts of these experiences, not just the calm recollections of them afterwards. I can't help, after viewing the poet's summonings of the world around him, to want a few more vulnerable self-portraits.

After wandering through a field with Graves, listening to his stories about barn swallows, cows, and dead family members, we will feel more connected to each other and to our own lives. Indeed, every time we wander through a field with Graves, we will carry away something worthwhile. ■

Charles Dodd White. *How Fire Runs.* Athens, Oh.: Swallow Press, 2020. 272 pages. Softcover. $22.95.

Reviewed by Randi Adams



By opening his latest novel with a swastika flag being hoisted into the air and a Nazi salute, "Seig Heil," proclaiming victory, Charles Dodd White warns us the stakes are high in the story to come—and he doesn't disappoint. *How Fire Runs* is White's fourth novel, and in it he expertly intersects race, social justice, small town politics, community, and environmental destruction. A resident of Knoxville, White utilizes his understanding of east Tennessee to portray a contemporary fictionalized Elizabethton, a town tucked into the bounds of the tri-cities of Johnson City, Kingsport, and Bristol.