Review of *Blue Rust*
by David Rigsbee
The Cortland Review

What do we care of the past, with its issues and death, its leathery solemnities, its errors, and faded passions? It's by no means self-evident how backward gazing will get us any further along on the way to the Promised Land, nor how the imposition of past things on the present will be accomplished without a lingering whiff of that old mortality that sent the past spiraling backward in the first place. I remember hearing an account of a literary set-to that took place between a prominent American poet and a British critic. The critic went over the familiar ground that western poetry was based on the stupendous past and on meditations of a mortal and metaphysical sort. But the poet chimed in that much Chinese poetry, by contrast, was based on friendship, to which the critic retorted that so was Western poetry... from Dante to Milton to Tennyson to Yeats. "Yeah," the poet replied, "and all the friends are dead!" Now I take it that the proposition that all one's friends are dead is indeed something to inject caution in the most carefree imagination. The sneaking suspicion behind the exchange is that the poets leveraged these finished friendships in order to strengthen their ties with the doings of yore, orienting themselves backwards, so to speak, even if the result looked to the less deceived like a kind of creeping necrophilia.

Joseph Millar's new collection, his third, more than touches on loss, though it would be damnable to leave it at the word, which has gathered its implications and entailments into the figure of a yawn. His poems engage in Boomer retrospection to be sure, and it is a question that must be judged by each member of that generation (I am one): how much indulgence should be given to nostalgia, however aggrandizing; how much to origins, however unusual or for that matter utterly common? The title, Blue Rust, hints at temporal erosions and at a possible instability of the two terms, "blue" and "rust." It also signals that the poet is going to take us to sites of origins, and that in doing so he may drag their baggage into the present. Quite aside from the deeper questions of origin search and query and the effect of origins on the present--of the dead on the living, and the past on the present--what emerges is a persona, begetter of these poems cast as image, a man keen to true the level on language without betraying much anxiety over language's ability to underwrite authenticity. Here is also the kind of person you would like to knock back a few with, whose indictments against life's injustices don't spread out and try to guilt-trip the other bar patrons. It may be that in evolving this persona, Millar is speaking to capacities of subjectivity to create not just images for the past, but the type of person who can resolve the contradictions such images present—by creating the further image of a persuasive literate man whose opinions and poetic strategies have not been chiefly formed by literature. In another poet, this would translate into a bemused persona, but Millar has just enough of the tragic and the contingent flowing in his veins not to fall for that dodge. This is a poet in some sense satisfied with the results of his dice, though chance doesn't quite get the image I want. It's more like emotional savoir faire, the statesman's natural grace toward his small host country.

When James Tate quipped that American poetry was predicated on the notion that "something kinda hurt me once," he was a referring to, well, a lot of poets and to several thick strands of our poetic history, not the least of which was the School of James Wright, one of whose spiritual students is Joseph Millar. But if that is the case, it's the difference, the way in which Millar's poetry escapes Tate's illuminating japery, that makes Millar's poems so

humanly appealing. Behind Wright's poems was the danger of sentimentality, and it wasn't a long throw from that to formal error to the moral dead-end of self-pity. Millar shares Wright's blue-collar creds; indeed at times he seems to draw near Carver's land mass, except that Carver's vulnerabilities are all too clear, his temptations not only a matter of record, but a source of literature. In America the secret, often subconscious, shame attaching to origins is also the source of power for many of our best writers (think any number of southern writers). There also appears the writer who learns to transact the distance minus sentimentality or chagrin. For this writer, such are divergences from the objective, namely to represent what Blake called "the products of time," of which that poet assured us that eternity--read the most complete viewpoint--was in love. Millar's poems might even be poems of sensibility, except that the very concept seems snagged in the moss of the past and hence of little explanatory power, except perhaps to remind anyone reading that tonality--aesthetics, tact, balance, wit--can almost be enough to smooth the chafe of the noose.

It's not surprising to find then that Millar's poems are filled with highways and marriages: the former the image of mobility and transport; the latter the temptation to rest, sometimes to settle. Such twin temptations were already on show and waiting for the poet at birth:

> My mother wrapped me in her robe
> fragrant with camphor and sweat,
> hushing my desolate howls.
> She loved me and she hated me
> through those early months
> when I wanted everything she had,
> and all my father wanted
> aside from her warm, pale body,
> was to finish his hitch and get
> the hell out of the army forever.
>
> ("Nativity")

But it's not all William Bendix-style post WWII self-rearing that we witness in these poems. Millar has a sharp eye, and the vividness of particulars prevents him from settling for aesthetic platitudes. So on the one hand he avails himself of pop culture to set the stage--a stage indeed framed in the confines of lyric poems. On the other, it's the feel, the look, and the smell that authenticates the journey, not the celebrity matrix. Indeed, celebrity turns us away towards fancy and desire, but settling--in both senses--is as much a temptation as Frost's woods:

> You could settle down by her woodstove
> turning your back on the road outside,
> hidden away in her kitchen
> smelling the spaghetti sauce
> like a child or an old man. You could
> live easy and die happy, a candle burning
> in every window, the blue compass needle
> and hands of the clock pointing north
> through the field's wavy grass.
> You could make your grave in her.

("Romance")

It was the hippie dream, after all, combined with earthy, working-class, what's-in-your-lunchbox solidarity, that drove the Boomer nostalgia engine, the one that initially eschewed corporate creep and universal commodification. In its way, we Boomers lived through as rich and mucky a period of romanticism as any Wordsworth or Keats, and when the pendulum swung back--the one sharpened on theory by poets in neckties--it knocked off a lot of well meaning but ultimately feeble wannabes. It's amazing, when you think about it, that so little memorable poetry attaches to this vaunted generation about its circumstances and the feel of the time. Most of the populist energies went to popular music, and our musical bards turned out, often against their intent, to be our chroniclers.

Millar typically writes a medium-length lyric that's strong on voice and exact with image, lifting what nourished memory from a submerged narrative. Pop culture icons frequently get a shout-out in Millar's work, like ne'er-do-wells in a hipster's gradebook. He ticks the names off: Jackie Gleason, Sarah Vaughan, Little Anthony, The Del-Vikings, Paul Newman, Chuck Berry, The Grateful Dead, Michael Bloomfield, Mickey Rourke, Carlos Santana, Bo Diddley, Willie Dixon, The Who, Quicksilver Messenger Service, Michael Cimino, Elvis, Fellini, The Beatles, Karl Marx, Dali, Joe Hill, Bunuel, Gene Autry, Randolph Scott, Jean Cocteau, Sam Peckinpah. Compared with this rogue's gallery the roster of poets might seem slim: Villon, John Clare, Vallejo, Allen Ginsberg, James Wright, Larry Levis. And yet there is a personal logic to such pantheons, and we are way past the day when homogenous cultural literacy required remote, classical resonators. I seem to remember my own teachers telling us to beware where you get your mythologies. They were afraid that references to The Doors or Dustin Hoffman would obligate us to footnotes by and by. They seemed to have missed Hegel's advice to historicize everything. Millar's use of this familiar yet personal constellation reminded me more than once of the similar, but preppier, Mark Halliday, just as his orientation toward his own version of the mysterium tremendum is reminiscent of the cosmic middle-American, horse-breaking, Zen-and-image-master Dan Gerber, but lighter on the Zen and more narrative-friendly.

And what stories they are. Millar writes a poem tight in its unfolding, as befits a former fisherman, working the boats like the character in the marvelous and unexpected "ocean":

> One summer night the fisherman told us
> he'd run aground in the river mouth, hull
> mired deep in black mud. He said he saw
> the hour of his birth, the swamp slowly
> filling with light, kelp stretched out
> like a vestment covering the flanks of the marsh,
> the sea's wretched age, monstrous and fecund,
> hair full of dead leaves, rayed petals clustered,
> shoals of dark gravel exposed.
>
> ——
>
> He told us sometimes he'd rather be dead
> than face the gray rooming house

and a day-job, his heart like iron
remembering the sea and staring
at grayed pallets stacked in a warehouse
smelling of creosote.

The poem goes off in quite a different direction from every other in this collection. It is consciously mythy, and the experience is closer to reading George Seferis than Philip Levine or David Ray. By that I mean it quests at the level where our commonalities thin, and the ocean, as life-giving mother, seems at once true and a stretch. We seek authentication on the slimmest of evidence, and when it comes to scattering and generally mystifying, the ocean doesn't disappoint. It's also almost never less than other. For the old fisherman,

No place will be open now
except for the sad bar, barren of women,
except for the motel near the dunes
with its flocked wallpaper
and rusty heater that moans
in the night like a tired swan.
The next day no one will look
in your eyes, transparent stranger
belonging to no one,
not the children sledding on cardboard
down through the frozen parking lot,
not the waitress humming a song
you wish you could remember. . .

if she asked you about your family
you could show her their silhouettes
in a drop of saltwater
from Wingaersheek Beach
you keep in a jar by the window...

The ocean in its anonymizing comfort recurs in a poem many will find painful to read, "Stove." In this poem, the father has found himself reduced painfully, almost absurdly, when he suddeny must move a lighted stove across the floor and to try to keep it from walking, with its claw feet, down the stairs and setting fire to the house. He heaves to, saving the house, but suffering serious burns in the process. This is just the kind of freaky circumstance that appears in the better poems of Raymond Carver, and readers will be reminded too of some of Carver's better poems. But Millar's work is more consistent, less willing to countenance the slide into sentimentality. The poem ends,

Now he sleeps on, smelling of medicine,
forever deeper and wider, his legs
which once ran The Hundred in ten flat
float apart in the water. God
only knows how far from this world
the fins of his dreams have carried him,

the ocean breathing outside in the night,
its metal voice blistered with fallen stars,
wits pale fans opening and opening.

While Millar stays clear of sentimentalizing fate, he doesn't shrink from revealing the odd and even grotesque planks of which the ordinary's house is cobbled. The disclosure of the particulars of our humble origins and in handmade craft is poetry's equivalent of the moribund's privileged speech, of Rorty's final vocabulary," and Adam's names. I began this review by introducing a distinction between the possibly necrotic reach of elegiac practice and a more salutary model of interpersonality. While it's clear the poet must face discontinuity and death if he would write of his past, Millar's welcome book avoids the somber reach of the first and the overreaching sentiment that often befalls the second when rendered in poetry. The privilege for which he works in view of his own sources suggests a third way: that of an authenticating muse. And that is good enough to live by (or die), as "Nightbound"makes clear:

Nothing to see or hear or hold onto,
blue rust floating away from your
touch, dark mosses crumbling under
your tongue, nothing to carry back,
curled on one side with yur knees drawn up:
father, mother, grandmother, uncle,
naming your dead one by one.