

Clay, Adam. *A Hotel Lobby at the Edge of the World*. Milkweed Editions, 2012. 86pp. Paper: \$16.

The edge of the world is “a courageous landscape/gone cold,” and the hotel lobby is full of people and a crying baby and a ringing phone that does not exist – or does it? In his second book of poetry, Adam Clay threads each of his poems together with a careful repetition of words and images that transform and change meaning from one poem to the next. In “I’m Pretty Sure That’s a Hurdle in the Distance,” he says “I could run from repetition/forever . . . Anything/I say could start with repetition/and end with light,” and so many of his poems do.

Images of water, light, nature, and so much more, in various forms, are repeated from one poem to the next, while others are repeated with several poems in between. Such as the prayer in “Natural History,” and the “prayer for no one” in “Poem in Place of a Fractured Sonnet,” and the well-worn knees from “praying beneath/an untreadable flag” in “Light Bulb Hum.” Or the ringing phones in “As Complete as a Thought Can Be” and “A Hotel Lobby at the Edge of the World.” In “Elegy for a Thousand Half-Masts,” birds wait “past April to return,” and it’s a cycle – they wait, but they do return “the day in late winter/when they trickle back through town” in “A Memory, Forgotten at the End of a Season.”

Much as the spaces between words, between poems are filled with repeated images; there is an overall theme throughout the book of filling empty spaces. In “What Movement Sounds Like,” ninety-six-year-old Pearl fills the “space between the houses with [the] clatter” of her ice pick chipping away at the ice on her driveway. The very next poem, “A Day in August,” wonders what moderation could mean, “if you sit still and give the impression/that you were always/meant to fill that very space.” The speaker in “For Your Eyelash Anchored to the Sky” watches “a boot fill up with blood” while the speaker in “Gathered” finds “a book split open, it’s spine full of atmosphere.”

Filling empty spaces throughout the book takes a lot of building and tearing down and rebuilding. In “The Last Horse,” the speaker says

I held a brick up to block the sky,
but it remained nothing more
than the sum of its dust. One summer
I counted these bricks – the space between
them seemed more defined and less blurred
by the sun – it took all summer.

and so much of the book is like this – taking things apart, examining them, and then putting them back together. The book shows these cycles: repetition of images and how they change and transform – as the weather/seasons change, the migration of birds, traveling from place to place, to the edge of the world and back, and filling the empty spaces between.

Images of the horizon, lines, and “the edge” are repeated throughout a number of the poems, and in the poems that do not have a clearly defined edge, the speaker seeks them out, as in “Sonnet”: “I am trying to find a line of tenderness/to walk tonight.”

Clay also shows his reader the edge in the physical form of his poems. Most of the poems have short lines – some very short – and in many, he spaces them so as to give the illusion of longer lines, to give them a shape, a more defined edge. Clay takes the reader to the edge of the world, shows them the edge – Michigan in winter – and in

many ways, it is like everywhere else the speaker has lived: there is a train, birds, a glimpse of the harbor between buildings, and “Every day we fold a dozen obituaries on top of each other.”

– Amanda Meyer