RED FIELDS by Jason Poudrier

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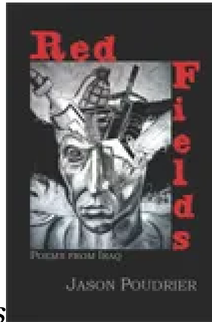
Review by Benjamin Myers

RED FIELDS
by Jason Poudrier

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When I was in my early twenties, I had won a few university prizes for poetry and published a few poems in small, regional journals. I thought I was a real poet. Meanwhile, my father, an employee of the VA, had started a poetry writing as therapy group for veterans. He invited me to a reading in celebration of a little anthology his guys, mostly Vietnam vets, had put together. I am ashamed to say that I thought I was condescending to spend an hour listening to these "amateurs" read their doggerel. The verse that evening was, indeed, rough and unpolished, but it was also the most electrifying poetry I had ever heard. By the end of the evening, I had realized that everything I had ever written was inauthentic and trivial. I vowed at that point to only write "real" poetry, poetry with blood and guts. Reading Red Fields is, for me the milquetoast civilian, a renewal of that vow.

How to acknowledge in our poetry the present wars with which we find our country engaged is perhaps the most pressing of problems, both morally and artistically, with

which the contemporary American poet is faced. The wars are far away, and, though I know personally many men and women who have gone to fight, the general population of American poets is demographically quite distinct from the population from which our country draws its soldiers. Yet, how can poetry go on in a personal and domestic mood when our countrymen are fighting and dying each day and their families are making innumerable small and large sacrifices for them to do so? It seems morally repugnant to ignore the war in our poetic work, like stepping over a dying person to gaze more closely at oneself in the mirror. Yet to properly register the war in our poetry is a challenge especially for a generation of poets who started writing long after the end of the Vietnam conflict, for our way of thinking about our art is conditioned by the long years of the Pax Americana: the gloomily persistent threat of nuclear annihilation fits easily into postmodern poetic strategies, but to acknowledge our brothers and sisters in the immediacy of combat might require a complete rethinking of our poetics.

For the poet who has actually been to war, however, the artistic challenge is different, essentially the same as that faced by Sassoon, Owen, and the other "war poets" of the early twentieth century, and later by poets from Anthony Hecht to Yusef Komunyakaa: how to do with the experience of war what modern poetry does in processing raw experience into art. Jason Poudrier, a veteran of the Iraqi war, is one such poet. Poudrier's collection is an impressive first book of poems and a good indication of how poetry can process violence.

Like much quality war poetry from the past, Poudrier's work achieves power by telling the facts straight. Consider his poem "Artillery Kill":

> I flipped a switch:
> The rocket launched
> And landed with an
> ACME cartoon cloud.
>
> Then we drove,
> Tracks over sand,
> To where I shot
> And found bodies
> Unanimated.

Far from diluting the realism, the pop-culture reference at the end of the first stanza adds something of the eighteen-year-old's perception of the war: extreme experience filtered through memories of a misspent youth much like my own years wasted in front of the television. This pop-culture element, along with the deadpan tone, puts one in mind of Frank O'Hara and his "I do this, I do that" poetics, despite the vast

difference of context. At his best, Poudrier follows O'Hara's example in avoiding the conventionally "poetic" in favor of a direct relay of experience. A good example of this is "We Called Him Martha Stewart," in which Poudrier introduces us to a sergeant who copes with the war by making a home in the rubble, refurbishing a bombed-out apartment in which he "touched up the artillery holes / with desert flowers potted / inside chipped terra-cotta." He never sounds more like O'Hara than in "Baghdad International," in the lines "his face now looks as if it were rained on / by burning shrapnel, which it was." Both the well chosen line break and the colloquial undoing of the metaphor remind one of the New York School poet, even though the experience is very distant from O'Hara's bohemian milieu. In "Who Dat Is?" Poudrier conveys the terror and tedium of guard duty, again in a Frank O'Hara deadpan:

> and the shadow responds
> with the same question,
> in a voice I recognize, so
> I know not to blow
> his fucking head off.

The directness, the candor, disguises, perhaps, how well crafted these lines are. In poems such as this the art lies as much in what is left out as in what is included. Lesser talents would be tempted to pour the experience of war on thick, but Poudrier understands the power of restraint, the sort of understatement that has marked good war poetry since at least the *Iliad*. He doesn't tell it all–perhaps no one could authentically–but what he does tell, he doesn't tell slant.

Though I wouldn't want to push the comparison to O'Hara too far, I will say that Poudrier also shares the New York School's interest in language itself. O'Hara, in poems like "Having a Coke with You," made poetry from the language of an emerging form of American consumerism then infiltrating the vocabulary of urban America. Via CNN and Fox News, the war has already infiltrated our vocabulary, leading us to speak of insurgents and IEDs in both literal and metaphorical modes as part of the run of daily life. Poudrier, perhaps like many of the best poets–Shakespeare with his low diction, Berryman with his cant–rides that wave of linguistic adjustment. Poudrier turns NVGs and IEDs into language for poetry, presenting the reader with the linguistic moment of the conflict in the Middle East. He does so not by sacrificing the other elements of poetry to make room for new language but rather by finding ways to make the vocabulary serve poetically, as when he draws out the rich sound in phrases like "Blackhawk hull" in the poem "Blackhawk Medevac." Another poem, "Baghdad International," opens with the line "The ninety-four left of 3-13 Field Artillery, Red Dragon Battalion, / drove over bumps by night, bodies by day."

Somehow the uniqueness of the military terms color the other words in the sentence, particularly “bumps,” to give a sense of a very particular and very intense experience.

Perhaps Poudrier’s greatest contribution is his depiction of how that intensity of the combat experience carries over into the civilian life of a returned soldier. In many of his best poems, Poudrier explores the way the soldier’s past occupies the present in ways both frightening and, oddly, at times comforting. We see the frightening side in poems like “A Corpse Walked into the Bus Station Today,” a nightmarish narrative poem about the demands of the dead upon those who survive them, and in “Post-Theater,” which addresses the veteran’s susceptibility to flashbacks. Yet, in other poems we see also how such chronological confusion can be comforting, as the returned solider conjures up the ghosts that can understand his experiences in ways that the civilians around him cannot. In “Welcome Home” the poet is greeted by the face of a fallen comrade on a placard held by the fallen soldier’s mother at a homecoming parade. When Poudrier says “I almost don’t recognize him,” we see the soldier struggling to recover the strong connection unavailable with civilians. When he hugs the comrade’s mother he confesses an inability to comfortably connect: “I don’t know where / to put my hands, my arms, / which way to tilt my head.” Poudrier poignantly portrays the mixed emotions of the combat veteran, the inability to comfortably settle back into the civilian world.

That inability is the theme of the book’s strongest poem, the nine-part piece titled “Tainted.” The poem begins with a literal reminder of combat conditions–“My tainted toenails / with browning cuticles crumble / under clippers, brittle”–and moves from there into a more metaphorical mode:

> I fold the covers under and around
> my crusty feet, creating a pocket
> my wife calls my cocoon
> –she’s not allowed in.

The poem explores the toll of combat upon the soldier’s civilian relationships, in this case with his father and with his wife. His father, a non-combat veteran, struggles to connect with his son but flounders, a relationship dynamic which Poudrier succinctly renders in the strained intimacy of an awkward phone conversation. Poudrier writes most poignantly about marriage:

> I watch over her as she sleeps,
> not because I love her, which I do,
> but because I am on guard:
> my body tense,
> my eyes won’t close.

These lines, clipped and brusque in Poudrier's most accomplished style, convey in a simple scene the complexity of the relationship. Later in the poem, the veteran's choice between sleeping with his gun and sleeping with his wife becomes emblematic of the unresolved choice between past and present that the combat survivor faces every day. Poudrier has the guts and artistic sense to leave this choice unresolved at the poem's close, which offers only an effort at intimacy, not a guarantee:

> I tell her about my battle buddy's dead body
> beside me, and his face
> fills our five-by-five living room
> –mouth open, eyes closed
> as if trying to catch snowflakes
> but his tongue's stuck
> at the back of his throat.

The scene is powerfully suggestive of the emotions involved: the couple near each other but not facing one another, the overwhelming presence of the dead in the room, the veteran's inability to speak the whole truth projected onto the dead friend. The poem's final lines leave us in the tense limbo of the returned solider and his wife:

> We sit on the couch together
> within his head,
> looking at each other
> through the fog
> of his cold skin.

That remarkable final image perhaps does more than any prose memoir or documentary can do to convey to a civilian like me the haunted life of the veteran.

Reading *Red Fields* takes me right back to that evening with dad's vet-poets, the raw emotion and restrained pathos of those poems. One need not go to war to write poems that matter, but we civilians ought to let those poets who have seen combat remind us that all great poetry comes out of human situations with high stakes.

Benjamin Myers has recently published poetry in *The New York Quarterly, DMQ Review, Nimrod, Tar River Poetry, The Iron Horse Literary Review*, and many other journals. His first book, *Elegy for Trains*, won the 2011 Oklahoma Book Award for Poetry, and his second book, *Lapse Americana*, is forthcoming in 2013 from New York Quarterly Books. He lives and teaches in central Oklahoma.

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