

# HIRAM POETRY REVIEW

Issue #78

Spring 2017





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THE HIRAM POETRY REVIEW

ISSN 0018-2036

Indexed in American Humanities Index

**Submission Guidelines:**

3-5 poems, SASE. HPR, P.O. Box 162, Hiram, Ohio 44234

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**[hirampoetryreview.wordpress.com](http://hirampoetryreview.wordpress.com)**

\$9.00 for one year or \$23.00 for three years

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Last year was our 50th anniversary issue, and you would expect that there might be a bit of a hangover, not so. In fact, issue #78 demonstrates how lively American poetry is with poems from expats, underground and aboveground poets, and prison poets. Furthermore, with the release of *Paterson*, a fine film by Ohio native, Jim Jarmusch, poetry is as cool as ever.

This issue also features reviews of important new books. I'd like to note that the strength of the past four issues has been due to the outstanding efforts and talents of three of my ace readers who are leaving. Tom, Sara and Alex have brought a range of aesthetic perspective to the slush pile that will be impossible to replace. However, the HPR will morph in, as yet, unseen ways. We will miss them, but they have left their marks on the HPR forever.

To our readers, writers and subscribers, thanks. We want to encourage all of you with some numbers. In the past reading period, we received over 400 submissions (we read year round). We accepted 17 poems from 15 poets. I mention this, so writers can gauge their chances, and so that readers and subscribers know that they are getting the best of the best. The poems here will keep for a long time, but if you want to share, consider passing the review on to someone who might enjoy the poems herein.

Willard Greenwood  
*Editor, HPR*

## Henry Hughes

### *The Constellations of Extinct Stars and Other Poems*

Scot Siegel

Salmon Poetry, 2016

“When the power goes out / an older power switches on,” Scot Siegel tells us in his stellar collection, *The Constellation of Extinct Stars*. Siegel raises these deeper, older forces in a 1920s wind-swept western romance between a lineman “Righting poles downed by storms, / restoring light to the darkest homes,” and a pretty school teacher who feels the poetry of weather and work—“wind from the east, / like rolling pins over the dull xylophone / of our one-room schoolhouse”—and also likes dancing and other women. These tightly carved historical journeys of the heart arrive many years later, as they often do in our lives, with sweet and painful memories of what we have and what we might have had. In “Windy Writes Back,” a finely rendered poem about outward acceptance and muted regret, the lineman acknowledges the good life he has with his wife and children, but he tells us that for some time he “camped . . . on the outskirts of my life,” and heard that teacher calling him in from the cold, where, of course, she is “lovely” and they are “young again, / and it was spring.” In the collection’s title poem, the aging teacher remembers the woman she loved through images of a Portland hawk and moth that “tie loop-knots / in slow syncopation over the cityscape, and etch the cobalt / sky with a cool elegy.” The dark and bright skies of this book continue to challenge and renew lovers with the dizzy admission that

The most loved I ever felt was nearly make-believe.  
The clouds had just lifted, and the pines,

weighted down with sugar snow, began to sway.

Siegel’s poetic history of passion includes varying degrees of male longing, from a man missing his wife while she attends a week-long conference, to the lyric ache of widowers—“a train disembodied from its whistle / pushes us along.” But there’s also an amusing real estate satire about a man hunting for a “home with good bones” with “catacombs” where the former owner may have “stashed his mistress’s many perfumed letters” and a porch where this new possessor could sip bourbon and chew tobacco, “squinting / across the way toward the neighbor lady’s / upstairs bedroom window.” In another gender studies poem, Siegel considers “What Was Lost” in the composition of the ancient *Kama Sutra* and its nineteenth-century translator, Sir Richard Francis Burton, a sixty-two-year-old British soldier, linguist, poet, fencer, and hypnotist. After Burton’s death, his wife burned many of his papers to “protect /

His Privacy. His reputation.”

Just like that, every facet of the Lovers’ Art,  
so painstakingly

researched, translated,  
annotated . . .

She burns!

The value and absurdity of endless documentation and forms is something Siegel struggles with as an Oregon town planner—his day job—and yet he brings this practical knowledge, charged with humor and insight, to a poem like “The Hysterical Preservation Specialist”:

Any Labor Day, all the diners  
might burn.  
You carry a light briefcase

In the shape of an antique  
bellows. You do not open it.  
You bill the city.

Siegel offers lots of smart, wry critiques of the Northwest in short poems like “Meth Labs in Rain” and in longer monologues, including the darkly brilliant, “The House on Willamette Falls Drive.” A butch daughter remembers a hard life after a paper mill closes in Oregon City: “The summer sturgeon washed up on the shore, and we / pickled them for winter. But the flesh tasted like mud, and over the years / father grew ill; the mercury made him weep until this throat swelled and his mouth bled.” The girl sleeps with an older woman, is raped by her school principal, and witnesses the murder of a boy pushed off a cliff into the river. There’s also a local whore the father tries to save, and something about a blackmail tape. This sketchy story with its myriad characters can be hard to follow, and perhaps that’s befitting a place where “grief / was a hole below the murk of the mill, where the falls dissolved / in a dervish of mist, where eels lived.” The perfectly phrased music, rich in alliteration and assonance, makes this a pleasure to read, regardless of plot. And like the Stamper family in Ken Kesey’s *Sometimes a Great Notion*, it is clear that these people endure. “He left no money, but taught me to fish / and fix old engines. I teach shop at the college where the mill used to be.”

The earth can be a mess under *The Constellation of Extinct Stars*, but Siegel expresses some hope that our world will turn out okay, even if the projection is out a few years. In “Gen Z” we hear the good report that

Under your watch, oceans stop rising.

All passengers wing-walk to safety. Children  
in every country know five languages.

Under your watch the water is clean again,  
the fish plentiful, and the rice cooked to perfection.

Generations, poets, problems, styles, solutions—even stars—come and  
go, but these words of Scot Siegel will stay bright long after the cover  
closes.

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