

## Do What a Poem Does

By Robert Stewart

Review of one poem, a retrospective:

from *Four Swans*, by Greg Pape,  
Lynx House Press, 2013.



We have so many books of poetry and fiction here at *New Letters* (hundreds) that come to us for review or other reasons, many go unreviewed, no fault of the books'. We keep them out and available to folks in the city and always will, as long as I am here. On a recent Saturday morning, I came in to roll up my sleeves and chop some wood for the bureaucracy but veered, instead, toward a 2013 book by Greg Pape, *Four Swans*. I remembered a fine poem of his called "My Happiness," from a book much earlier (1978, *Border Crossings*, U. of Pittsburgh) and thought, if Pape could write "My Happiness," what might be in this book?

I started at the final poem in *Four Swans*, "White Church in Wiborg," with its opening,

When I first peered through the window of the white church  
on the hill in Wiborg I saw, with the help of family stories  
and old photographs, my great grandfather, the Reverend  
James Fletcher Peters standing in his black coat . . .

Those lines, written who knows how many years ago, were, themselves, rolling up their sleeves, so to speak, to work on me. The work of that poem, I discovered, is less about what the poem says than what it does. The distinction harkens back to John Ciardi's important textbook *How Does a Poem Mean?* The meaning of the poem, I finally have come to see, lies less in its ideas and more in its actions.

For example, had the poem in line two said, "on the hill in Wiborg, I saw my great grandfather . . ." it would have sacrificed, or hidden, the literal rationale of how he could have seen his

grandfather (“with the help of family stories and old photographs”). This poem, instead, operates in the open. It reveals experience as you need it. I like that in a poem. I find it endearing.

Further, the poem invokes the power of imagination, held in all of us, I trust, to structure our lives on a larger continuum than the mere present. Once the poet establishes how he knows his ancestors, he moves to something bigger than nostalgia—the life of family, even the call of salvation. In that, the poet tenders no apology for raising stories to the level of myth.

Jim was there, and Ada, and all  
their children, the dead and the living. Laurence sat  
next to Ralph, his younger brother, whom he shot and killed

with Jim’s shotgun, accidentally, one mild spring afternoon.

They are all there, now, inside the window of that church. Outside, the poem finds a mule path that leads to the cemetery, and to the drift-mouth mines, all the way, says the poet, to Cumberland Falls, which I take to be Kentucky. That’s where I, reviewer, will stop my surface-level synopsis.

Because many readers of this note will be poets, themselves, something about the end will be of interest. The first five stanzas of this poem each have six lines, and you know—at least I believe, poets being what I think of as pattern-making creatures—that Pape had wanted the final, sixth stanza to have six lines, as well. This, however, is not what the poem wanted. The poem wanted five lines. There must have been a line in that final stanza that Pape felt compelled to cut, the pattern being less important than the impact.

The impact of those final five lines justified my decision to release myself of bureaucratic, office work and read the poem, and follow its behavior. I won’t quote those ending lines here—because they deserve to be read in context—but relate to you that when I read them, I felt part of the family, as well.

One more thing this poem does is to hold each moment of the story out in front of the reader, as if to cherish every facet of the world, meaning the hilltop graveyard, Highway 27, itself, and the

baptizing hole. "One could stand / in the mist on a bright night," the poem says, "and watch the Moonbow / rise above the river."

When I finished, I could not read another poem in that book. Not then. I often react this way to a poem; I don't want my mind, or my heart, drawn away from the experience. If the poem is right, I learn something about how to live, just by watching what it does: to see with my imagination that which is truly present, to be open about it, and not coy or cute. To invoke the names of those I love. So it was, I read "White Church in Wiborg" and just set down the book. I was good for the day.

