

An Insufficient Literary History of Greg Field

By Robert Stewart

On the books:

Uncertainties, by Greg Field, Woodley Press, 2017.

Black Heart, by Greg Field, Mammoth Publications, 2014.



“Poetry is not a secret rite,” says critic and translator Eliot Weinberger: “It is a public act that is generally ignored. But if it were to disappear,” he goes on—“and who knows, it has never happened—the worlds it organizes into speech might well vanish with it.” I often have experienced such previously ignored worlds become organized into speech, in the form of major writers I would discover only by visiting other regions of the country. You likely know writers in your own region who deserve more exposure, perhaps around Athens, Ga., or Marin County, Calif., or the Holyoke Valley, Mass.

In the border region of Kansas and Missouri, the poet Greg Field is one of those voices too little known, here or elsewhere. He has not always chosen to push for wide publication—and had not, until recently, published a book of poems for 16 years. He could be cajoled, on occasion, into reading in public, where, while known to some people—as a visual artist, computer technician, musician, editor, sailor and chemist—he often met audiences unfamiliar with his poems. I liked to position myself amidst those audience members to hear their reactions when they inevitably would discover a voice and sensibility entirely distinct, lyrical and confrontational. Who knew?

The speaker in Greg Field’s “Waiting for My Goddess” (from *Uncertainties*), for instance, alone in the house or alone in his thoughts, sees himself, as he says, “like an old bear, lumbering

through the rooms and halls.” Know this. There is authenticity always in Greg Field’s poems. Take that bear, for instance. After Galway Kinnell’s “The Bear,” Frost’s “The Bear,” and Gary Snyder’s “This poem is for bear,” both Field and I would agree: Don’t mention a bear in your poem unless you, yourself, as a young man in Alaska, who also had survived the 1964 Alaska earthquake, had seen a bear rise up on its hind legs from the shrubs 15 feet away and lock eyes with you, so close you could choke on its odor. Fortunately, the wind was coming off the bear and not off the young man, and so, after staring at our future poet a while, the bear turned and, yes, lumbered up the opposite hill.

“My ancestors,” Field continues in “Waiting for My Goddess,”

believed a man could find
a good death somewhere
in this world, but I’ve begun
to doubt that. Finding a good
life is hard enough.

To sustain that life, Greg Field (biographically) has spread his talents deep and wide: with a B.F.A and M.A. in painting, several solo exhibits; as drummer and composer for River Cow Orchestra, an improv-jazz group, and for the band Brother Iota; as a mostly self-taught chemist and IT technician; and as sailor of his own boats. He and I and two other friends confronted a raging storm on Lake Superior one summer, aboard a 32-foot, single-masted Cal, and survived due to Greg’s sailing skills. Full transparency, Greg Field is a long-time friend, whom I consider to be one of the most cryptically concentric and talented individuals I know.

In the 1970s and ‘80s, Field and his former wife, the late Crystal MacLean Field, ran a home-based poetry workshop that vitalized a community of Kansas City poets and other writers, including Mbembe Milton Smith, the playwright Frank Higgins, Field’s present wife, Maryfrances Wagner, and for a while, the poet Dennis Finnell, now of Massachusetts, and me. Others extended the group on occasion, such as David Perkins, Conger Beasley Jr., Robert Slater, and Heather Wilde. Many of those have passed, now, far too young. Some of us, like Field’s bear, lumber on.

I mention these things because the Kansas City group of writers then did not go in for evasive or precious word mongering. Greg least of all. Nothing in Greg Field's poems could be taken as convenient, conventional, or merely poetic. His work with sound and imagery defines and toughens our understanding of the lyric.

In "Sins of Love," the speaker sits in traffic behind a school bus full of kids, and, of course,

The ones at the back flip the finger
and mouth obscenities with bulging eyes.

Immediately, the poet elevates the scene, then, by showing us how to love those kids: "I can see their dreams beating / at the flat windows, / wings to be pulled from skinny, / squirming bodies. . . ." Immediately, the poet organizes speech into metaphor, which rides the alliterations of *dreams*, *wings*, *skinny*, *squirming*. In that, we are pulled by the world of language through time and memory.

Listen to this. With characteristic sonic cadence, Field takes us "On the Road to Paradise, Missouri," where,

wary piglets hurry through a wallow
beneath a bull's slogging darkness.

and later,

On the road to Paradise a boy's body
sprawls on the ribs of a pick-up bed.

Don't look for wasted lines or images snared in convention. Field's voice takes a measured drum beat, letting each syllable tap distinctly on the skins.

We probably would not have access to these poems had not Field's wife, Maryfrances Wagner, and another determined woman, Denise Low, a former poet laureate of Kansas and publisher of Mammoth Publications, convinced Field (I am told, *compelled him*) to gather his poems based on his Native ancestry and especially his Potawatomi father, which resulted in the 2014 book *Black Heart*. That book has been beautifully reviewed previously in these pages,

by Trish Reeves, who cites Field's "painter's eye, musician's ear." Exactly right.

Having just reread *Black Heart*, however, I am compelled to make some personal observations. Field's father was a bass player, who traveled where the gigs called him and often kept the family close. In "Learning to Drink Beer," the poet recollects the time his father tried to teach him to shoot a rifle for survival:

I jacked a shell into the chamber,
pulled off a shot. The barn wall
ate the bullet. "You'll be one
hungry son-of-a-bitch, boy,"
my father said and slapped
the back of my head.

Don't cry for him. You might want to turn on the sympathy and say poor boy. Rumi has said, "Run when you hear that. / A father's stern slaps are better." Mr. Field, as I had know the poet's father, had taken the family to Anchorage, Alaska, and Las Vegas, among other places, and earlier poems show him carrying his bass with cracked hands out to the car in the early hours. Here, "He drained another Pabst," the poet says,

placed it at my feet,
and slapped the back of my head.
"Who do you think will help you
the day you starve to death. . . ."

These poems find their own salvation in the arrangements inherent there—the strong verbs, yes, but measured by the assonance of *jacked*, *slapped*, *back* and the consonance of *barn* and *bullet*—which is the real expression of respect and affection held in the worlds organized within. "Pray for a tough instructor," writes Rumi, "to hear and act and stay within you."

I am projecting my own interpretation, to some degree, but I know certain things. The poet's Jewish, great-grandmother on his mother's side escaped the pogroms, and his mother danced for the USO and knew soldiers who accidently killed survivors of

concentration camps by giving them water. All of which projects a level of sobriety onto poems that are also often hilarious, charming, deeply moving, and spiritually stunning. No one writes a more provocative title than Greg Field, as in “Young Women Make Me Sleepy,” where he writes,

Some friends and I
are about to swallow
a couple [of ‘ludes] each and lie down
with a glass of red wine,
listen to Miles Davis boil

[*notice the verbs*]

a cauldron of bitches’ brew—

until someone mumbles
is that a horn or was it
the young women sighing
into their boyfriends’ collars?

Poems like that come from a fidelity to historical and lived experience, and a determination not to phony it up, for anyone’s sake.

You might have noticed that my interest in Field’s poems has little to do with thematic or cultural insights. To evoke Wienberger again, “The poem is not a vehicle [for ideas]; it is an act of transportation.” We are transported on language, itself. That’s the poet’s job, and his or her only job. In 2014, *Black Heart* seems to have broken loose a couple of decades worth of poems, with the collection *Uncertainties* following quickly and recently, and about darn time.