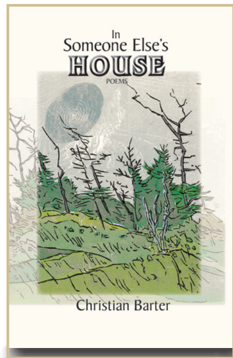
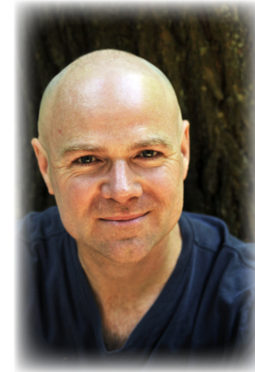


In Someone Else's HOUSE

POEMS

Christian Barter



ISBN 978-1-886157-85-9, $16.95, 72 pages, trade paper, BkMk Press, University of Missouri-Kansas City, www.umkc.edu/bkmk

by Marie Mayhugh

Q. Many poems In Someone Else's House reflect upon life's journey. The collection's title imparts that sense of our own denial and recognition of mortality. Is this what the title means to you?

A. Denial and recognition of mortality. Well—in part, yes. But you only see these things in retrospect of course. The title comes from the last line of "Tom's House," which I hope gets across the right feel for the collection, too, that we are guests in someone else's house, more or less literally, though usually unaware of that; usually (as a sixteen-year-old would do) we just strut around eating the food and trying to have our fun as though we're going to be here forever, as though we had a right to be where we are, etc. I hope the title brings attention to the tension between the deep feeling of belongingness and essential knowledge of transience, to put it in kind of a bullshitty way.

Q. In the first poem "Things I've Forgotten," the speaker says, "All my best first lines for instance that come to me while I'm driving so fast." Do you find that your best poetry lines come to you when you are engaged in a fast-paced activity?

A. Ha! No, actually—but those are the ones that get away, and that poem is about equating what gets lost with all the most important stuff of life, and in so doing, tests that hypothesis a bit. I get lines when I'm driving, but also, luckily, lines when I'm sitting in my chair at home—though when they're good, I suppose, there is a sense in which I feel like I'm maneuvering a car at speeds a bit too high for the conditions, or riding an elevator into sleep, i.e. oblivion; there's always the sense that a poem will get away from you until it's done. Maybe even then.

Q. Some of your poems In Someone Else's House reflect upon the youthfulness and promiscuity of college days. What is it about this time period that encourages you to write about it?

A. I find that I write about that time of life less and less; yet it persists. Why? Perhaps it's the most dramatic example, my (shall we say "carefree"?) youth, of feeling a more or less unquestioned closeness to the life of things; often I'm contrasting it to a more considered, and often darker, way of seeing things now. Or I could just say that often, still, it's the brightest light in the room—though certainly not always. Things from the past have a different kind of life, they become mysterious, sweet—well, perhaps like wine the stuff of our lives ages into what it is.

Also this: the things in those poems, such as "Marcelle" or "Beth" are the things that wouldn't go away, the kind of persistent scenes that stay with us because there is something about them that we need to understand, that is important to us now; I'm a big believer in the subconscious throwing up stuff from the past that needs looking at now.

Q. You received a BA from Bates College in music composition, and your first poetry collection was titled The Singers I Prefer, and now in this poetry collection you have two poems, "The Final Movement of a Late Quartet" about Beethoven's Opus 131 in C-Sharp minor, and "Kicking Russell Out of the Band," which seems autobiographical. How much does music influence your own poetry? Does the beat of music inform as well as influence the rhythm in your poetry?

A. So I think you're asking two questions: the first is about music as subject matter, and the second is about the musical qualities of writing poetry in general. To the first: I love writing about music, and I don't necessarily feel that those poems have to be imitative of their subject. I love writing about music because it's one of the greatest substances known to us, and because it is impossible to "understand" in an interpretive sense—and yet feels so utterly human. To the second: Overall, I'm with Frost that it's most important to find the rhythms

of real speech, rather than, say, superimposing a "musical" sound onto a poem; having said that, I usually know I have a poem in process (not just another attempt) when I can hear a specific music of that way of speaking; then I can follow both music and meaning together, the two of them having some kind of conversation more or less independently of me as we go along.

Q You are currently a supervisor of a trail crew at a park in Maine. The scenery in that part of the country must be inspiring with its diverse landscape. Do you find that nature plays a role in your creativity?

A. More and more. My first subjects, as I suspect it is with a lot of younger poets, were people and peopley things, like the heart, etc.—and they still are; but I'm pleased to notice that I seem to be becoming able to write about natural beauty without feeling that I'm totally full of it (and maybe, conversely, less able to write about certain other things that were obsessions earlier). That's a big part of the hesitation, I think, too, especially for younger poets: it's very hard to write a good nature poem; they tend towards sentiment, and also it's very difficult to get away from the major models in that area (mainly the romantics) and do one's own thing—so the whole area is a bit of a mine field, especially early on I think. The same is more or less true of political poems.

But I think I've always found the great outdoors, the parts not screwed up by us, inspiring, whether or not I'm taking nature as my subject; in the company of one kind of beauty we are often reminded of—and suddenly able to speak of—another kind.

Q. In Someone Else's House is divided into four sections. Each section has a few poems that claim to signify the past, future, and present. In section II, you have a few poems that yield a despairing tone such as "To the Unborn," "The Idealist, "and in "Cassandra" the final line is "it's the present we're forbidden to believe." Does this line combined with the other poems suggest how dismal the world has become and how ignorant it is of how to better its current state?

A. Couldn't have said it better myself. But I'll try. The poems you mention are all monologues, each is a voice with a way of thinking—an attitude—I have simply tried to carry to its ultimate conclusion. Cassandra—by which I mean in this case my Cassandra—isn't utterly hopeless, I don't think; she is, of course, hopeless about fixing the situation, but the poem places that in the past and this poem is about her taking stock, initially defending herself and then just trying to understand things. I sensed a strong feeling of belief in this character, the belief, instilled by her dreams, in a world where, to put it bluntly, the idea of meaning is actually relevant; yes, she must square this with the real world, but she doesn't lose it, either, even as she unfolds her dark appraisal of mankind.

"The Idealist"—I really struggled with the title there. But mainly I'm trying to push an attitude, a kind of victimhood that I find pervasive in the American psyche (and in my own, too) as far as I can. In "To the Unborn" I'm also trying to capture a way of seeing things, of digesting our own time. I do think that feeling unable to better our own state, as you say, is a pervasive contemporary feeling—and for that reason alone worth exploring a bit. Of course, I feel that way myself a lot of the time too, though I'm not sure how much to trust it.