

Ned Balbo

No One Leaves the World Unhurt, John Foy. Autumn House Press, 2021.

John Foy's third book, *No One Leaves the World Unhurt*, is J. Allyn Rosser's selection for the 2020 Donald Justice Poetry Prize and a darkly witty, beautifully written addition to the distinguished series. Foy, no stranger to well-earned recognition, continues to develop and refine a voice established in the excellent *Techne's Clearinghouse* (Zoo Press, 2004) and the New Criterion Prize-winning volume *Night Vision* (St. Augustine's Press, 2016) — books in which the author's black humor and skeptical musings never obscure his compassion or seriousness of purpose.

"The Payment Plan," the new book's opening poem, and "Cost," its penultimate offering, embody a characteristic stance. Through the bland terminology of balance-sheet capitalism, Foy examines more substantive matters of mortality and meaning. "The Payment Plan"'s smooth-talking speaker pretends to offer strategies for dispensing pain in predictable allotments: "Our actuaries first consult the charts // and calculate, for someone of your age, / the ratio of grief to be applied / based on tribulation indices." The poet's barbs are directed toward those who reduce human life to a business transaction, their vague assurances designed to prey on fears and bring in profit — "[We] hope you know that interest will accrue, / as per the plan, on unpaid balances" — but Foy's subject remains the very real grief that no advance plan can ever anticipate or diminish. In "Cost," the speaker is seeking an investor, or at least some good financial advice: "I have an asset on my books that I / must carry and maintain despite the cost: / this body that I live in like a house. . ." Here, Foy's voice is looser, more openly tongue-in-cheek as he mocks the idea of placing monetary value on the body that is also, unavoidably, himself: "The thing I have will just depreciate, / the net effect of which will likely be / not foreclosure or eviction but / a rendering of my house unlivable, / an act of God that leaves me in the cold / zeroing out my balance in the books." The dry humor of both poems highlights the absurdity of viewing human lives through an economic lens, while raising serious questions about the nature of ownership: is there anything that is *truly* our own when, in the end, we ourselves will be swept away?

Foy displays a tender side in poems that arise from his love of music. “Long Live Rock” references the movie *Night of the Living Dead* in elegizing the speaker’s youthful rock star dreams, while cryptic references suggest a hidden narrative: “I lived for so long in that edifice, / that house of decline” and “Electric guitars, I thought, would redeem / the dying I endured behind machines.” Are the speaker’s fantasies of “rock stardom, never really mine” a way to escape from having to witness the death of an ailing parent or loved one? In “Night Riff,” Foy depicts the calming solitude of playing the guitar in darkness: “The dog’s awake / and wondering why I’m here, but that’s okay. / The sound is quiet, rich, and sure enough / to soothe the mind of any animal. . .” Here, the act of playing is itself the gift, independent of any need for an audience beyond the speaker’s pet and the player himself: “and I am left alone with my guitar, / as much of it as I can hope to play / without a thought for where I have to go.”

By referencing the early ’70s television hit, Foy’s poem “The Partridge Family” expands to the wider world of popular culture. In seemingly casual but highly skilled blank verse, the poet shifts back and forth between his childhood love of the show’s fantasy (a pop music-performing family tours the country in a Piet Mondrian-inspired psychedelic bus, playing their hits and engaging in shenanigans), his mature response to old episodes (“the single mother, Shirley Jones, / would smile and sing but never did get laid”), and the real-life rage of actor Danny Bonaduce (“Danny Partridge”) who was arrested “for assault, / when he punched out a ‘transvestite prostitute’ / he’d taken for a girl. Now, that was bad.” In his final lines, the speaker recalls, reluctantly, “how, back then, I thought it fit and meet / that such as these should sing of happiness.” Foy’s masterful management of tone — from wide-eyed wonder to outrage and poignant regret — yields a fascinating exploration of lost innocence that transcends the era and the show.

Foy can be serious as well. Several poems reflect on the subject of war with a sensitivity born of the author’s informal interviews with recent veterans and his own family history (his English father was a soldier who spent much of World War II as a captive German prisoner). “Making War,” an outstanding sestina, inhabits the voice of a veteran looking back: “The enemy was always closer / than we’d thought, pouring down fire / on our flanking team, and then a final / blast and bewilderment in the ditch. . .” A trio of poems that share a structure (four tercets of tightly written three- or four-beat lines) also share an impulse to confront

civilian expectations: “It’s not like what you hoped it would be” (“Cordite”); “Get used to the lack of light” (“Clip”); “Look at the target, gauge the range, / and line your body up with what // you want to hit” (“Concussion Grenades”). These brief but powerful poems address us directly: we become the recruit plunged into a world whose rules for survival are unfamiliar — a world where deadly weapons, and the will to use them, are disturbingly commonplace.

Taken together, the serious moments and layered ironies at play in John Foy’s work suggest a highly appealing persona — one who refuses to accept easy answers, conventional wisdom, or the meaningless cant of politics and business. He feels empathy for “Gollum,” Tolkien (and Peter Jackson’s) “poor son of a bitch, / corroded and ruined in the dark”; he mocks Mattel’s Barbie in neat couplets while celebrating a daughter’s justified skepticism at the appeal of “Barbie’s upbeat catatonic face / gazing across all time and space” (“Headless Barbie Commission”); and Chris Childers, gifted poet and translator of Latin classics, is rewarded with one of Foy’s loveliest lyrics, “Contemplative”: “The birch I point to, even though it’s late / to practice any kind of augury, / is right in line with that old apple tree / I look upon beneath the sky and take / my bearings from.”

For all this wide-ranging poetic wealth, I haven’t even touched on Foy’s extraordinary sonnet sequence, “The Museum of Sex,” an authentic New York institution that, if it didn’t actually exist, would have to be conjured from Foy’s imagination to provide the perfect vehicle for his distinctly singular blend of wisdom, irony, and bawdy compassion: “Would there be dioramas like the kind / at the American Museum of Natural History? / To go alone would be unthinkable. / How sad, to wander through the galleries / inspecting things that don’t seem doable.” Here, as always, the lens turns toward Foy himself — not to claim attention but to avoid excluding himself from the serious joke that is life itself: the aspirations we hold dear, the hopes that sustain us, and the falling short that is our daily lot. John Foy’s prosodic confidence in verse formal or free is evident throughout the book, as is his kindly, yet skeptical vision; and though *No One Leaves the World Unhurt* serves brilliantly as both apt title and sage reminder, it’s equally impossible to leave John Foy’s new book without also feeling amused, enlightened, and deeply moved.