

**Alejandra Vansant**

***Keep the Feast*, Stephen Cushman. Louisiana State University Press, 2022.**

When entering Stephen Cushman's new poetry collection, *Keep the Feast*, one senses decadence. The 17th century Abraham Mignon painting on the cover initiates the reader: a seductive still life with grapevine, bulging pomegranate, love-in-idleness, raw oyster, spiders, some debris, a mysteriously warm light, and behind it, darkness. However, the still life is not as fixed as it might suggest. It holds motion, history — it is thoroughly lived in. So, too, is Cushman's collection, as his enduring interests in American history, nature and its endangerment, religious and secular contemplation, and long poems — in his scholarship as well as his own works, such as *Hothead: A Poem* (2018) and *The Red List: A Poem* (2014) — forge fresh, energetic territory in *Keep the Feast*.

Though feasts in the Bible are celebratory, I think of Ecclesiastes: "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to heart." What is the feast we are meant to keep, and is it our end to keep it? Cushman is certainly aware of this paradox, but through his animated and exacted verse, he resists an "age of inattention," delighting instead in the tensions between pleasure and faith, history and embodiment, feast and restraint.

In the first of the book's three parts, we begin in Eden. "The Fruit Thereof" considers

just what sensation  
followed her mouthful and subsequent double-take  
at fresh sight of him, still oblivious  
and suddenly scrumptious

— already the reader is attuned to desire, but Cushman's language is clear and inculpable, hovering above the embodied moment. "Time Management," "List List," and "Frequently Asked Questions" also feature early on. In them, the religious is deliberately paired with the quotidian: "pray without ceasing: / figure it out; pump out the septic"; "grocery list, Christmas list"; and "Do you think / I look fat? What is prayer?" The effect of this play-

fulness is twofold — we see religion leveled with life’s tedium, malleable enough to joke about, but we also see the dynamic, parallel lens it affords the speaker.

Amid increasingly rhapsodic verse, ekphrastic nods to Caravaggio and Rembrandt, and allusions to the Civil War and John F. Kennedy assassination, Cushman finds footing in the deft resonance of poems like “Supposing Him to be the Gardener”:

How can one tell divinity  
From a tree turned red,  
Or *Do not hold me* from what else  
Its leaves might well have said?

Here, what may be the speaker’s skepticism of divinity is instead subverted in an expansive gesture: how could one separate divinity from the beauty of earth and the mysterious language it extends to us? This moment signals a desire to move *into* the mystery, rather than toward definition.

The titular poem sequence, which comprises the second of the book’s three parts, takes the form of Psalm 119. The poem’s verse is filled with vitality and fervor for “thee” who is at once a conduit for the speaker’s sensuality and the locus of his unconditional devotion. This formal connection to scripture, paired with the lover’s ambiguity (both divine and personal), allows for a peculiar spectrum from fondness to blasphemy. Visually, each poem is of uniform length with every other line indented. Their indented teeth, not unlike the expansion joints of a bridge, guide the reader along a continuum of “euphorics.” Furthermore, Cushman’s characteristic play with etymology reminds the reader “that believe and libido share the same root / with lover, quodlibet, beloved, and leman.”

Over the arc of twenty-six pages, the poem reaches erotic heights. However, as the speaker finds himself “with limbs yoked to thine, / sitting or standing, prone or supine,” he asks, “why was I falling in love with the end?” This earnest reflection redirects the poem’s rich sensuality back to its purpose: not the veritable climax and close, but the communion of the speaker with the other. This is the space the whole of *Keep the Feast* attempts to inhabit, that of attention in its pure and impassioned form. At the poem’s end, after it has traversed the lovers’ landscape, the speaker sweetly prompts, condemning all scorn for the body: “how could someone feel alone / lying next to thy hipbone?”

In the book’s third and final section, Cushman drives questions of wildness, worship, and interconnectivity home. In

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“Green Zebra,” he muses on tomato cultivars and their obscene engineering:

[we thought] we had evaded human improvement,  
only to find  
in ancient love manuals  
we might as well be  
a Cherokee Purple, another Big Rainbow,  
  
or this zingy beauty with flavorful flesh  
striped green and yellow.

In this tender language is the notion of being far from one’s nature, perhaps misunderstood, but still precious. Linnaeus’s classifications, the poem asserts, do not close any gap; they only serve to alienate one cultivar from another. Then, in “He Chose Minnesota,” a poem about Thoreau’s journey to ease his illness, Cushman writes:

Last journal entries describe a new kitten,  
as perfectly protected by instincts in infancy  
as by any wisdom “an old man can be.”

These themes of instinct and ancient wisdom highlight a different means of reaching truth. In “Cut and Paste,” Cushman extends an invitation to chant prayers in other languages, to scale a mountain in worship, to do the unlikely: “let’s push the statute, let’s worship freely.” The book’s final poem is set in a church. Here, the speaker holds a serene clarity of connection, much developed from the first deliberations of Eden.

Sincere contemplation — of nature, faith, and pleasure — becomes its own devotional mode in a culture of inattention and artifice. These poems press beyond tedious discourse and classification. They implore the reader to fully enter their world, to “lusciously touch” another, even across distance. Finally, the feast in question was not a sign of decay or overindulgence, but a bold and challenging exercise in embodiment. Religion is one vehicle, the body another, and both intertwine without prejudice in *Keep the Feast*.