

## New Model for Surrealism

By Phil Estes

Book Review:

*Destruction Myth*, by Mathias Svalina,  
Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2010.



The humor, violence, and surrealism of Eastern European poets have attracted and influenced many young American poets, which can be seen in a renewed interest in such established names as Charles Simic, Tomaz Salamun, and Zbigniew Herbert. Simic's output remains prolific, averaging a book every two years. Salamun appears in a wide range of journals at regular intervals. Herbert's *Selected Poems*, published in 2007 by Harper Collins, appeared on best-of-the-decade lists, even though he died in 1998.

Their maturation in the repressive post-World War II Eastern bloc appeals to younger poets like myself who struggle to communicate in a period of war, fear, and economic crisis. Most of us in the first decade of the 21st century approach surrealism all wrong. We attempt to emulate Simic, Salamun, and Herbert, but we lack their urgency. We graft their grief and experience onto our lines. *Octopus* co-editor Mathias Svalina's debut book, *Destruction Myth*, creates a new model of surrealism for a newer generation of poets to emulate, by implementing distinctly American images and language within the old creation-myth form.

The least likely Gods make these worlds. One myth starts:

The world began with the beat of a drum.  
The drummer was in a metal band  
So he was drumming really fast  
& things started changing rapidly.

Svalina subverts expectations of the Judeo-Christian creation story: no man and woman, no tree of life, no serpent with an apple in its

fangs. Instead, a suburban group of head-bangers generate life for a town through processes often equated with decadence. The “metal singer’s” lyrics birth men named “Deeply Satanic” and “Bloody Bile,” who become the town’s mayor and kayak instructor. A sweet solo shredded by the band’s guitarist turns into a woman named Solo: “Solo had a knack for engines / so she became the town mechanic.” The poem ends with the mundane existence of suburbia families who, “On Sundays . . . went out to the batting cages / & saw an action film at the theater.” Their creators disappear, too—the band members skip town as quickly as they establish it.

Svalina culls his deities from American life and popular culture. A bachelor makes people out of caulk and nails, and tries to share leftover lasagna with his creations before burning them to death. A boy crafts a daisy chain of paper people. In a world where, “In the beginning everyone looked like Larry Bird,” the real Larry Bird sits in his basement and builds watches of decreasingly smaller sizes.

The title poem, comprising the final third of the book, shows us the many ways the American world will end; again, Svalina mixes images indicative of our culture—“Everyone will sell their names on eBay”—with biblical images of the apocalypse—“The oceans become blood again.”

One of the few instances of God as creator comes early in a poem titled “Creation Myth.” Here, Svalina most directly imitates the dark humor of the Eastern European poets, Herbert in particular:

He built the first mountains  
because there’s not much else  
to do when you’re God.

On the surface, this poem is funny and easy to read—a good inversion of the omniscient, all-knowing Western God. Below the simple diction, however, lurks an indictment: We see ourselves as divine, children of destiny, and we think we have the ability to craft our worlds. The work of Simic, Salamun, and Herbert embrace the opposite, absurdity of life, the inability to control one’s environment. Svalina achieves a new American surrealism through clichés of American culture: We create nothing but destruction, jokes, and—far worse—suburbs.