

## Context with a Twist

By Walter Bargaen

Book Review:

*Pretenders*, by Jeff Friedman.  
Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2014.



“We had the experience,” T. S. Eliot wrote, “but missed the meaning.” Paraphrasing Eliot and going a step further: We had the meaning, but missed the interpretation. Jeff Friedman in *Pretenders* understands this conundrum, asking where are the boundaries of meaning and interpretation? Many of his absurdist prose poems, where logic and convention twist beyond resolution, create a larger, unexpected and often delightful context for both. The reader finds in the poem “Horse” a man who receives everything he asks for, including a horse, a paddock, a saddle, a race track, a finish line, a trophy, crowds, adulation, admiration, and flashing cameras, but then he loses it all. So he starts over, expecting to regain good fortune, but not this time:

give me a horse, he said; so we stuffed a bit in his [the man’s]  
mouth and spurred his sides until he took off in a mad gallop;  
now he didn’t even need us.

Consumed by greed, seeking self-aggrandizement, the man gallops off into a new darker and lonelier sense of self.

Every good poem is written out of some necessity or discovers its necessity in the process of writing, as Stephen Dunn has said; or the poem dives into an emergency, as Frank O’Hara might say; or the power of a poem lies in its ability to open up its crisis to the reader, as Dan Beachy-Quick has written. There is the danger of turning poems into newspaper headlines: What bleeds leads. Friedman’s *Pretenders* is crowded with good poems, even as the author falls inside and outside this triumvirate of necessity, emergency, and crisis—as he searches for other means to create meaning in poems. Every poem in this book is energized by one

of these three, if not all of them at once, but there is an additional element found in the writing, and that is Friedman's absurdist imagination, as it dolphin surfs through waves of surrealism.

James Tate claims to stare at the blank page to discover new countries, new languages, new ideas. Friedman is an explorer of these yet-to-be-discovered and delineated lands. The triumvirate shapes the poem around its intentions and meanings. Here is the question: Is it ever possible for something to be meaningless? We all have a propensity, a need, a desire, to hang our hats on the hook of meaning.

Friedman offers us a fourth option as a foundation for his poems, the liberated imagination. In the poem "Noah's Last Note," a list of what could not be saved, as the waters of capitalism rise and lap at the gunwales of the Ark: "the bankers absconded with the vaults,/before the wisened patriarchs sold off/cemetery plots of cyberspace, before/all the books became bits." Here, Noah is left bereft and sinking into the flood, as Friedman's imagination does the butterfly stroke for shore.

Friedman is a poet caught in a world that makes less and less sense and needs an imagination in hyperdrive to rescue it. The poem "Trust Me" is a list not found in any accountant's ledger, but one created by a poet giving all the reasons for lack of trust:

came the church of appalling clauses,  
 requests for large donations  
 multiplying like diseases,  
 came the causes marching  
 from the dumpsters. . .  
 and all the gods and goddesses  
 quick as a quake and treacherous to the bone.

In this world, Friedman suggests, trust is a rare commodity because it can't be easily commodified. For Friedman the poet's role is to speak out, to report, to be a witness to the proliferating losses, as in the conclusion to the poem "Somebody": "Somebody tosses a bomb/in the burning bush/and nobody's talking." Religious imagery often appears in profane settings of his poems. There is no silencing this author even in his most humorous, consummate moments of failure, as in "Oral Sex, 1969":

"You're a long way from the pearl  
in the pulpit," she says,  
when I go down on her. But I keep at it,  
twirling like a helicopter in the wind.  
[And the poem ends with these two lines.]  
"Who has an orgasm every time, anyway," I say.  
"You do," she answers.

Friedman's poems move back and forth between lined verse and the prose poem. Both forms allow him to dive into his own crazy fables, from the bear that steals his girlfriend that turns out not to be a real bear, and his girlfriend who turns out not to be a real girl in "Bear Fight." In the poem "Judges," Moses "is told to drum up some business in this poor economy." Moses turns into a devouring god: "ate our phones so we couldn't call for help." He leaves nothing for anyone else at dinner and then offers a prayer: "That should take care of the problem . . . Now there was nothing left to fight over, but nothing was more than enough." Friedman's prose poems bestiary includes crows that are darkly prophetic, parrots that are almost always dying, fish, moose, turkey, chickadees, and a cow that calls him a schmuck.

For Friedman, our only choice is between which absurdity we will cling to and declare to be our religion. There is no George W. Bush, to tell us that when times get tough, the tough go shopping. Instead, in the prose poem "Old Bird," the Old Bird "rages on about injustice. 'Buy now, suffer later,' he shouts." Consumerism becomes in the end cannibalistic of its Old-Bird Cassandra when the bird is tossed in the oven to bake. There are moments when the reader of these poems will recall the Brothers Grimm fairy tales, but Friedman is more succinct and fantastic.

Necessity, emergency, crisis, imagination are exponentially alive in *Pretenders*. It is a profoundly moving book. Friedman's leaps from real to surreal intensify his vision of a fractured and corrupt society. Capitalism is the engine that is running all of us down. Money is the real serpent in the Garden of Eden. *Pretenders* is Jeff Friedman's best book yet and belongs among the best books of this decade.