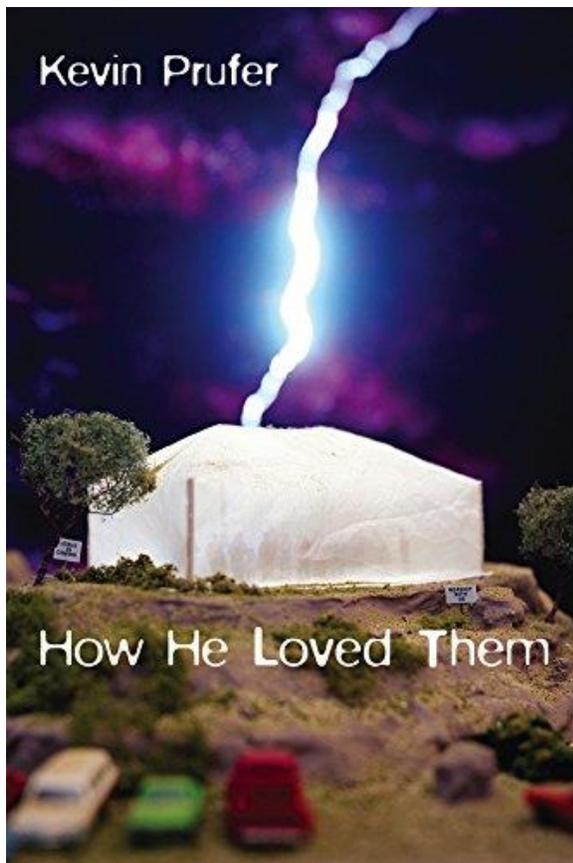


The Beaumont Book Beat

Loving Imperfections: The Poetry of Kevin Prufer

How He Loved Them by Kevin Prufer
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How can love exist in an imperfect, fallen world? That's the big, essential question Kevin Prufer asks in his latest book of poetry, *How He Loved Them*. And indeed, these poems paint a dark world where parents die, lovers leave, and epic tragedies play out daily. Still, though, at the heart of these poems is the impulse to love despite it all, even in a world of violence, a world of grief, and ultimately, a world of striking, lyric beauty. It's an ambitious book, but Prufer, who

teaches creative writing and poetry at the University of Houston, is just the sort of poet who can pull it off.

The book opens with love—the titular poem, “How He Loved Them,” begins with a statement: “How much the colonel loved his granddaughters / you will never know.” It's almost sentimental—we hear the granddaughters laughing in the backseat of the colonel's Mercedes, and it fills him with “inarticulate love” that he can hardly contain. However, the poem quickly darkens, as many of the Prufer's poems do when a car bomb bursts with “self-obliterating joy” as black smoke “billowed and rose like a heart full of love.” The poem unfolds and makes death seem almost beautiful, an act of mercy rather than violence, or so the colonel tries to tell himself as “the sound of his granddaughters' laughter” lifts him high into the air “like a scrap of burning paper” and he disappears into the sky with a cloud of black smoke. “Love Poem” has a similar juxtaposition of love and violence. It's a sort of contemporary love poem for America, a beautiful, imperfect country with steel mills and smoke stacks that “choke the sky with love.” Addressing America, the speaker declares that he loves her “line of trucks—they beat the pavement like hearts full of love,” how its airplanes “smoke the body with love,” how he loves her “like a bomb loves its timer.”

Unfortunately, love is often also the cause of grief. Because we're all human, love doesn't last forever, and this reality hovers over many of the “love poems” in this collection. In “After You Have Gone,” the speaker ruminates on the last bit of wine left at the bottom of a glass as it bejewels and clots. He refuses to rinse it out, much like one might refuse to let go of a memory because it “is so lovely.” At the end of the poem, the memory is no longer a source of beauty and comfort, though. The speaker declares:

It's not the soldiers who have shot me full of holes.

It's not light that pours out.

Love did this.

I was filled with wine.

Now I'm drained of it.

Many of the poems meditate on the grief of losing a father. This ineffable loss sits in the backdrop and pops up in unexpected moments, much in the same way sorrow pops up in the minds of the grieving. For example, in the poem, "House Sitter," the speaker begins by detailing a narrative of a house sitter who drinks one too many glasses of wine and drowns in the hot tub. The speaker describes the body's return to the earth, to the water and the leaves. He asks "At what point / did she become merely / the hot tub's contents?" Then, however, the poem turns and the body becomes a metaphor for the memories of the dead, the speaker's lost father: "And so I experience my father's absence / as a displacement / of volume." The poem "Monkey Lab" functions in a similar manner. At first, the poem is about the horrors of animal experimentation and the suffering these monkeys must experience at the hands of scientists. The speaker wonders how our modern society, with all its sophistication and compassion, can let these animals suffer such agony at our own hands. He compares this to the pain of caring for a dying parent, taking him to doctor's appointments, caring for him as an invalid, and watching him fade. The poem ends with a striking image:

He looked too small

Beneath the bed's wrinkled landscape

A useless, nearly

Emptied animal.

The poem asks why, in our world, must such profound pain and suffering exist. Of course, there is no answer to such a question.

But it isn't all darkness. Prufert lets just the right amount of light into his poems as well. If love is violence and love often leads to grief, it's worth it because of moments of beauty. We only feel the pain of grief because we've loved deeply, he seems to remind us. In "Love Poem: Just Then," a scene unfolds of a young man robbing a convenient store, holding up a Glock to an old man's head. In that same moment, Prufert

juxtaposes another scene, more commonplace: a woman lays in bed "having just made love" listening to the sound of her lover "washing himself / in the bathroom, his gentle cough" as she contemplates opening the blinds and letting the sun into the poem, perhaps like a slat of hope and beauty. In "Another Love Poem," a commonplace scene of two lovers having breakfast is juxtaposed against the reality of war across the world. In the poem, the woman cuts her finger as she slices an apple, and the blood becomes a symbol of war and violence, but in the end, the speaker reminds himself to "just be grateful / for the Sunday morning / sun and all."

How He Loved Them are complex love poems for our complex times. They resist sentimentality, but at the same time, they resist complete cynicism, too. Only a poet like Kevin Prufert could juxtapose love and grief so successfully against one another to make tangible the intricacy of human emotion. It's a good read for anyone who wants a dose of sobering hope with a hearty side of somber beauty.