



Couldn't Prove, Had to Promise (Johns Hopkins: Poetry and Fiction)

Wyatt Prunty

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In *Couldn't Prove, Had to Promise*, Wyatt Prunty ushers readers into a seesaw world, one that teeters between small fables of childish misgivings and adult assurances. Alternately shadowed and illuminated by nostalgia, this deft, witty volume brings together seventeen of Prunty's recent poems, seven of which have been previously published in *Poetry*, the *Hopkins Review*, the *Kenyon Review*, and *Blackbird*.

In "Crescent Theater, Schenectady, NY," a silent-movie accompanist reads his foreign newspaper after work as he listens, ever the outsider, "to his children using English / For everything they wish." In "Rules," a small girl, told she can't go to the school nurse "every time some bad thing happens," plaintively wonders, "Where do you go?" And in "Making Frankenstein," a boy who has cajoled his parents into letting him see *The Curse of Frankenstein* wakes to a nightmare. His father bans horror films as "too anatomical"; "What's anatomical?" the boy wonders. Given a book that catalogs diseases, the worst of which come "from intimate contact," he is horrified by his father's explanation of grownup intimacy: "That's how you made your way into this world."

Moving from a wry portrait of a husband musing on mortality whose Christmas tie lands in the gravy, to "Reading the Map," which grapples with the cartography of love, to "ad lib," a farewell that redefines farewell, these poems burnish the small triumphs and fears that fill our daily lives with humor and pathos. The book closes with a long, four-part poem, "Nod," which transports readers to a parking lot in July: an asphalt-as-inferno where Cain the cracker, or adversary-as-initiator, the pleuritic voice of disappointment, names the ways inversion makes a lie reliable and works people best as, like a joke or discount price, "It makes you feel you're getting more by giving less." Funny, raw, and colorfully musical, "Nod" plays what teeters, like a tuning fork.

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