


“Magnificat,” a tiger dies in an ice storm in a neighborhood “turned to glass,” and the poet concludes:

There is hardly anything killed/ that does not
live again; the tiger/ by the scruff of its neck is borne in the mouth
of God, God/ with ultraviolet stripes that are the wounds of
generations. The ice-laden/ elms, whose limbs bear the Emerald
Ash Borer, are on fire now & again because of/ sunbursts; un-
expected each breath that surpasses breath; thus, enough said.

With its religious title and its emphatic midline slashes, the poem resonates with ideas of annunciation, embodiment, and healing through sacrifice. These final lines are indicative of Klatt’s ability to turn what might be felt as relevant only to those of faith into existential concerns applicable and urgent to many. He is a supple and analytical poet, pursuing an unconventional spiritual journey toward self-knowledge, and beyond. Indeed, the depth of these poems comes from his very sense of uncertainty, which can strike a chord with anyone.

 Orlando Ricardo Menes’s engagement with religion is considerably more skeptical than Klatt’s. Though Menes shows respect for some aspects of civilization’s architecture, the poems in *Heresies* frequently satirize convention by conveying how fear and desperation lead to belief in myths and fetishes, as here in “St. Cajetan, Patron of Gamblers”:

Why dawdle with Hail Marys when it’s Lady Luck you really seek? Spin the roulette of rosary beads. Go for broke, picking your numbers christologically: 5 (wounds), 7 (words), 8 (beatitudes), etc., till his final 33. Don’t ever choose 13 or 30, Judas numbers, sucker bets. Cut, shuffle, riffle those holy cards made in Italy. Pray hard for the five of martyrs. Shout hallelujah if it’s the five of incorruptibles. Shake those saints’ bones in the chalice.

Heresies not only undermines confidence in social and religious institutions it also challenges our powers of perception, which are shown to be easily distorted by inaccurate narratives, both those we are told and those we tell ourselves. In “St. Primitivo, Patron of Heretics, Exhorts His Catechumens,” another of the wildly irreverent saints’ lives at the heart of the book, Menes goes on to consider the futility of religious routines and paraphernalia:

Don't pray for favors kneeling on little stones or scribbling pleas that you roll into a scroll. Fate is wind you can't control. How often it kills the candle's flame, blows dirt into hallowed wax. And aren't tapers just dribblers of doubt? Utility is holier than ritual. Put those fonts to good use as bird baths, those missals as mulch, those catafalques as oxcarts. You want to be pious? Hang laundry from the paschal cross. Grow basil in a pyx. Knead dough on the altar.

As the book's title implies, *Heresies* creates a tension between idiosyncratic experiences of faith on the one hand and adherence to convention on the other. His characters long in vain for explanations—rational or miraculous—that might free them from the anxiety aroused by the ruptures in their lives and in the world. In “St. Anthony and the Sow,” a sow dies while birthing a batch of “cherubs with kinky tails” in a nunnery, and the event turns into a mad scramble for sacred relics:

Altar boys storm the convent with axes,
keen to chop the sow into a dugout,
row across eddies, raid the convent's groves.
The nuns fight back with paddles,
vats of lye, yet the boys, covered in pigskin,
continue their assault. Right then,
St. Anthony, who'd come to pick up albs,
breaks up the fight, beats heads
with a fat figwood crutch, and the boys flee
toward tabernacles of bamboo.

His crutch striking the ground, he orders
one nun to light the cherubs rolled into cigars,
another to fan the flames, and after saying
a prayer, St. Anthony harvests the sow's fat
for unctions, christenings, exorcisms, etc.

Heresies' ironic tone and absurd images are catalysts for revelation and subversion. Menes's poems bring to light patterns of personal and spiritual corruption and the power relations between insiders and outsiders on which economic, social, and religious systems are based.

Scotland's John Burnside is one of the UK's most widely read contemporary poets—which makes it surprising that after more than ten