



# COAL HILL REVIEW

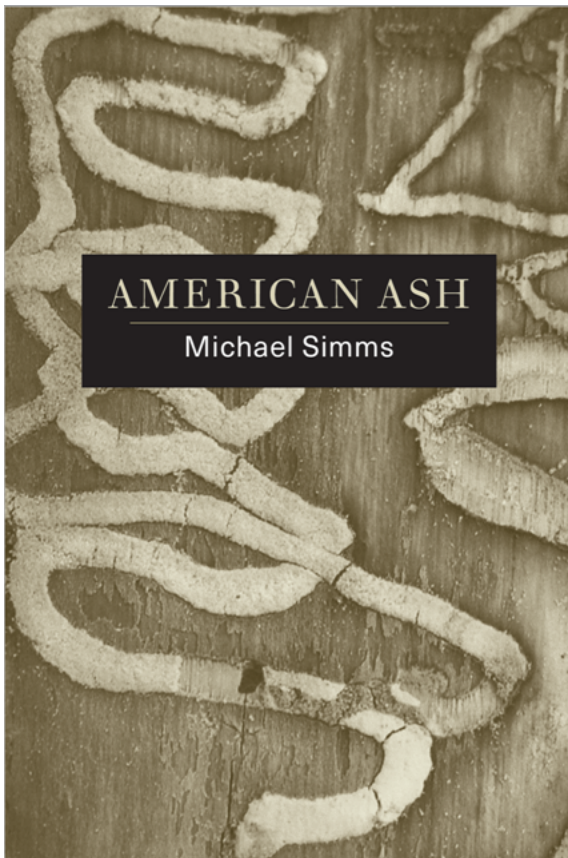
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*American Ash*

By [Michael Simms](#)

Reviewed by [Gerry LaFemina](#)



Princeton, NJ: Ragged Sky Press

88 Pages, 2020

Poetry. 94 Pages. \$17.00

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Reading the title of Michael Simms's new collection of poems *American Ash* (Ragged Sky, 2020), one can't help but consider its contemporaneous meanings: America is literally burning, with fires in our cities, and the sense that Trump has metaphorically burned down an idea of America. But Simms, whose *Vox Populi* website presents the voices of the opposition daily, is smarter than to just pander to one meaning of "American Ash." More literally, he's referring to the tree. As readers we're left to sit with a term that is both the thing and its antithesis: both a tree and its wood, and what remains when you burn it down. The death of a thing is found in the thing, in every American ash, in every American, even in the idea of America. But also in those things is the possibility of rebirth.

Simms presents the book's world view in the first poem, "Hammer," which presents to us the aftermath of American exceptionalism in its opening lines:

On West Carson Street skinny white boys

Slump in front of tattoo parlors  
Scratching their arms. Girls  
In short skirts take long pulls  
On cigs, stand in groups  
Smiling at the men who drive by  
Hungry and shy... *the realm*  
*Of the hungry ghosts* the Buddha  
Calls it.

The nod to Buddhism suggests the non-dualistic nature of the poet's vision, and sure enough we meet the speaker's son "Nailing a one by four to a two by four / Reinforcing a stud in a wall / That's seen better days": rehabbing a house. It becomes a controlling metaphor for much of the book: rehabbing this shared house of America.

Like West Carson Street, the poems in this book are filled with the sacred and the profane: family sits side by side with the junkies and dealers; Kali and Shiva sit side by side with comic book heroes. Our world is a hodge-podge of the sacred and the profane our imperfect pasts with our embarrassed present selves. In "Swamp Thing," we discover childhood disillusionment at the cruelty of "Two older boys with a net seining

A pond and pulling out fish and  
Netting a turtle which they beat  
With sticks until the shell

Cracked and the naked turtle writhed  
And the sun dried its flesh, a wanton  
Unspeakable crime.

A crime about which he's powerless to do anything, and which leads to a series of crimes: a father who beats him, a neighbor boy ("He was my bet friend and all / I knew of love") who sodomizes him with a table knife. What recourse does a child have in such a world of cruelty but the imagination? So he imagines himself "one of the elementals" whose allies were "The heavenly power called / THE WORD which passed on / All their powers to Swamp Thing." But the word is not scripture but the power of language and poetry, the power of story to provide the solace through the imagination, and thus allowing even the hurt and angry child the ability to give "humanity another / Chance."

Time and again, humanity gets its second chances. And time and again we're reminded that the cruelties of the world that, perhaps, we think of as political or historical are also personal. They're embodied in the title poem's veterans who "rarely

Say anything about  
People they killed or  
Horrors they saw instead  
They talk about the fun stuff  
f war the killer weed and

the mama-san they spent  
weekend with

This poem which offers no punctuation, no ending when it says that these men “Bury that shit real deep / where no one can ever find it” and thus reminds us that this human story continues into the future.

This poem is followed by “Tree of Life.” The poem, as it builds to its end reminds us the cruelties of the world are simultaneously personal for the victims:

Somewhere a soldier is beating a boy  
For throwing stones. Somewhere  
A priest is raping a child.  
Somewhere a girl in a marketplace  
Has a bomb strapped to her chest.

My friend and her mother  
Were in the Tree of Life synagogue  
When a man who hated immigrants  
Pushed through the door of their faith  
With an automatic rifle. You know the rest.

The penultimate stanza gives us that sense of the historical and political: bad things are happening elsewhere, and then we shift to someone talking to us about something closer to home. And it ends without replaying the news it ends on “rest” as in the remainder of the story but also as in a pause, a hesitation in music. And more, how we might need a rest from all this violence, but it never comes.

Much has been made about the name of that synagogue. The fact is the tree keeps growing, Despite the many cruelties of man that show up in this poem—big and small, against nature and other people—the speaker of these poems never submits to despair. In “The Garden and the Drone,” Simms notes that “We feel free to be kind,

To walk from here down the street,

Greeting our neighbors, stopping to give  
A dollar to a ragged man sitting on the sidewalk.  
Beauty wants us to be kind.

And maybe that’s the importance of poetry, of “THE WORD,” that “heavenly power” that enables us to create poems, to create beauty from the horror of being human. What fire did Prometheus bring down? Perhaps it was the fiery tongue of language that allowed us to pass on stories, like the story in “Angela Fell in Love with her Monkeys” a one-sentence long poem that extends well onto its third page, making us run in a “slithery rhythm” as fireworks fly overhead. Fireworks, of course, are artificial, the beautiful aspect of gunpowder made into art. Time and again we’re asked to look skyward toward that beauty even as we’re drawn to the earthly, to the desires, as the speaker in “Consider the Hummingbird” has been. You can’t have the sublime without the earthly, the light without darkness. Thus we’re urged to see

The whirring of its wings and the glint

Of red at its throat  
A deep

Mystery in the mere fact  
We experience  
The world

As whole and beautiful with  
color and music  
and joy.

And it's not trite: Simms isn't insisting that we look at the beauty, he's insisting that we can't help *but* look at the beauty. The world of the 10,000 things contains multitudes of beauty and horror. We experience it all.

There's a lot of fine poetry in this book and a lot of passion, of raw heart on a mission. In the last several years it's become more and more in vogue to talk about a book's agenda, more and more fashionable to suspect a book ought to have an agenda. Still, I can't help to feel that Simms is preaching to the choir and sometimes he sacrifices the poetry of these works in service to that agenda, as in the poem "Our Father, Who Art in Flowers," which seems simultaneously fresh and pedantic.

Still, in age, of too-hip irony and over-intellectualized fractal poetics and the almost-emo Instagram poems, to have a book that risks heart and mind, that engages the spiritual and the historical, the self and other is a pleasure. More to have poems that risk sounding grandiose but not self important, to suggest that the human species is grandiose, is powerful in an era when many of us feel powerless. That's why the move to second person gives the book its powerful closure:

In this last chapter the snow is  
Falling slowly covering the tree  
And houses and everything is  
Beautiful as you feel yourself  
Floating over the city and you wish  
The story didn't have to end.

The story doesn't end. Whatever the hardships of history, we persevere, the human story continues, we rebuild. Like many poets these days, Simms is rehabbing the house that we live in, these United States, and these family units. It's a melting pot community where the speaker's flawed kids live side by side with the flawed kids of others, where the Buddha, Jesus, Shiva and Kali, the God of Abraham, and all the atheists and agnostics, too, live side by side in the poems. There's grief and hope. This is a wonderfully human book. Flawed and triumphant.



**Gerry LaFemina's** numerous collections of poetry include *The Parakeets of Brooklyn*, *Vanishing Horizon*, and *Little Heretic*. His collection of essays on poets and prosody, *Palpable Magic*, came out in 2015 from Stephen F. Austin University Press and his textbook, *Composing Poetry: A Guide to Writing Poems and Thinking Lyrically* was recently released from Kendall Hunt. His new book of poems, *The Story of Ash*, is forthcoming this year. He teaches at Frostburg State University and serves as a mentor in the MFA Program at Carlow University.

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Born and raised in Texas, **Michael Simms** has been active in politics and poetry for over 40 years as a writer, teacher, editor, and community activist. He is the founder of Vox Populi, an online forum for poetry, politics and nature, as well as Autumn House Press, a nonprofit publisher of books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. He's also the author of four collections of poetry and a college textbook about poetry—and the lead editor of over 100 published books. Simms has won a number of awards and fellowships, including a Certificate of Recognition in 2011 from the Pennsylvania State Legislature for his contribution to the arts. Simms has an MFA from the University of Iowa and a Certificate in Plant-based Nutrition from Cornell University. He lives with his wife Eva in the historic Mount Washington neighborhood overlooking the city of Pittsburgh.