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Pink Reef

Introduction by Timothy Donnelly

Robert Fernandez

June 19, 2013

“The mosaic has a fundamentally Caribbean soul,” Robert Fernandez writes in his brilliant and captivating first collection of poems, *We Are Pharaoh*. The son of an American mother and Colombian father, Fernandez grew up in Miami, close enough to the Caribbean to have inferred a thing or two about its soul—and maybe even to have fallen under its spell. Now a resident of the American Midwest, Fernandez remains, in large part, a poet of the tropics, one capable of detecting “whale song / in the alien corn,” as he writes in his remarkable new book-length sequence, *Pink Reef*. Throughout the work, Fernandez relaxedly (rather than fetishistically or heavy-handedly) invokes Caribbean fauna and flora, including dolphins, parrotfish, manta rays, the gumbo-limbo tree, and of course coral, whose accreted skeletal remains and living colonies form the complex biotic structures referred to in the book’s title.

But it’s more than topicality that makes Fernandez a poet of the tropics—truth is, his breadth of reference is actually quite wide, as the poetry below will demonstrate, and it’s pretty much devoid of locodescription. Put it this way. Just as a mosaic is made of any number of discrete tiles, so the Caribbean region comprises approximately 7000 individual islands and islets. While its collective land mass is relatively small (less than that of Oregon), the Caribbean houses an extraordinary number of microclimates and exceptional biodiversity. The human inhabitants of these islands are largely of African descent, but many have European, Near Eastern, Asian, and Southeast Asian ancestry, with a significant number of inhabitants identifying as mixed race. There are six official languages spoken throughout the region, as well as dozens of creoles, patois, and indigenous languages. In other words, what it means to have “a fundamentally Caribbean soul,” first and foremost, is to contain multitudes—to be diverse, polyvocal, complex, dynamic, and evolving.

Pink Reef is possessed of just this kind of soul. And it's a soul that celebrates its incarnation —“there is meat enough for us all,” Fernandez writes, “for all of us lush / medallions.” Purity and restraint aren't privileged here. Abstraction doesn't last in this climate. As in the title poem of *We Are Pharaoh*, the “dominant impulse” is “to survive,” which is to say that struggle and even violence are expected. And yet it isn't the individual that persists and is valued in this work so much as vitality itself, or life's embodied principle. Indeed, the solitary subject often wants to reknit into an amalgam, even an interspecial society (“to be / among...brother / cacti”); the mere self wants to pluralize, or even to metamorphose: “I get so sick of myself I / want to clip & // clop, clip-i- / ty clop,” Fernandez writes, ingeniously suggesting both the dismemberment of the self and its transformation into a trotting horse.

This will to push forward through adaptation finds an analog in *Pink Reef's* powerful musicality and shifting forms, which manifest a protean erotics of excitation and play while still offering moments of startling and resonant denotative clarity. The wish for a consistent through-line or conventional argumentation should be resisted in favor of a more open, sensuous reading strategy at first, followed ideally, and inevitably, by a pleasure-driven investigation of the sequence's pockets and patterns of meaning-making. Reading Fernandez, think of yourself as a kind of valiant scuba diver, dazzled as you take in the heterogenous structure of a coral reef at the onset, then rapt as you poke among its many marvel-holding nooks and niches, not knowing if they hold a gold doubloon or a moray eel. It's a thrilling experience you won't soon forget.

—Timothy Donnelly

Editor's Note: The following 23 sections of *Pink Reef* represent only a portion of the book, which has just been published by Canarium Books. The first section here (“I've decided to pay...”) first appeared in *Mandorla: Nueva Escritura de las Américas*.

from *Pink Reef*

*

I've decided to pay

just at the point

I've decided

to pay into

PINK REEF. By Robert Fernandez. (Canarian Books, 2013)

"The roads are / staggered meat," Robert Fernandez writes in his second collection of poems, *Pink Reef*. The roads *are*? Yes, are staggered meat. The undercutting of ontological firmness achieved by the line break—and most of Fernandez's new lines are stabs as much as they are starts—would be pure Fernandez, if the end of the poem,

what is meat to
sides of venison
covered in moths?

weren't *it*, the very beauty, puzzle, horror, super reality, that is at the heart of his style and hence of this series of untitled, usually one-page poems—poems fabulous with metaphor and consecrated to surrealist violence and voluptuousness. Fernandez is a rare poet in today's scene, an all-out tragic poet, by which I mean not glumly defeatist, like many young poets today, not crazed or hornety with vexation at disappointment, but plain glad *and* horrified to be alive to die, to be corruptible meat, aware at every moment of the sacrificial nature of being flesh, being here, and being every moment thieved of existence itself, of one's loves. Also, it is true, half in love with death ("we want to steal me away"). How confusing it is: "Chanel, don't make me laugh I'm trying to die, I'm / trying to drive." True, he, too, is often melancholy and disappointed, one of *those*, one of the boys whom life has got down. But in his case not because history stinks, but because life is in its very conception, so to speak, a bizarre contradiction, a trap of death in which life is caught and torn. What is it that ails thee?

. . . it is that we are alive
it is that we are fallow
it is that ecstasy's
gas masks flop
from beneath our ribs

This nullity is indeed one pole toward which the poems swing. But note that what the speaker minds, cannot get out of his mind, is the lack of an ecstasy whose possibility he has sensed; he *feels* the lapse from long "-low" to short "flop." He would be Dionysian, seeing that he is forbidden to be idiotically happy. Would you "imagine / yourself / not . . . corrupt or / corrupting / rather joyful, / fair"? Sure; but "(O / Wolfgang) we are / stilled before / a wall of speakers." Fernandez, for one, however, speaks back. His imagination is all flair and flare, his fearlessly wild images rock the auditorium. Originality jets from him: "all's ghost / & Lord / noise & / abyssal jet"—you can't get any more deliciously creative than that with six words strung together with &s. The same poem ends, "I am . . . a rib of heat rising along / the opaque surface / of the water." A rib out of joint? Rather, an already

always jointless rib: in a sublime view, the end pre-appropriates the beginning; "red refrigerator-blood / fills me." Fernandez's images of isolated body parts dismember the body—he's a butcher boy—but at the same time urge on the meat and bones a life beyond dismemberment, which is what those damn moths affect to do to the sides of venison. His scenes of horror, which include almost every scene he imagines, are loud with contrasts of values, including loud color contrasts: regenerating orange, expensive red, healing violet, versus unmodifiable black. Caviar: black; but, ah, "the red roe / of *ekstasis*" (the spelling a nod to Heidegger). Everything includes to its opposite. Life rises out of death, indestructible, as myth knows, but life cannot be without its contrary. Alas, and exaltingly, it is all stomach-lurchingly *one*. The dualities meet uroborically at the beginning and the end. The Carnavalesque was never before *this* crazy and sublime. "Why don't I just die, says Judith, / drawing a dozen roses *ta- / da* from beneath her ribs"; lucky Judith, to get to pull more life out of death's hat and thus to enjoy relatively long lines. Fernandez's style compulsively repeats its gestures, is anaphorically jittery, driven, and hopeful that the unknown, the "fair" surprise, will come, even if only "meat enough for us all for all of us lush / medallions" (the embedment of "us" in "lush" is a sign of appetite and an argument for design). "A shock of rain, an ecstasy of sudden passage"—if the verse moves fast enough, might it not also be such a shock, such an ecstasy? But then it would be over. Would die. Well, of course. In any case, the rush is further dizzied by spinings, "spins the searchlights / that drift screaming (all my / Marilyns are trapped in the light / all my Marilyns . . .)"—here an elegiac, *come back* sort of repetition. On rare occasions, the imagery is all too reckless with regard to the natural relations of things: e.g., "pink reef—in one meaning, the brain, via "brain coral"—shedding under the tree, / snapping at masks"; but illogical mixes are its discovery, its nod to the Carnavalesque interfusion of forces. How determine taste in handling imagery in such an ambience, such a vision? A little fear is good, but excess is better than caution. Fernandez braves the test and compounds the risks through syntactic splits and shifts of rhetoric: "I will follow / after the bright / seeds of marrow are / shaken from the thigh / & the thigh placed / on a stick in / the faceless gallery / I will devote, / for thou hue / thou gravel / thou hearse— / the blood oranges / so bright / because they are against a white / background / the blood oranges / so bright," etc., in a final stuckneedle ecstasy of seeing ahead of time a determinate, heartening spectacle—a *benign* contrast. The consummate wisdom is that you are what you are not: "take a lesson / from what it means to say / what you are not (what you are)." In other words, you are all and not all, "heart flexing on a trident" and everything you hunger for, you are "the great grey owl's / shirred // facial / disc // everything / swivels & // slips / everything // *shines*." Nietzsche, meet your latest consociate. A worthy one. This is a book Rimbaud and Césaire might have read with a shock of recognition.

—Calvin Bedient

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Pink Reef

Posted by [Paul Scott Stanfield](#)

24 May 13



[Pink Reef](#)

[Robert Fernandez](#)

Canarium Books, April 2013

96 pages

\$14.00

I brought this along on a recent visit to my doctor, just in case there was a wait; as it turned out, I read the whole book and started again at the beginning—not only because my doctor was running an hour behind, and not only because it was a better alternative than *People*, but also because it is a book that envelops and surrounds, creating a space one cannot easily leave. A doctor's office, too, seemed an eerily suitable place to take in Fernandez's meditations, which trace the shore where the mind meets the body.

The “pink reef” of the book's title, mentioned in the first of its 74 untitled poems, may be another name for what some of the book's later poems call the “brain coral.” An image of the brain flushed with blood, perhaps? Blood is mentioned often in the book; our muscles need it just as our brain does, and its circulation governs both our thinking and our acting.

Mentioned almost as often are seeds, eggs, eyes, bone. Yet for all the intense physicality of these poems, they seem equally concerned with consciousness. “I am a slot filled with meat,” Fernandez writes, having already declared, borrowing a technical term for non-physical mental states, “I am the / blistering *qualia* / of all that lives.”

Pink Reef feels more like a sequence than a collection. As with Rilke's [Sonnets to Orpheus](#) or Rimbaud's [A Season in Hell](#), sometimes we seem to hear a consciousness expressing itself in language, other times we seem to hear language constructing a consciousness. Lines from other poets—Blake, Keats, Dunbar—surface and disappear, sometimes oddly refracted: John Donne's “bracelet of bright hair about the bone” becomes a “bracelet of black roe about the bone.”

Elsewhere, a phrase will start looping, Steve Reich fashion, experimenting with itself:

Happily I explore

Bunches of

cherries under the

happily I explore

*bouquets of paradise
roses inside of*

happily
from Paris

their son a
little bunch of roses

Sometimes the poems seem to simply conjure whatever they can conjure from the sheer play of vowels and consonants: “rye light / rye eye seeing as it’s flowing / flown ground eating / across seeing.”

Pink Reef, in its unique way, participates in the mystical tradition, but not by transcending the body or merging with the cosmos. Instead, like the poems of Thomas Traherne, Fernandez’s is a visionary poetry in which consciousness dives so profoundly into the body that even the boundaries of identity begin to dissolve: “how strange to be called F-e-r-n-a-n-d-e-z,” one poem parenthetically notes. One can do a lot of exploring, it turns out, without leaving the doctor’s waiting room.

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One Response to *Pink Reef*



Stanley A. Woodcut says:

May 25, 2013 at 4:09 pm

“Happily” from Lyn Hejinian ?

“F-e-r-n-a-n-d-e-z” from L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E ?

This poet gestures towards the gesture.

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THERMOS

28 OCT

Alex Walton on Robert Fernandez

Posted October 28, 2013 by thermosmag in Featured Poet, Robert Fernandez. Tagged: Alex Walton, Canarium, Nebraska, Pink Reef, poem, poet, poetry, Robert Fernandez, Thermos. [**2 Comments**](#)

To kick off the second week of our feature of Robert Fernandez's poetry, we've asked friend-of-THERMOS Alex Walton to write about Pink Reef. — AS

A Note on *Pink Reef*

Usually I'm thinking about this part of the Marvell quote: "Meanwhile the Mind, from pleasure less, / Withdraws into its happiness [...] Annihilating all that's made / To a green Thought in a green Shade." But in the ellipsis, between "happiness" and "Annihilating,"

The Mind, that Ocean where each kind
Does streight its own resemblance find;
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other Worlds, and other Seas;

– which a perhaps worthless gloss once told me Marvell references a "then-current doctrine" of pseudozoology in which each land-animal was supposed an aquatic complement: horses and seahorses, mermaids, mermen, and people. (Sir Thomas Browne frowned on this theory in his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. He did not stamp it out.) Charming and bizarre theory, I remembered it this weekend, thinking over *Pink Reef*, the second book of poems from Robert Fernandez– what quality does the ocean have that makes us look for our resemblance there– not our exact semblance, not saltwater Narcissi, but in uncanny form, the seahorse looking the horse in the mouth. We have a persistent sense of an obscure submarine self-sufficiency, a completeness unto itself, which must, if complete, contain some reprised versions of our own lives, intelligences, constructions. And threatening as it mirrors: "Few eyes have escaped the picture of mermaids." (–Tho. Browne again.) When at low tide that wettest trope of sublimity retreats, we are confronted by a spitting, crawling, particoloured yard of hissing jellies and

festery barnacles, Ernst Haeckel's sweet-shop, you know it, one is uncomfortable among these forms of life which (animal or vegetable? or mineral? industrial trash washed back up?) if they reprise or repeat our life, may do so satirically; difficult to tell. *Pink Reef* (whose pink is what – human? blood in the water? coral encrustation?) has that uncanniness and that pulsing, hissing life to it; the encounter of “streight its own resemblance find” just as it occurs between the mind, in its withdrawn happiness, and the annihilating thought. “How strange to be called F-e-r-n-a-n-d-e-z.”

A “candied light of a distinct South Beach nihilism” (Fernandez, ex-Floridian, in an interview (<http://thermosmag.wordpress.com/2011/06/20/a-conversation-with-robert-fernandez/>)) showing through the title, through dolphins variously quartered or apostrophized, does not imply any ruminating on this or any other attitude, landscape, system. Not ruminating *anything*: *active* with coral's living, distributed vigor from the smallest scale upward; a restlessness through, not with, poetry; the questing-in-place through which spirit (<http://thermosmag.wordpress.com/2013/10/21/public-letter-robert-fernandez/>) might appear, not as an apparition before but as the appropriator of ourselves and our material reality, together, in an objectively audible coach. (Conch?) Beyond this self-requirement to be ceaselessly in motion, to posses by music whatever material is at hand (and regard *everything possible* as material), it gives no proscription as to what may occasion, or carry, poetry. Forms expedited: flat-rate, compact, signature confirmation; not book- or bulk-rate. To be free from feeling that poems ought conform to their own idea of lyric, or virtuosity– is virtuosity; for these poems to attend to and certify their individual rhythms goes far further into poetry than any hovering attempt to subvert or interrogate Poetry.

I have compared thee, O my love,
to a smear of gold teeth in Pharaoh's chariots

in one place,

& clop, clip-i-
ty clop

in another. I would like to mention the Polyhedron as a figure here, “Polyhedron” being the title of the first poem in Fernandez' first book, *We Are Pharaoh*: “Intending to begin at the billowing page,” beginning instead at interlocking angles, joined surfaces, “Think of the bardo (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bardo>) as 2,700 intersecting *tiles*”; in other words think of an intermediate state, the space between you and anything, as if states themselves were something angular, irregular, and investigable as Durer's (<http://mathworld.wolfram.com/DuerersSolid.html>) solid. The sections of “Polyhedron,” the poems in *Pink Reef*, fit that way: shared edges (returned images and objects: blood, roe, discs, violets, many more), and heavy repetition inside individual poems. Across one face of the solid flashes clear imagery; its opposite side quotes a joke; the adjoining side detourns it; one's metaphor becomes another's ground; those turned part way away, grow obtuse and thin in perspective, but stay in sight. “Imagines itself a Cadillac- / mouthed cupid” — which is

fantastical, impossible, and then, when the grille becomes a grill (<http://www.amazon.com/s?ie=UTF8&keywords=mouth+grills&tag=googhydr-20&index=aps&hvadid=29644482907&hvpos=1t1&hvexid=&hvnetw=g&hvrnd=3307237751731984980>) an image of intense complexity and vivacity. What returns does so not as gratuitous hieropanting [sic] but as the seams and edges of that solidity we feel or desire to feel in reality. There is, throughout, an obstinate insistence on a material reality of such density that each thing slides out from another like rows of overlapping scales, as if the fact of overcrowding were the source of the metaphoric faculty. But the testament of that reality is not in trying to apply fixative to a single transcendent image; it is, rather, in the sound one makes of it. As in Zukofsky when Zukofsky says:

One can go further, try to dissect capillaries or intelligent nerves— and speak of the image felt as duration or perhaps of the image as the existence of the shape and movement of the poetic object. The poet's image is not dissociable from the movement or the cadenced shape of the poem.

That “cadenced shape,” I mean, is not only how and where we encounter ourselves (our voices), but how we can be made to feel the entrenchment of things in themselves. Not unrelatedly, *Pink Reef's* alternations between the flesh as hunks of meat under a dicey MRI and at the flesh as intricate, delicate systems of separate (nervous, skeletal, circulatory) self-life-support clarify that the view that seems more gruesome is in fact less terrifying, in the sense that a true vision of the working circulatory systems is far more unsettling than the sight of spilled blood.

Rimbaud, his verve, fired pupils, drunken boat knocking between everything that could be in language as language, is a precedent spirit, and when Robert quotes (not, I should say, without reservation) his statement that the poet might, for instance, “die charging through those unutterable, unnameable things [n.b. “charging through” not: “seeking to name” -AW]: other horrible workers will come; they will begin from the horizons where he has succumbed!” it is clear that the show of fragility and the show of intensity are unavoidably one; one is already a bull, already in the china shop. Poetry is the ensuing. And the china, Rimbaud's opulence, is in Fernandez's poems compacted and recapitalized by available, mythic brands: “Cartier chariots strung with pearls”; “ecstasy's Versace”; Chanel; Jeff Koons; “a pearl farrari / [approximating] the angel of history.” It makes sense: all that toil and cash to pack a whole atmosphere into the brand-name each season; which name, redeployed in poetry, can spread perfume with concision.

More:

one who flatters a lyre
clips the spine's fused discs,
spreads the mind's bloodied butter
on flat, brittle, cold dry toast

But wait:

just the smiles
(just the smiles)
just the smiles

Here and elsewhere, whether exactly echoing or wholly departing, each line responds to the line before with as much attention as the *mind* might bring; but it is the *ear* attending. This may sound obvious. It is a rarity in poetry. *Pink Reef* is a pleasure: a record of a hypnotic attention, not hypnotized, that makes things dream awake. "Look in thy ear and write!" (Zukofsky-Pound-Sidney). If the variety of, if the extent of, a fantastic imagination is coextensive with the variety we see in reality, it endures for us with that reality: much in the way it is the Ocean's magnitude, more than the incidental existence in it of seahorses, lions, and other such complements, that seem to make it promise a total complement of the terrestrial. That alternately primordial and avant-lapsarian "soup is / all the good stuff / mixed in."

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2 responses to this post.

Posted by Kevin Faulkner on October 28, 2013 at 6:53 am

Always useful to see a reference to specific text by Browne and where in P.E. he 'frowned'/ queried a particular theory.

Reply

Posted by aw on October 28, 2013 at 11:00 am

pseudodoxica epidemica, book 3 ch 24

— Mud Schematic

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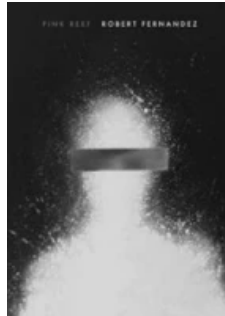
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February 18, 2014

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Book Review: Robert Fernandez's PINK REEF

Forgive me for comparing, but Fernandez's first and prior collection, WE ARE PHARAOH, is a starkly different thing and effect/affect than this follow-up, available from the very same [Canarium Books](#).



Here in PINK REEF, the poems are quick and sharp and gruesome in a beautiful and crystalline way. Here, the body comes in pieces and seems to be on its way out due to its own deep thinking and observing. The body (or maybe the voice) tries desperately to describe and claw at its surrounding world as it implodes in its bloodiness and pinkness.

“find the dragon’s scales seeing in / my stomach’s bleeding”

In this way, I think, the collection does lend itself a thread to its predecessor, as I feel both books try to tackle that wonderfully dense problem of absorbing and describing one’s world. But, again, the form and content are given more canines than molars. It’s similar to the experience, I would imagine (mostly based on stories — okay, entirely

based on stories), of acupuncture: you come out feeling relieved and renewed but the objects themselves are small and pointed.

The voice itself is still Fernandez’s, but with an entirely different aim and purpose than his first book. I wouldn’t call it a comeback; I’d call it a new set of claws.

“the mounds of roe are / so bright today it’s like / I see the sun for the first / time it’s like I see the sun clearly / in the idea of it it’s like I see the sun / clearly in the black mounds of / shine in the swollen / clear of it”

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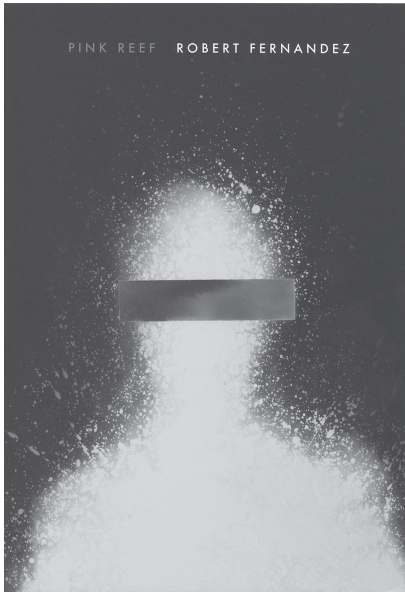
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PINK REEF

Robert Fernandez
Canarium Books (\$14)



Pink Reef, Robert Fernandez's second collection of poetry, comprises a curious grouping of poems, which is in no way a negative assessment. Fernandez continues to deploy the manic poetic style that he first used in *We Are Pharaoh* (2011), while juxtaposing relentless abstract energy with interesting formal constraints: none of the poems in the book are titled (the "Contents" identifies individual poems by first line only), and most of them are no longer than a single page. These choices mirror and reinforce *Pink Reef's* notable themes of bodily destruction and alternate constitution.

Fernandez's poems are incessantly concerned with *the real*—both the material world that surrounds our bodies and the psychological structures that exist within our minds. Invoking the vastness, complexity, and often non-associative appearance of reality, the poetics of *Pink Reef* can appear spontaneous—yet it is a spontaneity that allows Fernandez freedom within his formally controlled poems and that invokes a sense of the chaotic, unguided nature of reality:

sensitive anti-discourse dolphin
with your graceful pink

penis sensitive
expressivist teller of tales

with your pregnant precarious
dolphins

master of manners radical
chic . . .

Fernandez most often—and most successfully—explores the violently physical relation of the self to the real through his materially deconstructive use of the body; for *Pink Reef*, any meaningful exposition of being-in-the-world must be written with flayed skin and shed blood. This interest in the body works in tandem with one of the book's most prevalent stylistic strategies: to offset the potentially alienating abstraction and spontaneity of his poems, Fernandez will repeat (often three times) a specific word or phrase which acts as an anchoring device that stabilizes the poem (and the mind of the reader) while the poem's vocabulary strays into unexpected territory. The poetic repetition acts as a constant, normalizing point of reference, as the word "first" does here: "First breaking the black ossetra candies of / Enmity, first the ecstasy's Versace and sand-dry, first / Rustle of closed eyes, first / Noon of soft Versailles . . ." This use of the body in *Pink Reef* can likewise be read as an anchoring device; the body is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of our being in the world, and Fernandez uses it in language as a tool. In these poems, the body is deconstructed and bled, exposed and stripped of its familiar connotations. Fernandez forces the body to encounter unfamiliar and uncomfortable aspects of reality (whether physical or conceptual) in clear and intimate ways, providing access to the otherness of reality:

your
body on the cleaning board

cut then grip the gills'
shag,
tear loose

there is meat enough for us all for all of us lush
medallions

Fernandez's poems seldom falter, but when they do, it indicates an overabundance of meta-poetic self-awareness; the poems of *Pink Reef* generally play along the fine line of self-insistence and self-ignorance, and when they cross into the territory of the hyper-aware, this is often signaled by rhyme: "believe everyone you meet, wipe / the blood up from the street / eat acid in the heat . . ." While these hyper-aware rhymed lines do not depart from the general tone or theme of the book, they do seem hermetic and self-contained in a way that Fernandez's most successful *Pink Reef* poems do not. Yet the presence of rhymed verse is not entirely a weakness, as it provides a rhythmic respite from the intensity and relentless aesthetic of the free-verse poems.

Any flaws in *Pink Reef* are more than compensated for by the boldness, experimentation, and aggressively consistent arguments made throughout the poems. Fernandez's work is assertive without becoming didactic, and the craftsmanship and technical excellence of his poems is impressive; he maintains aesthetic interest while writing within a consistent form and challenges the lyric poem while paying homage to its history. Ultimately, *Pink Reef* advances a necessary poetic ethic: that the force of reality constantly surrounds our bodies, pressing inward, and we can best engage with the real through openness and measured self-abandonment.

—Connor Fisher

condition and speaking to tradition.

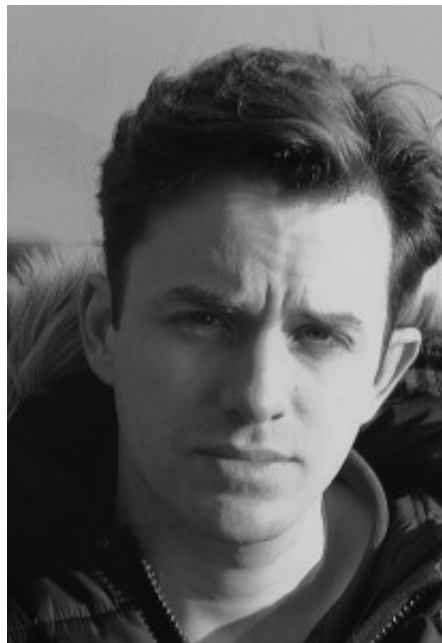
Underlying all of this remains a lyric voice that is neither unmoored nor paralyzed by the sense of possibility. For surely, as Starkweather puts it in the last of the four books, *Self Help Poems*, “[w]hen you have no choice, there’s nothing to do but wade around in those unknowns like a child in a kiddie pool, unafraid of what is contained.” What we have here then is a voice that is sometimes “at war with the sea”— with memory and with emotion— while elsewhere sort of trapped in reflexivity and the direct address: “I’m trying to tell you something but the writing keeps getting in the way.”

It is probably impossible to consider any individual book of *The First Four Books of Sampson Starkweather* without the others. Then again, one might be able to say the same thing about a serious consideration of any poet’s works. The poems talk to each other, echo one another, sometimes even wear the same tattered clothing. What unifies them here is a consistent, powerful lyric voice and an almost romantic notion of the poet as both hero and anti-hero. “In the myth I made, I was of course, the King,” he writes in *King of the Forest*. But the poet in the woods that sometimes appears in these books is the same one that is attached to his city: if not a Lorca in New York, then his literary descendant. The dichotomy here is a construct in itself: everyone has a city inside them; everyone emerges from a forest.

Read the full review [here](#).

[Buy this book](#).

—Mark Gurarie



28. *Pink Reef*, Robert Fernandez

Canarium Books

“then a shock of rain, / an ecstasy of sudden passage”



A soulful collection inspired by the tropical and filled with blood, Fernandez's *Pink Reef* is populated with small poems, often with thin lines that spread like a chain of islands and, absent titles, approach anonymity. Yet the poems speak less of a vacation utopia than a troubling and deeply loved home of variance and despair (“eel coiled around / the throat”). Fernandez takes a risk by pulling the reader between emotionally direct lines with threatening timber (“to hell with those that/hand themselves over//to me/that warm themselves//in me”) and the obscured near-cubist repetition and remixing of canonized text. In his author’s note, Fernandez explains he quotes, adapts, or is otherwise indebted to Blake, Donne, Keats, Lorca, Nietzsche, and others, and spotting samples becomes one of the book’s great pleasures. Stylistically, some poems seem poised between Stein and Williams; a poem early in the collection repeats the lines “the blood oranges / so bright / because they are / against a white / background” three times before concluding, “cold and light / cold and light / cold and light”—reflecting both the elements of Stein’s re-seeing of language and Williams’s directness. With its seemingly subtle approach and referential depth, Fernandez’s incredibly inventive book rewards both a casual read and a more studied one. *Pink Reef* hits a rare and magnificent sweet spot between unabashed raw emotion and fever-dream iconic imagery.

[Buy this book.](#)

—Seth Graves



27. *Begging for It*, Alex Dimitrov

Four Way Books

Once the submission period ends, we begin to go through the manuscripts. Josh, Robyn, Lynn and I will read them, but also our fantastic editorial team of Michigan MFA students will read them and choose a manageable number of submissions that intrigued them, usually giving us a semblance of an order of preference. We will compare their notes with ours, then winnow things down to two to three books we really love, and then haggle over them until we decide on the ones we want to pursue. We also solicit poets whose work we love, and consider their manuscripts with the same care we look at unsolicited work.

Once we actually offer a contract for publication and the author accepts, the four of us figure out who will be the lead editor on that particular book. While all of us will carefully read each book we publish, and offer suggestions, we typically rely on one of us to do the heavy lifting for one book. This is for a number of reasons. First, it allows our writers to become comfortable with one editor, as the relationship between an editor and a poet is complex, loaded with emotion. We don't want four different sets of suggestions pouring into the inbox of some poor poet who cannot make sense of all these different edits! As well, each of us has had a particular book or poet whom we simply bond with. And really, I mean whose work we *bond with*. I have been lead editor on both of Robert's books, and that's largely because his work simply slays me. I am frightened by it, as an editor, because Robert's vision is so immense and intense, and his syntax and intelligence is daunting. But that makes the work of editing his poems a serious challenge — I cannot be lazy! I must be as on as I hope I am when I'm writing. Robyn has taken on Tod Marshall, whose third book we will publish in 2014, largely due to her affinity for his sense of history as it illuminates and complicates the domestic. I have always felt that poems and books of poems should be edited, even when I worked for literary magazines. Poets don't always want their poems stepped on, and I understand this. But most of the time, a poem can use some tweaking, whether at the level of the line break, or at the level of the poem's larger logic. So, we are extremely hands-on, and I think the poets on our list would say they like it that way. I hope!

□



Interlude 3: A Short Review, a Question, and an Answer with Robert Fernandez

Often, when I want to return to a book of poems I've read and liked — and, for some reason, I do this with selecteds, collecteds, and completes even if I haven't yet read them through — I'll just flip the book open and read whatever poem I happen to land on. And I find this usually satisfies my desire for the book's particular sound, or way of thinking, or way of using words — if the book is sufficiently unified, I'll get a taste of the whole. But I don't think this would work with Robert Fernandez's second book, *Pink Reef*, even though it is a book I love and will return to, and even though it is an especially unified book. I don't think this method of returning would work, in fact, *because* it's such a unified book. *Pink Reef* demands to be read from beginning to end, every time; I would go so far as to say that the best way to read it would be to read it from beginning to end twice, the second time immediately following the first.

Pink Reef begins before the beginning, with a poem that seems to put forward what I take to be one of the reasons the book got written. Fernandez's particular skill, the thing at which he's as good as — or, really, better than — just about any poet writing, is charging philosophical investigation with lyric intensity:

I chose
pink reef surging toward
the name of the dog

pink reef shedding under the tree,
snapping at masks

...

I wanted to understand
this ethos of cameras
strung through juniper leaves,

juniper lenses seeing
at the tops of the trees

Here, I think, the impetus behind the book is explained. In *Pink Reef*, Fernandez explores the interrelations between artists and the natural world, between the cameras and the juniper leaves surrounding them, infusing what could come across as a purely intellectual exercise with blood, and terror, and life.

Fernandez is, of course, implicated in this exploration. He is both explorer and explored. He does not, however, romanticize his position:

the artist has
blood in the stomach

the artist has
blood &

bubbles of blood
in the stomach

the artist has
organs announcing themselves
as organs

I cannot argue with the flesh
I cannot argue with the meat
across which I speak
across which I grapple
& beat

The “meat”/“beat” rhyme here is important — Fernandez refuses to deny artifice, refuses to pretend that artifice isn’t what artists *do*. And yet by breaking just before the rhyme, so that the stanza doesn’t signify as an A, B, C, B quatrain, he suggests that the artist cannot prioritize artifice, that the artist “cannot argue with the flesh.” And the book bears his point out. There is moral authority here, and throughout *Pink Reef*. To my mind, it is one of the most important books of the year.

SHANE MCCRAE: What has working with the folks at Canarium been like? Was your experience prepping *Pink Reef* — editing, choosing the cover art, etc. — any different from your experience prepping *We Are Pharaoh*, and if so, how?

ROBERT FERNANDEZ: I would say that Canarium’s editors have integrity and vision; they’re also tireless and tirelessly professional. It’s inspiring being around that kind of dedication and character. The process of preparing *Pink Reef* was nearly identical to that of preparing *We Are Pharaoh*. I pick the covers, in consultation with Joshua Edwards, which then get stamped with Canarium’s signature font and layout. I give the book to Twemlow then chew on his suggestions — a very anguishing process, for which I require some time. I find myself second-guessing and polishing and making changes up until the last second. This year, after the manuscript had already been formatted, Josh was kind enough to listen to my chagrined explanation of having made a grave mistake by cutting eight poems from the book, and would he please put them back. He was, as ever, generous enough to accommodate me. All of which is to say that I feel that I can talk to the editors and that they are gracious enough to work with my process.

□

A Very Short Interview with Joshua Edwards

My final interview with Josh took place in March. I had one last question about *The Canary River Review*, the journal that would eventually lead to the press. In 2001, when *The Canary River Review* was founded, Josh and I lived in the same valley — the Willamette Valley in Oregon, named after the Willamette River — about 90 miles from each other, and there’s no Canary River there.

SHANE MCCRAE: So, why the name?

JOSHUA EDWARDS: I don't remember the exact genesis of the name. I know now, in retrospect, that the word "Canary" is one of my favorite words for its etymology. The Canary Islands were named after the wild dogs (Canaria) that lived there, and of course the bird was named after that. So we're calling a bird after an island after a dog. I think at the time it had more to do with the idea of the poet as a "lightning rod of civilization" or whatever Pound said, and so the Canary in the coal mine metaphor seemed appropriate. The river part I think I added because it was a river of voices, a river of songs.

□



Shane McCrae is the Whiting Writer's Award author of Mule and Blood. He teaches in the brief-residency MFA program at Spalding University.
<http://lareviewofbooks.org/author.php?cid=1073>

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Recommended Reads

- [Portrait of a Press: Four Way Books, Twenty Years On](#) by Jeremy Glazier (article.php?id=1264)
- [Portrait of a Press: Wave Books](#) by Broc Rossell (article.php?id=638)
- [Peter Campion on Noose and Hook, Torn and Army Cats](#) by Lynn Emanuel, C. Dale Young and Tom Sleigh "Beyond Disbelief" (article.php?id=141)
- [Lisa Russ Spaar on In The Badlands of Desire and Raptor](#) by Beckian Fritz Goldberg and Andrew Feld "Second Acts: A Second Look at Second Books by Beckian Fritz Goldberg and Andrew Feld" (article.php?id=1604)
- [Lisa Russ Spaar on Hard Freight and Incarnadine](#) by Charles Wright and Mary Szybist "Second Acts: A Second Look at Second Books by Charles Wright and Mary Szybist" (article.php?id=1480)
- [Lisa Russ Spaar on Sanderlings and History is Your Own Heartbeat](#) by Geri Doran and Michael S. Harper "Second Acts: A Second Look at Second Books by Geri Doran and Michael S. Harper" (article.php?id=1750)
- [Lisa Russ Spaar on Skylight and Atlas Hour](#) by Carol Muske-Dukes and Carol Ann Davis "Second Acts: A Second Look at Second Books of Poetry by Carol Muske-Dukes and Carol Ann Davis" (article.php?id=1356)

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Living fire and flattered lyre

On Erica Mena and Robert Fernandez

JAY AQUINAS THOMPSON



Featherbone

Erica Mena

Ricochet Editions 2015, 55 pages, \$15, ISBN 978-1938900112

Pink Reef

Robert Fernandez

Canarium 2013, 96 pages, \$14, ISBN 978-0984947133

In *Featherbone* and *Pink Reef*, poets Erica Mena and Robert Fernandez make an argument for poetry's somatic effects. These two books are very different, but they share a spell-casting potency and embrace the power of language not just to *denote* the world, but to *act*, vividly and terribly, within it.

Erica Mena's book-length poem, *Featherbone*, makes bodies of its words and then dismembers those bodies. She crossbreeds them into neologisms (boneslide, shaleskin, huskweight) and stretches them until denotative meanings thin out and the resultant language feels physical — somatic rather than explanatory.

Out of fleshfallow slip,
out of sicklight swell,
out of silvering fear,

(the featherbone reach)

out of undreamed grey,
out of waterskin scale,
out of bone soft loam,

(the featherbone twist)[1]

Featherbone is a book-length spell — a performative utterance. Like any spell, it strives to make concrete the material realities it names. Mena is not the only poet to engage with notions of ritual in her work: CA Conrad's (soma)tic poetics also hearkens back to magic, with Conrad explicating processes of self-hypnosis, the use of charged objects, and conversations with dead poets to produce his poems. But *Featherbone* claims an authority different from Conrad's work. Whereas the poems Conrad creates by his ritual process feel like the residue of that process — inviting a reader to attempt the same ritual herself and produce her own work — Mena's work has an authoritative finality. Her book *is* the ritual. In *Featherbone*, physical things (flesh and wing and feather and skin and bone) proliferate willfully — distinct from any shaping consciousness — before being consumed, desiccated, burned, eaten. The book conjures an environment of frightening vitality, where bodily forces contend, words carve and rasp and hum, and death is never an ending.

Against the formless in the heave, the featherbone cannot
be rejected / cannot take shape. The fatty stratum sifts the sublayer
and probes the subduction and swarms behind your eyes. I want
to know the color of your bones.

The shaleskin flakes thin above laceveined wing,
an oil to grease the featherbone plunge.
Your skullhollow for echo your bonehollow for wind
your eyepit for hollow, scraped off. (26)

There's a *you* and *I* in *Featherbone*, but no firm addressee, and certainly no "speaker" as, say, Conrad is in his (soma)tic poetics. Instead, Mena creates an environment where such distinctions blur, where categories of being overlap eerily. In *Featherbone* the body itself "leaks bones" (21), mindlessly generative.

This distressing and complicating of categories extends all the way to the nature of composition itself. Rather than suggesting a numinous authorial "soul" hovering behind its bodily substantiation in language, *Featherbone* evokes a world in which brief flesh and tangible words ground, and give rise to, a cold and sublimely scary spirit:

The featherbone develops language.

It teaches relations:

axial, caudal, vesicle.

It teaches shape:

spindle, flexuous, borne.

It vertexes, you intersect yourself. (44)

The featherbone, that is, came first. The poet did not create the featherbone to employ as a speaker; it is, instead, the featherbone who is the creator of the words.

The featherbone speaks. The tissue webs, it spreads across the voids. To scrape away.

(44–45)

This featherbone, hybrid being, is the strange heart of the book that takes its name. *Featherbone's* spell subverts conventional ideas of poetic inspiration much more deeply than many poems that present more obvious difficulty of reference or speaker. Plenty of poets enjoy the play of sound, but few can make it signify with the strange somatic unity found here.

Altricial or sereswallow tear in the afterthought glint and gleam,
whirlbone twist and glean that you may glaze the soundless throat.

Alveoli burst the pulse-turn gear and corrode. (17)

Mena's gift for verbal music — how this passage, for instance, gargles on its repeated *gl's*, *r's*, and *t's* — is always used in evocation of the physical.

Most lyric poetry presumes the Cartesian subject of modernity, holding inner and outer objects up for contemplation. *Featherbone* instead creates a psychic environment that makes me think of the ancient Greeks, who believed in an active soul, or *anima*, overflowing the body and entangling itself in the world. The *anima* doesn't precede or stand apart from material existence; it is inextricably caught up in it: "the soul is in a way all existing things," Aristotle said. This grants a frightening power to the free imagination, and in *Featherbone* there's a similar sense of risky, contagious magic in the use of words:

You filter and separate,
you striate and rise.

This is how it begins.

To become. It slakes
its lift in your weight.

The monstrous sky.

Your bonefuse around it,
 your salt-tide through it:
 you were made to expand. (37)

Just as ancient myth jammed together distinct parts into new creatures (the manticore, a lion with a scorpion's stinger; the naga, half-human, half-snake), so *Featherbone* jams death into life. For all the destructive power in the book, it ends not in annihilation, but in a suggestion of the dependency of the lofty and spiritual on the decayed and fleshly. "Made of things that flutter. Licham. Bonesalt. Pulse. The night within the distant skin. We thrall the weighted sky" (47).

It's tempting to attribute to Mena's distinguished work as a literary translator (from Spanish and Arabic) her poetry's command of language's tangible, changeable qualities. But *Featherbone's* intensity is such that the "command" seems to have run the other way. *Featherbone* is a body acting on a body; it's been a long time since I read a book which granted its materials such power over the composing poet — and over the reader.

*

Lying on his back in a darkened cell, a cloth across his eyes and a stone resting on his belly, a young bard of the western islands of Scotland would complete his study in perfect silence, "pumping his brain" until he emerged into daylight a master of rhapsody, curse, and magic, to be honored and feared by the island's lords.

This was five centuries ago, when bards wielded deadly and binding instruments of language; not many poets remember this time, but Robert Fernandez seems to. His book *Pink Reef* is a sequence not of descriptions but of performative utterances, emerging from a speaker alone in the dark with visions of eggs and bone, meat and moths:

the mounds of roe are
 so bright today it's like
 I see the sun for the first
 time it's like I see the sun clearly
 in the idea of it it's like I see the sun
 clearly in the black mounds of
 shine in the swollen
 clear of it[2]

This quote suggests the vividness and horrified fixation which dominate *Pink Reef*. Fernandez shares Mena's knack for arresting, tangible imagery. But his book relates differently to its subjects. "There is

an ink // into which seeing passes” (13), one poem warns us; whereas *Featherbone* grants a durable, gruesome immediacy to its material, the environment of *Pink Reef* is more mutable. *Featherbone* conjures a bodily reality; *Pink Reef*'s untitled poem-sections instead conjure visions in the poet's mind. Even Fernandez's oddest conjunctions of subjects have a hallucinatory intensity. When the speaker seizes on a noun and repeats it, as in the nautilus and the corn below, the reader feels not the particularity of the subject (a certain specific sea creature, a certain cornfield), but rather the overpowering force of Fernandez's obsession:

there are nautilus
in the corn,

but the nautilus
spray debris

bull draped in a mirror
of sweat

sprays corn
& blubber

I am listening
to the whale song
in the alien corn (14)

Those last two words come from Keats, but so what? History is no comfort in *Pink Reef*: Cartier and Chanel, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, Blake and Ida Applebroog all come up among the book's gristle, blisters, and brain corals, but they hang inconclusively; they are not presiding spirits or ancestors for the speaker but unstable material among other unstable material. Likewise the incursions of familiar technological flotsam: “the table set, blood / ruptures cloth speakers,” or “the scream boils like / refrigerator bubbles / under ice-pack” (58). *Featherbone*'s vocabulary feels intentionally ancient and mythic: it would puncture the book's effect if Mena had included cloth speakers or refrigerators. But *Pink Reef* is more capacious: the book's vision seems able to absorb any material, ancient or modern, technological or bodily. Nothing survives whole — as in the “melting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* cubes // *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* / blocks of melting shine” (52) — but neither is anything refused.

At its least effective, *Pink Reef* feels merely gross: “understand / the damned / with sails unfurling / from their / assholes” (9); “Jeff Koons / wants to fuck me / I offer him / a strip of / my back / a strip / of my bloodied / bleeding” (36–37). What, then, saves the book from being overkill, an eighty-four-page spurt of exploitative violence? For one thing, Fernandez's ear for poetic music: there's not one poem in here that doesn't *sound*, at the level of vowel and consonant, beautiful. “One who

flatters a lyre / clips the spine’s fused discs” (81); “it is the refulgent blush of your / diadems that makes me itch through the scrim- / shawed ant-hill of my bones” (42). For another, Fernandez’s sense of formal control: *Pink Reef* is broken into short sections (the longest is thirty-six lines) of short lines, a series of rigid containers within which the material can hurl itself.

This formal control points to another oddity of the book, and a way in which it differs profoundly from *Featherbone*. For all of the energy of Fernandez’s language, *Pink Reef* refuses any kind of ritual climax. Another poet might have worked such material into a cumulative long poem — some ecstatic Dionysian thing that would leave the reader feeling disturbed, but also transported, by the book’s end. Not Fernandez. “I / cannot / I refuse / I refrain” (84), ends the last poem.

But refrain from what? Refuse what? Fernandez asserts no argument, delineates no alternate way of knowing, spares no energy to attack contemporary notions of body and spirit. Rather the poems seem, as Barbara Guest once put it, to have “taken and shaken” the poet, leaving him, with “blood & // bubbles of blood / in the stomach” (43), to stumble forward, his soul and body in tatters.

Featherbone and *Pink Reef* are dark, often horrifying, books, but they are spiritually — that is, somatically — alive. In a poetic era whose idea of “resistance” is often limited to an ironic repurposing of dominant language, these books resist alienation by their very spell-weaving vitality, their commitment to an active, performative use of language. The poets’ force of belief — Mena’s in the proliferant bodily power of her featherbone, Fernandez’s in the intensity of his visions — sweeps the reader up. They demonstrate the continued vitality of a very ancient understanding of poetry’s power.

-
1. Erica Mena, *Featherbone* (Los Angeles: Ricochet Editions, 2015), 4–5.
 2. Robert Fernandez, *Pink Reef* (Marfa, Texas: Canarium Books, 2013), 74.

[SOMATIC POETICS](#)

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[ON THREE RECENT BOOKS OF POETRY](#)

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Pink Reef, Robert Fernandez (Canarium, 2013), \$14.00.

By [Luke A. Fidler](#)

I rarely read a book before I agree to review it. At *The Economy*, I often do reviews in order to support a press or an author, or because either Anthony (our editor-in-chief) or I hear that a book's worthy of discussion. The decision to review *Pink Reef* probably mixed all those factors. But—and this should serve as an asterisk for what follows—when I actually read the book, I fell in love. It's rare to find a book that so zestfully articulates all of the reasons why I read and write poetry myself. I've tried to maintain some critical distance, but if you talk to me in person I'll probably wax enthusiastic about *Pink Reef* until the wee hours.

Anyone writing about Robert Fernandez has to deal with the unfortunate fact that he seems to occasion bad writing in others. Critics have made all manner of grand, misplaced claims for his talent. A reviewer of his previous book, *We Are Pharaoh* (2011), claimed that Fernandez “conjures the entire history of lyric poetry and manipulates its potency to address the vastness and confusion of our age.” This would be a tall order for anyone, both because it's impossible and because “our age” (a mythy, theosophical concept anyway) possesses no more “vastness and confusion” than any other. In part, folks get Fernandez wrong because he baffles so many commonplace heuristics. He's postmodern...with feeling! This has prompted some daft musings on the counterpoint of irony and sincerity from reviewers not equipped to parse his nuances.

Indeed, *Pink Reef* is not conducive to short reviews. It's a sum of false starts, images stuttering over each other, a radio tuned to static on the border. It's a book that deranges, if not the senses, the sense of syntax. Fernandez uses what he calls the “[splinters](#)” of language to create artful interruptions and repetitions. He excels in estranging locution, then making it work:

a bread
 of violets
 baked in

a bread
 of mussels
 glutting the

a cache of
 roe in the
 stomach

Fernandez claims to have listened to plenty of house music and A\$AP Rocky while writing his recent work, and you can hear the blunt rhythms of “Goldie” here.

More often than not, Fernandez leavens his wordplay with delirious images. *Pink Reef* is a romp through “sensitive anti-discourse dolphins” with “graceful pink penises.” Note the nod to academic jargon. It works with the dolphins and their penises, but sometimes it comes off as gratuitously smug: “Our pecking / gold parrotfish / of the real” needs to be retired and express-mailed back to Žižek or something. I'm a sucker for his less surreal metaphors:

an ink
 of vultures

pocked in mist

The brilliance of these images, together with their maritime proclivities (roe, blood, manta rays, blood) and, you can't help but suspect, the poet's ethnicity, have spurred all kinds of fruitless efforts to pin the book's iconography to the Caribbean. Such efforts are reductive, eliding not only the diverse set of references (Cimabue, Nero, and Chanel as much as coral) but also the complexities of Fernandez's project. Even when he draws on a repertoire of Caribbean imagery, he makes it polyvalent in unnerving ways. Consider the “dusty black macaw” in [“the table set, blood”]. Wiped out by indigenous hunters before the arrival of Columbus, the Caribbean macaw has nevertheless come to signify the lure of the tropics and the rum-runners of Tortuga. Something strange is afoot.

What lingers for me, primarily, are lines like the following: “of spine-spread sun, of roe-packed spine.” The line undulate like an arabesque. There's something uncanny about the double image, collapsing on itself in a *mise-en-abyme* of spines and roe and sun. You could dwell for days in *Pink Reef*'s pocket.

THERMOS

23 OCT

Living Review: Robert Fernandez's "Pink Reef"

Posted October 23, 2013 by thermosmag in Conversations, Editorial, Featured Poet, Living Review, Robert Fernandez. Tagged: Canarium, Living Review, Nebraska, Pink Reef, poem, poet, poetry, Robert Fernandez, Thermos. [Leave a Comment](#)

For this living review of Pink Reef (<http://www.canarium.org/robert-fernandez/>), I talked for awhile with Dan Rosenberg about two poems from the book. It was a natural tack to take: our respective poetry classes recently read the book in common and discussed it at length in an e-mail exchange, part of the PXP program that Robert Fernandez will participate in a couple weeks from now.

The nature of the living review is to occupy a wider swath of time than ordinary in living with and thinking about a book. The dialogue that follows is, then, a beginning — something Dan and I will return to in time, as different poems or different ideas strike us. Please find the poems discussed, reprinted from Pink Reef, below the text of our dialogue. — AS

AS: ["I am shrill"] feels to me, even early on, like a departure from the general tenor of *Pink Reef*. The speaker is isolated as he appears to me to be in most of these poems, but is in a distinct physical space, behind the veil of a waterfall, bringing a strange lucidity to the act of perception.

DR: It's funny that you'd refer to it as "lucidity," since lucid is derived from lux, light, which plays such a central role here.

AS: Right. But I'm thinking of it in terms of the other kind of lightness — like a feather falling. I think of snakes, for instance, as having a sort of heaviness about them — a gravity, a specific weight. But with all this water and color falling around, the snakes cooling themselves seem to me to be relieved of that heaviness. They become cool in the way that water becomes mist. They are light. Perhaps in the sense of illumination that you mean, as well.

DR: I wonder if this poem unites the two? When my students wanted to talk about this one, they focused on the permeability of the landscape here, how the repeated "take their color" shifts from a literal reading ("falling water / & the sky" do lend color to things) to more imaginative and impossible bleed-throughs. The odalisques receive not just the reasonable color that comes from light refracted in water, but also the unreasonable but suggestive color reflecting from the snakes.

AS: I'm struck by how unified the poem actually is, how direct — whether or not it's unifying the different sorts of lightness we're discussing. The litany of things you mention, each of them giving color to the odalisques, seem at first to be conditional, suggested — but in fact there's nothing conditional about the poem. It's pure statement. The act of perception is over at the outset, isn't it?

DR: I agree entirely that the language is unconditional, potent here — but I actually tend to think of this poem as a process of discovery, as the magic by which perception is transmuted into beauty. There is something so insistently visual about this poem despite its opening claim to shrillness. It seems obsessed with the interpermeability of landscape and body (or am I just obsessed with that and seeing it here?), of the material and the immaterial. I know that Robert claims among his predecessors the surrealists, and I can see their fundamental project of bringing together public and private realities as a driving force here, and in the book in general. (That's another of my obsessions. Do I just love this book because it lets me think about what I want to think about?)

AS: ["we become soft"] is another poem I'd call "insistently visual" — another poem water moves through. In this case it wells up, it comes pooling through blue holes with all the weight in it that I saw drained from ["I was shrill"]. The speaker's condition is more complicated here, however. The poem opens with a surreal transformation of the plural speaker into "soft / light in purple wafers," but then that plural speaker disappears (almost) entirely into another permeable waterscape.

DR: Does the speaker disappear, or is the rest of the poem a litany of transformation? Grammatically, we could read this poem as a list of things the "we" becomes — which, indeed, erases the speaker by making them everything.

AS: I think that's probably the most interesting way to read the syntax, but it's not definitive — I can as easily see the transformation you're talking about finish off in the second couplet.

DR: Yes, or even the first.

AS: And it's this richness of choice in terms of how to treat the speaker as transformed into or observant of the waterscape that makes this the more satisfying poem of the two we've discussed.

DR: Are you trying to start a fight, Stallings?

AS: See, ["I was shrill"] is rich and direct in its sonic qualities, and I take a lot of pleasure in that. But while the series of statements that make up its landscape of perception are interesting, and resolve in another purity, the beauty of rainbow light, I'm ultimately left with a single understanding of that landscape, a single perceived thing that hinges on each listed thing's relation to the odalisques. But in ["we become soft"], the complexity achieved by the transformation of the plural speaker into "soft / light in purple wafers" carries through the rest of the poem's opening out, suggesting and then attaining a spiritual level that the first poem, for me anyhow, does not.

DR: I agree on the relative syntactic stability of the first poem, but I have to take issue with the notion that such stability limits the landscape to a single significance. When I think about how that poem unfurls I find myself following trails of thought — how this poem creates its physical reality, how it's a poem of creation, how its gleeful embrace of the impossible goes unremarked (as if all this color-swapping is natural, as it might be in a dream), etc. — all buoyed by the sonic and imagistic pleasures you described.

AS: What you're saying is that you see the first poem as also attaining a spiritual level. And I would agree with that, upon reflection. The two poems are more similar even than I'd thought to begin with, perhaps. Their motions are different, their syntaxes are different, but they're aimed in a direction that is, if not exactly the same, similar. Like most of Robert's poetry, they move with, or toward, spirit.

from Pink Reef

I am shrill,
barking through

a waterfall
at black rock

these odalisques
on the moss

take their color
from the falling water
& the sky

take their color
from the snakes
that cool themselves

& drink
between the rocks

take their color
from the fine
mist,

the rainbow's
light

from *Pink Reef*

we become soft
light in purple wafers,

a depth of
indigo-Caribbean,

blue holes

in the limestone
plateau,

& spirits,

black-clear,
blue-grey,

welling
from limestone punctures,

loas,
manta rays,

pooling
in limestone fountains

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Pink Reef by Robert Fernandez

Reviewed By [Kent Shaw](#)

December 18th, 2013

Can there please be a petition that Robert Fernandez change the title to his second book, *Pink Reef*? I was thinking *Sensitive Soul*. I don't care the ridiculous presumption this implies. For instance, what poet of the 21st Century would dare have the word "soul" in his title. What reviewer would dare suggest to a poet who is so obviously sophisticated in the craft of poetry and the delicate balance between irony and sincerity that marks the 21st Century attitude toward sincerity, what reviewer would insist on such an ill-conceived and unsolicited suggestion? And why would said reviewer not at least show some artfulness in his suggestion?

Because there is something in *Pink Reef* that is speaking so delicately, so sincerely, so tenderly, I want Fernandez's book announced to the world with an explicit sign that marks its true content. There is a soul at work in this book. And when I say "soul" I bring with it all that 1990s poetry baggage that workshops and misdirected earnestnesses have been piling on top of it. But why? Why do I need to put the word "soul" in place of a title that is already being so subtle about its comment on self / soul? Pink, I like to read, referring to a human biology color and reef a live structure that lives just below the surface.

Perhaps it's for my own nostalgia. That feeling when I was first learning poetry, and I could feel the tender hooks of a poem attach to that complicated sensitivity I am so happy lives below my surface. How vulnerable poems made and still make me feel. How emotionally exposed. This is what I'm hearing when I connect "poetry" to "soul." This is why, Robert Fernandez, if you are listening, I make this possibly unwelcome request. You have brought soul to my soul in your *Pink Reef*. And I am only asking all readers of the world be notified, beckoned, induced or whatever action a title is doing when it's attached to a

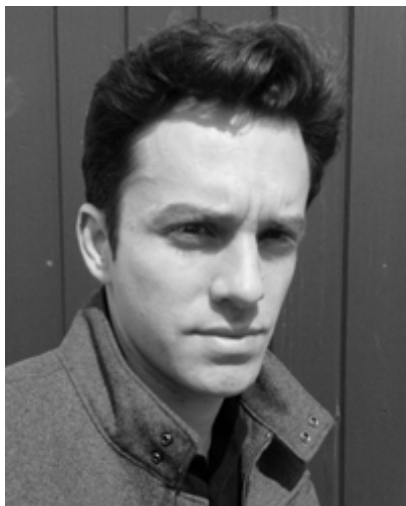
book.

Does all of this sound self-involved? You must not have read Fernandez's book. *Pink Reef* is a living of poetry, a living with poetry, a living about living, a living being, a living living itself out. Something inside this voice exploits my self-involvement, makes me feel that the voice I am hearing has been speaking inside me for longer than just this poem was going on. Here is the section [eat glass,]:

eat glass,
swallow blood
heart swallows glass,
blurts blood
bubbling is endless
heart surrounded
by red bubbles
heart surrounded
in delicate lights
heart flexing
on a trident

I don't even know where to start the list of what this poem risks. It risks repeating itself. There is so little language that it's working with. And yet the repetition not only appears natural. It appears essential to the poem's sentiment. And what is that sentiment? Wound. A physically felt emotional wound. And here is the largest risk of all. The poem risks preciousness.

Oh, the dilemma of preciousness. Sometimes it feels like all the wrong poets get to write precious poems, and the rest of us are left with little ironic nuggets to distinguish ourselves. Of course, this is an exaggeration. I am mainly reacting against books that use personal catastrophe as the book's "theme" without appreciating that a catastrophic event is not going to feel tragic unless the book is equipped with the right language, a circumspect credibility and a speaker who is humble before his or her own trauma. I want the sense of tragedy built by the poet, not assumed. *Elegy*, by Mary Jo Bang is catastrophic and tragic. *My Alexandria*, by Mark Doty is catastrophic and tragic. *Sancta*, by Andrew Grace, yes, catastrophic and tragic. The other books, the books I object to, are "catastrophic" in that precious, cloying, exploitative, presumptive way that makes me sad for poems. The mere fact that the catastrophe occurred and affected this poet, who has now written these heavy-handed poems, should not prove sufficient for these poems to affect a wide audience. Please, catastrophic poets, be courageous enough to not only write about your personal tragedy, but also to create a vivid and dynamically felt sense of that tragedy for your reader. I am that reader. And I am tired of feeling guilty into assigning poetic worth to a book of poems whose only compelling quality is that the poet experienced trauma.



Is *Pink Reef* about catastrophe, then? Only in the most abstracted way. And the risk toward preciousness is just that we are asked to see a speaker suffering, but without any real understanding of why. Do we need to understand why? Is Fernandez interested in giving us a clue? Is Fernandez playing an ironic game with sentimentality? These are the questions I ask. And there are few places to look for an answer. His first book *We Are Pharaoh*

feels more invested in gamesmanship. “We” are speakers. “We” rule. “We” are erratically pointing fingers at every corner of the landscape. I might offer up *Pharoah*’s “Action Persisting Past Restraint” as a poem with a similar voice to *Pink Reef*. It even makes a brief reference to “reefs.” The speaker here is sensitive and soulful. I could argue the poem is prototypical for what I find throughout *Pink Reef*. But that doesn’t resolve the source of the speaker’s suffering. Is it an ironic pose? If it is ironic pose, should that make it any less true? Consider this quote from “[knowing to see],” found towards the end of *Pink Reef*:

knowing is to see
& to remain tragic
at the heart
of where we are to go
knowing is to plate
the stomach in teak
& to remain tragic in the
heart of where we are to go

I could make every argument that Fernandez is posturing in this poem. The repetition. The speaker’s unambiguous reference to “heart” and “tragedy.” But these are the same reasons I used for praising the poem I quote above. They are the same reasons I would praise this poem.

Which is to say *Pink Reef* can unqualifiedly be called a melancholy delight. The book is a feeling that uses words I would have assumed had lost the poetic feelingness to them, that elaborates on wound and woundedness while holding back that most important part of the wound—its source. Do not try to figure out Robert Fernandez, just listen and listen to *Pink Reef*. What is the voice in a human biology? What is it saying? To some degree, you’re never going to answer these questions no matter the circumstance.

~~Kent Shaw’s first book~~, *Calenture*, was published by University of Tampa Press. His poems have since appeared in *The Believer*, *Ploughshares*, *Boston Review*, *American letters & Commentary*, *TriQuarterly* and elsewhere. He is currently an Assistant Professor of English at West Virginia State University. He is also poetry editor at *Better Magazine*. [More from this author](#) →

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'The web was woven curiously,/ The charm is broken utterly,/ Draw near and
fear not,—this is I,/The Lady of Shalott.'

– Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1832) v "The Lady of Shalott," John William Waterhouse, 1888

Dante's "Inferno" Canto XIII & Robert Fernandez' "Pink Reef" extract

Timothy Donnelly of *The Boston Review* praises Robert Fernandez, (& rightly so), as the *Poet of the Tropics*, in particular awestruck by the variety of Caribbean flora and fauna scattered throughout Fernandez' poetry book, *Pink Reef*.

See his review and all other links at the bottom of the page.

To me, he seems to see the heart of the book-long poem to be twofold: that of the animal survival instinct potent in man, and Vitality as the ultimate ideal. Thus, **(in my sole opinion)** throughout "Pink Reef," Fernandez seems to be

displaying awareness of how the radical left is stripping Americans of the Western sovereignty of the individual who strives toward the collective good and Truth with a resurgence since 1965–70 toward the modern individual wishing to reattach himself (say, like "red reef" or "slews of/crowd crystals") to the collective consciousness of humanity. (Hence, I believe, why psychedelic drugs are beginning to lose their social taboo; what Carl Jung called, when used prematurely, "unearned enlightenment.")

However, it is abundantly obvious to me that *Pink Reef* has its home in Italy, if not Tuscany specifically. From an early mention of a "fountain/will take my money" gesturing to the Bocca della Verità as well as the Trevi Fountain in Rome, to "torso by/Cimabue," the Florentine artist who forged the *Santa Croce* between 1287–1288. Fernandez also creates an extended metaphor with blood, meat, and coinage with the words: "medallion" and "diadem" throughout the stanzas, all pointing to Ancient Rome through historical figures like "(Catullus)," "Agrippina," and even referencing the Virgin Mary, "Madonna" in the "Judith" section.

(For the purposes of this post, I will only be analyzing *The Boston Review*'s extract of *Pink Reef*.)

Screen Shot 2020-01-20 at 11.36.34 PM “just as liars/bleed from/ the eyes.” Provokes the Neptune fountain scene from [A Room With a View 1985](#), does it not?

The rich Biblical imagery, blood and violence (one thinks of the Colosseum) as well as the rampant mentions of horses serve to illustrate this as well. It is unmistakable how fraught *Pink Reef* is with fertility, as well as man as a social animal through language, referencing Greek and Roman myth, Hindu and Catholic religions, as well as historical figures and tales. Again, the departure underground: “I am leaving the world/I am entering the/**sotto valley**,” or the glacial valley in Tuscany.

“the artist/has blood in the stomach” is an oft repeated phrase, which is suggestive of Prometheus, and man as a sanguine creature, who thinks from his stomach, ie: his thoughts, as considered by the Ancient Greeks, come from his liver, thus making him a social animal, no different from dolphins, no different from the poet who uses language but “get[s] tired” of its insufficiency in proving man’s divinity, citing his aggression and fleshiness (you might say ungratefulness (Dostoevsky)):

“I cannot argue with the flesh

I cannot argue with the meat

across which I speak

across which I grapple

& beat”

Although Fernandez also makes mention of American pop culture and metal working artist Jeff Koons; Judith of the Bible; Hinduism’s “linga” and “an ethics/of banana-leaf;” Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*; obliquely to J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*; the myth of Theseus, Ariadne, and Minos; Leda and the Swan; the Cave of the Crystals in Mexico; “in the streets/macaws” pointing to Central and South America; and lastly, the conquest of the Visigoths (Spain and Gaul). Yes, Timothy Donnelly is accurate in placing the center of the poetic work in the Caribbean as any New Critic would, but Fernandez’ references are all over the geographical and religious map and should be stated as such. Just as T.S. Eliot’s persona in “Portrait of a Lady” frets over a woman through lilies and social niceties, so too does

Robert Fernandez' persona in *Pink Reef*. Indeed, both are posing as "master[s] of manners radical/chic with... rabid/driftng *joui-/ssant*," only Eliot's "capricious monotone" is Fernandez' "refulgent blush."

Indeed, some themes of the poem are: the Convergence of Nature against the Inert Politics of Men; Civilization's Birth from Conquest; the Instinct to Preserve and Animal Ruthlessness; Feelings of Inadequacy and low self-worth; Images of the Stigmata and Christ on the Cross linked to biotic structures like corals and the "brain;"

(implicitly raising to mind ethical questions like: does Art imitate life or vice versa?),

the politics of attributing worth (self, monetary, etc.), bleeding hearts, and the masses as 'sheep;' sins of Lust and Suicide being linked to thrill of the hunt and manifested through modern metals like gold; the social linkage of poet, dolphin, and artists; the tongue or speech that, although distinguishes animals from man, still waxes and wanes insufficiently, "clip &/clop"ing; thoughts and thinking that act as a blood clot to the human mind; sex as dance; mating rituals; orgasm as the moment of creation and *le petit mort*; birth and rebirth (the multiple usage of the word "seed/s"); the phallic in nature and flowers; sterility and fertility of flora infused with human value; violence and the anxiety of survival, etc.

Fernandez is also extremely witty, in the axiom: "believe everyone you meet," having established the medieval period in the stanza preceding it with: "dragon's scales seeing in/my stomach's bleeding," serving to conjure the image of a slain knight (Seppuku?) as well as a possible alternate phrasing of the sentence, perhaps being: "no matter how naive, believe the knave." The one line alone hearkens back to the image of the liars with bleeding eyes as well as the poet filled with ennui ("get so/sick of myself"):

"just as

at any moment

I like to play at being desperate

as at any moment

being desperate

likes to play

at being

brained”

***Pink Reef* is undoubtedly bloody, with the poet suffering under the eternal question of Dualism.** Fernandez makes reference to “vultures/in the distance/ & am given back.” To Death? to Life? Or could it be after the Last Judgement, when his soul is given back to his body? “red heart steaming/bleeding in the hands” gives the image of a bleeding heart, and in a previous line of the stanza, whether to steal money from a wallet, a seemingly mundane decision, is unmistakably a “moral” issue. Since money is only defined by the value we place on it, thus, like meat, humanity has decided it is worth shedding blood over. Suicide is featured most prominently in the “Judith” section, as shown in the featured image. More obliquely, it is present with “Jeff Koons/places a hand/on my lung/I say/I know/I am not/adequate.” This also gives evidence for the seat of love not being in the heart, brain, or liver, as previously thought with the soul, but the lungs. The breath of life God breathes into souls that pulls their **vegetative, sensitive, and intellective parts into one substance, or soul that lives, feels, self-reflects, and is self-conscious.** *Pink Reef* explores all three of these facets of human nature in comparison to dolphins, and questioning man’s alleged dominance over animals through language and the brain.

Indeed, just as *Pink Reef* is obsessed with the natural variants and imitations of creation in botany as the offspring of the active generator of the male fused with the natural receptacle of the female, Canto 13 uses *ombra* as the infernal counterpoint to *Purgatorio’s anima*, which is the body and soul reunited and made perfect after the Last Judgement. For the suicides though, their physical bodies will only add to the deadweight of their suffering. *Pink Reef* partakes in the apocalyptic tone of the Last Judgement, wrestling with moral and ethical questions of self. Suicides were seen as negating themselves in life, and so, were metamorphosed (as Fernandez’s persona in the poem yearns to), from animal to vegetable. But the soul still remains intact. still feels pain. within another skin

In Canto 13, we enter the seventh circle in the second ring of Dante's *Inferno*: the Suicides. The punishment for violence against oneself is the metamorphosis into bleeding trees, attacked by Harpies. Likewise, the punishment for "wastrels," or those who did violence against themselves through their possessions is to be chased by the Black Hounds of Hell and torn limb from limb.

The suicides are trees grown from a soul-seed which has torn itself from the body, thus enacting a perverse form of the biological insemination and embryology process. The unity of body in soul that is the joy of the saved in Paradise, allowing one "white flame" to recognize another, is only more harrowing for the suicides, who have pit self against self in the infernal logic of (false) belief that the unity of the body and soul was destructible. The body is not expendable like they believed, just as the soul is not expendable as the Epicureans believe. Jesus as body and blood in the Transubstantiation as well as the Resurrection is proof of this.

See also Canto XXXIV, when Dante witnesses Lucifer himself crushing Judas in one of his three mouths: "to the one in front the biting was nothing to the clawing, whereby sometimes his back remained all stripped of skin." (*Inferno* 51-52.) This echoes Fernandez's persona offering a strip of his back to Jeff Koons in *Pink Reef*, aligning himself with the biblical traitor who takes coinage in exchange for the son of God. This makes the early stanzas all the more harrowing and tragic, especially when one thinks of [James Wright's "Saint Judas"](#) or [A.E. Stallings's villanelle "Burned"](#):

*"I've decided to pay
just at the point
I've decided
to pay into
the linen wall
& hope the fountain
will take my money"*

Link to University of Columbia's explanation of Canto 13 (and the whole of Dante's *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*), the suicides:

[Barolini, Teodolinda. "Inferno 13: Our Bodies, Our Selves." *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2018.](#)

<https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-13/>

Link to *Boston Review*'s article about *Pink Reef* and an extract (featured image) by Timothy Donnelly: <http://bostonreview.net/poetry/pink-reef>


Link to *Poetry Foundation*'s profile of Robert Fernandez:

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