Christina Hutchins, *Tender the Maker*
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In an essay about what she calls "soul-level influence," the poet Teresa Carson has written that echoes among poets are "not a simple pass-the-baton process; we do not read our poetic ancestors and then just pick up the conversation where they left off." She continues:

> Rather, we are, by nature, related to particular poetic ancestors but not to others. As J. D. Salinger said, "The true poet has no choice of material." We and our influences cannot help but work the same vein of the Underneath, however dissimilar our surfaces may appear. If we are persistent, honest, and loyal to that vein, then we participate in and continue the conversation of poetry—a conversation that transcends time, place, and style. ("The Temple of Delight: John Keats and Jack Wiler")

"Persistent, honest, and loyal." These are workaday traits, yet maintaining faith in them, as Carson reminds us, may allow a poet to find her way into the long conversation of art.

As readers enter this conversation, they, too, must be faithful to their own patterns of engaging with the echoes, and sometimes that means embracing an extreme simplicity of reaction. I decided to read Christina Hutchins's most recent poetry collection, *Tender the Maker*, for the most naïve of reasons: because I liked the title. I was drawn to something modest, something old-fashioned, about those three plain words. Yet I also sensed a vulnerability in them, for it requires a certain bravery to construct a title that risks being dismissed as a sentimental badge of devotion. And beyond meaning, I was held by the sound of the phrase's three words: a repeated cadence balanced on either side of a single note. The exactness of that pivot startled me.

Often I have preconceptions about a poet whose work I've never read—perhaps I know something about her style or subject matter; perhaps I have seen a photograph or an advertisement; perhaps I have skimmed someone else's review or overheard gossip. Rarely am I able open a collection with the sort of

innocence I felt when I was young, when nearly every volume was a wholly mysterious land. So how would I teach myself to meet this unknown book? In the case of Hutchins's collection, a first clue was my swift reaction to her title. I began asking myself, What do these poems sound like? How do their cadences rise and fall? Where does dissonance pull me? And just as quickly my mind began reaching for *who*, as if a name could offer me a sonic metaphor for what my ear was beginning to hear.

The name that came to me was Robert Lowell, the early Lowell of *Lord Weary's Castle*. Like Lowell's poems, Hutchins's often arise as formidable cohesions of diction, meter, syntax, image, and time. The two poets live among words in ways that are both densely aural and densely imagined. Compare the opening of Lowell's "Mr. Edwards and the Spider"—"I saw the spiders marching through the air, / Swimming from tree to tree that mildewed day / In latter August when the hay / Came creaking to the barn"—with the first stanza of Hutchins's "The Disappearing Doors":

> Don't despair if you begin in joy,
> the day still new on its hinges,
> and end at evening distraught,
> all that radiant air and easy access
> gone, the day shut up tight
> and painted closed.

These poems do not share subject or style. What they do share is the flexible power of the unspooling sentence. Both poets have listened to English as a composer might listen to Beethoven. Thus, I was not surprised to learn, later, that Hutchins is a pianist, nor to see she has also worked as a biochemist, a minister, and a scholar. Clearly, the exigencies of these duties have guided her into her particular version of poetry, for which the precise simplicity of her title is a sort of shorthand.

"Eye of the Storm, Pescadero Coast, 1972," one of the smaller poems in the collection, is a compressed example of the way in which, throughout the book, Hutchins guides me into her patient, fragile, complex vision:

> The same shirt pulled over the same head
> not once but again and again, a eucalyptus turned
> inside out. Brutal, foam-white,
>
> the sea tore at its rocky coast. Route One was
> forsaken. The big house was unlit, the plowed yard
> a pool of rain. A cloud ceiling
>
> pressed yet lower. Along worn cliffs
> in the farm workers' small-windowed shacks, stoves
> burned into the dark of the day.
>
> It was Sunday, but only the storm made it
> Sabbath. In flooded fields, unharvested
> Brussels sprouts clung to their stalks.

The poem is a map of images—a tree, a coastline, a highway, buildings, a sky, a field. Each sentence is as self-contained as a musical motif, yet, as in a sonata, those melodies accrue into a pressure of emotion. The tipping point is the first sentence of the last stanza: "It was Sunday, but only the storm made it / Sabbath." The moral weight of these words is also a weight of sound, and somehow also a weight of history, of experience. The line is inexorable—like music, like chemistry, like God.

Tender the Maker won the 2015 May Swenson Award for Poetry, and in her foreword to the collection, the competition's judge, Cynthia Hogue, writes that "Hutchins combines a pitch-perfect and precise lyricism with a postmodern sensibility of language's materiality." As an example, she cites the poem "Between Pages of the Dictionary," an artful imagining of the way in which "[t]he opening of an old dictionary leads to a rich dwelling on the thing itself, the actual book and the materiality of the language it houses."

I agree with Hogue that Hutchins's ear is her conduit into imagination, yet to my mind this sort of playful poem is not nearly so compelling as those in which she pushes the language beyond brilliance into more shadowy articulations, ones that often address layers of history. As Hogue notes, "If the poetry's music tethers Hutchins's poems internally, what holds them

together in theme and subject is the thread of the elegiac at both personal and historical levels." One of the most poignant of these elegiac threads is the speaker's grief, in poem after poem, at her brilliant and much loved father's effacement by Alzheimer's. The wordplay of "Unrepeatable Poem" becomes the heartrending portrait of a man who can no longer reliably match his words to meaning or memory. Yet, as Hutchins shows, the accident of dementia is, at times, also the accident of metaphor:

> On the porch-swing, he and I lean together. *How many fingers am I holding up?* "Seventy." *What time is it?* "Seventy-one."
>
> In McDonalds, his soda spilled, root beer dripping everywhere—his chest, his lap, the curved plastic seat, the floor— "What was that explosion?"
>
> His voice again, a desperate sundown, "They're locked. It's terrible. They're all locked in." *Are you lonely?* "Yes."
>
> A hot August day and a slow walk, both thick-soled beige shoes dragging. He stops to point at his feet. "I've got chairs on those."
>
> Last photo of the three of us, he picks out my mother and me. She points to the one he doesn't name, *Who's that?* "Oh! That's that smart man!"

The poet spins innumerable elegiac threads—landscape and story, water and sun, sweetness and ignorance—and they are linked across time and place by the acuity of tenderness. In "A Way Back to Life," Hutchins writes:

> From Russians I learned never to shake hands
> across a threshold, but a half-hour after
> rising, I return to set my cool hand into the bed
> where a river of dreamheat lingers, the still-warm
> flank of our horse's dark gallop.
>
> To make sure it was me they got, my parents
> put up all night with a mockingbird
> perched aloud in one of three liquid birches

→

a handspan from their open window. Do you
think I'd make that up?

Hutchins offers such imaginings with enormous generosity. She, as the maker of these poems, holds herself accountable for their tenderness. In this way she reminds me, at times, of Jane Kenyon, despite the different physicalities of their writing styles. Like Kenyon, she is always aware of the "luminous particular"—the concrete reality that communicates the ineffable; and in the final three stanzas of "Cleaning Out the Garage in 1968," she offers what might be a lesson on that notion:

Beams of the day reached into the garage
and struck an already brittling stack
of newspapers where Dr. King
still marched I was seven years old
It was the newspapers The dusted sunlight

It was Alexander's desiccated body
pressed thin as a ping-pong paddle
translucent as apricots held to the sun
and it was an old shoe
dried into the same stiffness

laces untied and dangling and
shadow where your foot should be
the leather tongue
still molded to the known
curve of your high instep

Hutchins and Kenyon also share an attachment to the poetry of Anna Akhmatova; in fact, the biographer John H. Timmerman believes that Kenyon first coined the phrase "luminous particular" as a way of describing Akhmatova's work. Hutchins herself was in St. Petersburg while she was writing several of the poems in *Tender the Maker*, and the life of the Russian poet was a doorway into at least one of them, "A Traveler Is Met by Touch." In this poem the material objects of Akhmatova's apartment become, for the speaker, a conduit into the history of evil—"a cinder never quite burned out," as Hutchins notes in her epigraph, quoting the French poet and Résistance fighter René Char. Europe's midcentury devastations haunt her; she returns

again and again to those images. In the poem she shifts her imagination from Akhmatova's samovar to Krakow, then to Salzburg, and then to the death camps:

> At Auschwitz I placed my two hands flat on the gas
> chamber's wall, then flat on a brick oven's sliding drawer,
> a raft so narrow on its tempered rails. When my hands flew
> to the roof of the mouth, like one blind I felt my way
>
> to where I had never been. I needed to trace the arch.
> To know what? Evil, and something more. To follow the path
> of risen smoke?

Yet at this moment in the poem she allows the rising smoke to lift her attention away from Auschwitz and back toward home, where "last year my father was incinerated, / a tag on his memorized toe. / His ash scattered by strangers beyond the Golden Gate." These collisions of loss—one so vast, one so personal—are a form of time travel. And though, as Hogue notes in her introduction, the words "Evil, and something more" may seem to be "a moral imperative (to *imagine* evil, as Robert Duncan famously urged of Denise Levertov)," Hutchins is equally compelled by "Life's unrepeatable, glorious Mystery," one that may so eloquently turn on a vision of "risen smoke."

In his "Ninth Elegy," Rainer Maria Rilke writes that "truly being here is so much; because everything here / apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way / keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all." Hutchins, too, ponders this ambiguity, this sense of seeing oneself as both necessary and extraneous. The theme is woven throughout *Tender the Maker*, though she reconfigures it within a variety of voices and settings. In "The Disappearing Doors," for instance, she invents a bardic speaker who proffers a generational comfort:

> O celebration, human, do not despair the days,
> your life. In Venice, old stone stairs
> march down the tide. Slow-rising
> waters submerge the generations, remnant
> hollows of their footsteps, cupped sills,
> the houses' bright doors.

"Interregnum" ponders similar ambiguities in a first-person voice that is both private and mythic:

Plum-hot the anvil, lava, the volcano's rise, ours
is a sky of yellow crumb and ash. Amorphous, still I am consuming,
yea and nay, and consumed,

but shaken loose: empress
of undertone, perilous foam,
creek in its natal dark.

Many such moments involve a sudden recognition of doubleness: "the child inside the child," "the poem within the poem," as Hutchins writes in "The Music Inside." In "Atop Zugspitze," her speaker recalls a summer day in the Alps, when "at three I came to myself":

Boots on the guardrail, I spread my arms:
the mountain cast away from its own
terrible boulders. An unbridled wind arose.
I leaned into
the mouth of my making.

Rilke may have become a mentor of sorts as Hutchins worked to document her visions of the "glorious Mystery." She quotes his work frequently throughout *Tender the Maker,* including this passage from *Sonnets to Orpheus,* which she translated herself:

One who is like a fountain flowing from itself
realizes her essence and, passed through that motion,
bright creation—jubilant!—often closes with a beginning
and opens with an ending.

At the end of the collection, in her "Notes to the Poems," she shares some of her thoughts behind the word choice in her translation:

[Rilke's] phrase "realizes her essence" can also be translated "recognizes herself as made by the making," so realizing one's "essence" is not discovering a preexistent, enduring self but the dynamic of the artist realizing self as a motion-in-relation through which the work of art completes itself. The work of art may be a poem or a conversation. It may be a human lifetime.

Her explanation brings me back to my initial sense of these poems, as sound, for sound involves more than pitch or texture. Like a conversation or a lifetime, sound is also movement. The artist who "recognizes herself as made by the making" is shifting back and forth in time. However, rather than simply progressing

chronologically, she advances into the unknown as a dancer does—formally, circuitously, with cadence and intent. Substitute the word *scientist* for *dancer*, and the metaphor is still apt. Both the depth and the precision of Hutchins's work arise from her exact attention to the "motion-in-relation" of herself as an artist, which is also attention to the tools of her work and to her imagination's duty to honor the seen and the not seen. "Perhaps," Rilke muses in his "Ninth Elegy," "we are here in order to say: house, / bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window." Again and again, Hutchins is driven to record such clarities: canoe, summer, barefoot, water. "Praise this world to the angel," Rilke tells us. "Show him / something simple which, formed over generations, / lives as our own, near our hand and within our gaze." And Hutchins writes, in "Reservoir at Uvas Canyon,"

> . . . The spillway loomed
> high overhead: we floated
>
> under its concrete mouth. Ankles
> sloshing, we dragged the boat partway up
> a yellow-soil bank and scrambled up the listing
> stone to sit on the great lip.
>
> Dangling our legs, my friend and I
> ate pork and beans from the can
> with a single plastic spoon. We did not
> litter. We did not sing.

Certain poets do their best work in a land of echoes, and Christina Hutchins seems to be one of them. I have heard Rilke, Kenyon, Akhmatova, and Lowell inside these poems, but there are many other voices as well. In her "Notes to the Poems," Hutchins writes of "being in conversation with Emily Dickinson" and acknowledges borrowing phrases from Handel's *The Messiah* and Mahler's *Adagietto, Sehr Langsam*. "The fourth movement of his Symphony in C Sharp Minor," she notes, "is quietly driven by dissonance." In the process of reaching for her own language of sound and motion, she is constantly attentive to the ways in which other artists have wrestled with the search. Like Teresa Carson, she knows that "we and our influences cannot help but work the same vein of the Underneath, however dissimilar our

surfaces may appear." In *Tender the Maker* Hutchins rethinks, reworks, reimagines the echoes. For, as she writes in "Linseed," "Who knew at Auschwitz the grass would be / so very green?"