



# Apalachee Review

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## **The Neighborhoods of My Past Sorrow**

Jesse Millner. Kitsune Books: Crawfordville, Florida. 2009.

In Jesse Millner's latest poetry collection we are certainly privy to "past sorrow." The "sorrow" is laid bare for us repeatedly, especially in poems that address a past struggle with alcoholism; we are intimately connected to Millner, who eschews all pretense of a speaker in these poems. In "I Confess," he writes:

I shrank inside myself, considered my unpublished book  
of confessional poems, how each one of them was a page  
from my life, a leaf of grass from the fields of my memory,  
a tiny song of myself, that by book's end became  
an egocentric chorus of all things me.

Millner's collection does not feel "egocentric," however, but rather like an exuberant worship of the poet's life—complete with a beautifully flawed hero-poet who finds more comfort in his dog these days than he does in the Baptist hellfire-and-brimstone God of his youth: "So many died for our God. / No one has died for Dog."

Religion and alcoholism are close bedfellows for Millner: both become inseparable components of his identity, and both leave him with a tremendous guilt. *The Neighborhoods of My Past Sorrow* is so compelling, in part, because we do not know, until the last section of the book ("La Florida"), that Millner has survived this fire baptism of religion and liquor. There is a real danger in these poems—a danger that our hero-poet will not outwit his demons. Even in a poem about his grandmother ("I remember the small table in Grandma's bedroom"), the danger is ever-present: "There's a wilderness / inside of me where the branches of beautiful / trees gleam with ice and the cold." Though for us, as readers, this "wilderness" safely belongs to someone else, we desperately desire Millner to carve his way through it.

Millner does make his way through the "wilderness," though does not come out unscathed—deaths of those he loves and divorce are only two of the fallouts which level Millner, bring him to his proverbial knees, and let us see him at his most vulnerable. Poems such as "Recovering Baptist," move us with their intimate power: "I feel guilty that in the eight years / we were married, we never made love / without a beer and joint warm-up."

In this collection, however, it is the poems that break us, only to raise us up again in glorious personal resurrection, that are my favorite. Poems that show us what it means to be human through a combination of the sacred and the profane make this

collection shout its own fractured narrative from the rooftops. And in poems such as "Angels, Biscuits, Booze," we cannot help but listen:

Stop the world and let me off,  
let me drift in shallows of space,  
and French kiss drooling angels who know  
all the words to my favorite country songs.

—*Review by Dominika Wrozyński*