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The Rusted City by Rochelle Hurt (review)

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and Schneirov have rightfully pushed us to continue thinking about Chicago and the Midwest within a larger national story—one that has previously been limited to southern regionalism—as boosterism, capitalism, ethnicity, and labor all formed a complex web of power and politics.

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Rochelle Hurt, *The Rusted City*. New York: White Pine Press, 2014.
96 pp. \$16.00.

The reason Rochelle Hurt's homeland is called the "Rust Belt" echoes all the way back to Steinbeck. In the early 1980s, as the industrial cities of America's heartland began to choke and decay, the term "Rust Bowl" was evoked from the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, a similar period of collapse, displacement, and supernatural ash. The moniker quickly spun into "Rust Belt" and has remained ever since. Hurt, in a finely tuned and sharply detailed debut collection of poems, successfully etches a grimy set of human faces onto the aesthetic and cultural patina that covered her own experience. Her work is neither sociological nor geographically specific but rather a closely private series of episodes within an eroding family whose back-drop is stained with the tones and textures of a real American place.

Hurt—such an apt surname for a child of the industrial collapse—was born and raised in Youngstown, Ohio, a city that has struggled longer and harder than most amid the decline of the nation's steel industry. Her real city's brick is darkened with soot, its fences stained with rust, its windows grimy, its asphalt cracked and choked with weeds. The ubiquitous red dust of her poems comes literally from her own backyard. And while it seems certain this landscape informed her aesthetic, Hurt's writing both avoids and transcends the specificities of place and time. She uses the tangible details of an actual "rusted city" to generate a clanky, junkstrewn, often magical wasteland.

Her created city consumes its denizens, choking them down, staining them red. And it consumes itself; in one poem, "It jostles (scraps) down its throat, shaking an old tune out as the scraps rub and clash their way underground, groaning into their beds of dirt." And the various members of this family consume the city, especially the young girl at the center of

the loosely told tale, in whose infant chest “the whole town confirmed: the sound of the city throbbed inside her.”

The Rusted City takes dreamlike steps through the life of a family that exists in a place of shape shifting corrosion and disintegration, a city of scrap and crushed cans, of secrets and sorrow. If the Brothers Grimm stumbled upon a backstreet of dead machine shops, this is the world they would spin even as that world—including its language—falls apart. One poem tells of a time when “production of words was cut to save money.” The characters are allegorical: “the quiet mother,” “the smallest sister,” “the oldest sister,” “the favorite father,” and “the rusted city” itself. The short, connected pieces undulate between prose poetry and verse as the city and the family oxidize, corrode, and self destruct.

Artfully arranged in five sections, the pieces find their tone and consistency in the motif of rust and deterioration. If there is one complaint—and it’s a minor one—it’s that the recurring redness of rust and dust, sometimes embodied as red mites or fire ants, eventually borders on redundancy.

The best surprises come when the larger mythology of the place opens up, especially in sections two and four, as the oldest sister teaches the youngest sister the history of their city, in a series of “In the Century of” poems: “In the Century of Fumes,” “In the Century of Mute Tongues,” “In the Century of Tiny Earthquakes,” “In the Century of Breaking Sentences,” and so forth.

These pieces help balance the close tension of the family and generate a backdrop for the ultimate hardscrabble hope of *The Rusted City*, as the smallest sister begins to build a home of her own from the scraps around her and the possibility of a new city begins to grow inside her.

The Rusted City, published by White Pine Press, is the eighteenth volume in the Marie Alexander Poetry Series, which is “dedicated to the appreciation, enjoyment, and understanding of American prose poetry.” Hurt, who now lives in Cincinnati, has made an admirable contribution to that form, and to a growing body of contemporary Rust Belt writing.

Whereas much of the recent literature, journalism, and visual art of the postindustrial Midwest has embraced a specificity of place—most notably, most often, and often most histrionically, Detroit—Hurt smartly manages to work up an otherworld (and an underworld) of the imagination just beyond the real place she knows.

With a number of recent prizes and strong publications in literary journals, Hurt is a young writer to watch. This debut sets her voice among the new generation of writers from the Rust Belt, a region often misunder-

stood or ignored, and therefore ripe for new definitions. With *The Rusted City*, Rochelle Hurt has ramped up the production of a language for the place that made her.

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Gordon Young, *Teardown: Memoir of a Vanishing City*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013. 288 pp. \$29.95.

This book opens with Gordon Young sleeping on the floor of a vacant home in the Carriage Town neighborhood of Flint, Michigan—one of America's most depressed cities. *Time* magazine declared the city the country's most dangerous in 2007, so Young slept with his "security blanket"—an aluminum baseball bat. Made famous by Michael Moore's 1989 film *Roger & Me*, Flint has lost more than seventy thousand auto jobs since 1968. Its population is half of what it once was.

A hometown boy, though long exiled to San Francisco, Young is careful to cultivate his street cred from the get-go. Young, a journalist, now runs a popular blog called "Flint Expatriates," which is his way of "thinking out loud about Flint" (30). Fifteen years after leaving Flint, he still felt that he owed his hometown and wanted to give something tangible back. The book is organized around his on-again, off-again efforts to buy and fix up one of the cities many neglected properties. One of the joys of reading *Teardown* is to accompany Young as he squirms over his urban homesteading idea. Did it make financial sense? Would his partner understand? How would his actions look to others? Would it make any difference? He did not want to become another underfinanced absentee landlord—or part of the problem.

When I first started reading *Teardown*, I wondered about its politics. Would Young be another urban explorer wanting to cash in on other people's misery? Was it going to be more "ruin porn"? Early on, he reassures us that he is not some "minor-league George Orwell" intent on slumming it with the marginal for a few days. To his credit, he never aestheticizes rubble into ruin. The book is all about the people who live amidst this ruination. Young is particularly drawn to those who are defiantly trying to dam the floodwaters of decline. "They were all tough people fighting for Flint in their own ways," he writes (240).