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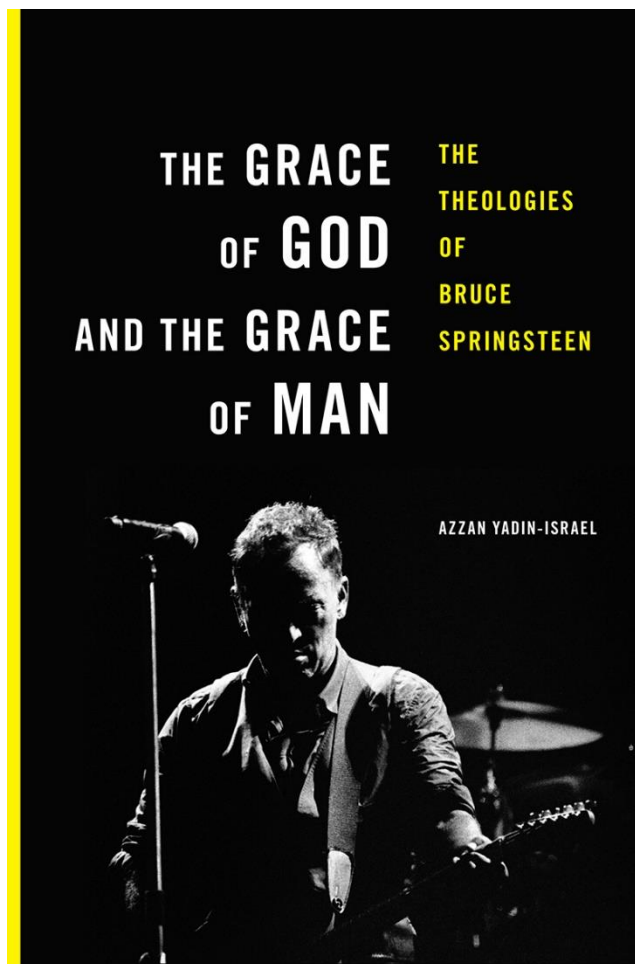
**PORTFOLIO
BOOK REVIEWS**

May 2020

SOMEWHERE IN THE PSALMS OF JERSEY

Azzan Yadin-Israel

The Grace of God and the Grace of Man – The Theologies of Bruce Springsteen



In his dense and impeccably researched 2016 book, *The Grace of God and the Grace of Man*, Rutgers University Classics and Jewish Studies professor Azzan Yadin-Israel charts a rattlesnake speedway through the biblical references in Springsteen's lyrics. Yadin-Israel's pilgrimage takes

us some of the songs Springsteen wrote before the release of *Greetings from Asbury Park* (1973) all the way through “Swallowed Up (In The Belly Of The Whale)” from *Wrecking Ball* (2014).

Travel through Springsteen’s work and you’ll find a veritable King Solomon’s mine of Bible references, both Old and New Testament, where they illuminate bus drivers, cowboys, dealers, drag racers, dreamers, drivers, factory workers, gamblers, gypsies, lotharios, poets, prophets, single mothers, soldiers, stunt men, veterans, waitresses and everyday heroes residing within the grooves of his oeuvre. In Yadin-Israel’s telling, these references imbue many of Springsteen’s characters with what might be described, in “Cautious Man,” as “the beauty of God’s fallen light.”

As Yadin-Israel admits in his introduction, “...Springsteen himself does not deal with religious and theological matters consistently...Born in the USA, for example, has little or no such imagery.” Perhaps the Bible, classic American cars, *The Grapes of Wrath* (particularly John Ford’s film version of Steinbeck’s novel), the hard life of the working poor in America (particularly in the southwest on 1995’s *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, the *mise en scène* of *Asbury Park*, the stories of Flannery O’Connor, the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Vietnam War and Westerns (again returning to John Ford) are each a well of images and messages from which Springsteen has drawn freely throughout his almost 50 years of making records.

Yadin-Israel draws from the depths of the deep well of Bible stories referenced in Springsteen’s lyrics, and *The Grace of God and The Grace of Man* is an archaeological tour of the Holy Land as we find it in Springsteen’s songs: Yadin-Israel he starts with trowels and progresses to sifters and brushes to bring these treasures to light, following the theological thread stitched through the fabric of songs many of us have known and loved for decades. The result of his exhaustive and loving research is, as Raymond Carver put it, a new path to the waterfall. Here’s Yadin-Israel’s analysis of the final verse of “Greasy Lake”:

Locating the lovers in the dirt does not mean that their love is dirty because, crucially, they are singing their *birthday song*, the “song” each sang at birth. Their nakedness has been transformed into a redemptive force; they are naked and crying out like newborns, having recovered the innocence of Eden on the shores of Greasy Lake.

Songs like “Adam Raised A Cain” and “It’s Hard to Be a Saint in the City” are given their closeups in *The Grace of God and The Grace of Man*, as are later classics like “Philadelphia,” which references both communion and Judas’ betrayal of Jesus in a single line: “so receive me brother with your faithless kiss,” and “Into the Fire,” of which Yadin-Israel writes:

My analysis focuses on two biblical motifs found in the song: the firefighter’s ascent into the fire, and his laying on of hands on the singer...There is...one fiery ascent in the Hebrew bible, namely, the account of the prophet Elijah’s death, a narrative whose core themes resonate with the narrative of “Into the Fire.”

Toward the end of *The Grace of God and The Grace of Man*, Yadin-Israel explains the term Midrash, rabbinic biblical interpretation: “Midrash is a conscious and deliberate engagement of

scripture, often responding to textual difficulties. At its best, it provides real insight into the biblical text, whether by connecting disparate biblical verses, calling attention to broader interpretive issues....” The Grace of God and The Grace of Man is Yadin-Israel’s midrash of Springsteen’s lyrics – it is expansion and explanation, the addition of more flesh to these mighty bones. There are more hues to Springsteen’s blinding technicolor than we thought; the well is deeper than we knew.

One of the many gifts The Grace of God and The Grace of Man gives Springsteen fans is a brief and lovingly written explanation of the thematic shift Springsteen’s work has taken as he, and we, have grown older. Yadin-Israel closes his discussion of redemption with a section of the lyrics from “Living Proof” from Lucky Town (1992): “and when that train comes we’ll get on board...” Yadin-Israel writes:

These transitions, first from the car as a vehicle of salvific mobility to a vehicle of contemplation, and then from the car to the train, embody the shift in Springsteen’s writing, as a triumphalist celebration of the open road gives way to a muted but still joyful appreciation of the grace available to us in the here-and-now of our lives.

As Springsteen calls out in “Human Touch” from Human Touch (1992), “we’re all riders on this train!” Lucky passengers to be proffered the grace of his songs. The comfort of his voice.

We recently caught up with Professor Yadin-Israel via email; he was gracious enough to submit to a few questions.



Azzan Yadin-Israel in the Asbury Park Casino

Stereo Embers Magazine (SEM): How is it, as a Springsteen fan, you ended up as a professor at Rutgers? Was this your plan all along?

Azzan Yadin-Israel (AYI): Yes. As an undergraduate I majored in philosophy and Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University, then I went to Berkeley to write a Ph.D in second- and third-century rabbinic interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. I suspected I might be able to get a job somewhere in New Jersey, allowing me, 17 years after getting my Ph.D, to write a book on Springsteen. Long game, man.

SEM: What is it about Springsteen's work that has inspired so much scholarship?

AYI: I think Springsteen is a rare combination of artistry and popularity. On the one hand, he's a singer-songwriter who is often guided by non-commercial considerations; I'm pretty sure the executives at Columbia weren't badgering Springsteen to record a bare-bones acoustic album whose title track is written from the point of view of a mass murderer awaiting the electric chair. But that's what he was working on as an artist, and so he released Nebraska. On the other hand, he's enjoyed a remarkable amount of popular success. It's probably fair to say that during the

mid- to late-eighties he was one of the most successful performers on the planet. Also, I'm sure there is a disproportionate number of white men in academia and journalism who are or were Springsteen fans.

SEM: Other than Dylan, or perhaps The Beatles, can you think of any other artist whose work would lend itself to a work such as *The Grace of God* and *The Grace of Man*?

AYI: I know Leonard Cohen's music lends itself to this sort of analysis, because not long after my book came out a similar book came out on Leonard Cohen (*Tangle of Matter and Ghost* by Aubrey Glazer). Many scholars have discussed the overlap between sacred (gospel) and secular in the R&B of the 1950's and 1960's, and the borders between country gospel and country music were not that clear for decades. There's also a great deal of religious and biblical references in some hip-hop artists' work. Jay-Z used to use the nickname, "Hova," which was short for J-Hova, i.e., Jehovah, suggesting that he was the god of hip-hop. And a number of my students have suggested Kendrick Lamar's work is rich with religious and biblical themes. In short, I think there's probably a great deal of interesting material out there.

SEM: how long did it take you to write *The Grace of God* and *The Grace of Man*? Given the bibliography is eight-and-a-half pages...

AYI: This was actually a book I wrote as a break between philological projects. I had just finished a very complicated study of a rabbinic text that doesn't have a full modern edition. I was working from a 10th-century manuscript for years; I am now working on a book explaining how the Forbidden Fruit came to be identified with the apple. Relatively speaking, *The Grace of God* and *the Grace of Man* was a breeze. It took me about eighteen months.

SEM: Do you think you might go back and update the book after Springsteen releases a few more records?

AYI: If the new albums contain biblical or theological motifs, absolutely.

SEM: What are you working on now, and why, and when can we expect to see it?

AYI: As I mentioned above, I'm writing a book on how the Forbidden Fruit came to be identified as an apple. It isn't in the Bible (just "fruit"), and early commentators, both Jewish and Christian, tended, for various reasons, to identify the fruit with the fig or the grape. It's an interesting project that involves early Hebrew and Greek works, the Latin commentary tradition and the representation of the Fall of Man in Western art. I've finished a draft of the book and have sent it out to colleagues who are experts in each of these fields. Once I get their feedback, I'll do one final revision and then try to find an academic publisher.

SEM: Your favorite Springsteen album, and why.

AYI: My favorite album is probably *Darkness*. The album is great on many levels, but what I most admire about it is the way it breaks with expectation. After years of touring and recording, Springsteen really hits it big with *Born to Run* – Time and Newsweek covers, etc. etc. So what is

the next album going to be? Well, if the history of popular music is any indication, some sort of attempt to recapture the vibe of the breakout album. Instead, Springsteen goes a completely different route, releasing a musically and thematically different album that in certain ways explicitly repudiates the claims of *Born to Run*. That album was all about the promise of the open road, the night-time drive, and the love of a woman. The first line of *Darkness on the Edge of Town*? "Lights out tonight, trouble in the heartland/got a head-on collision smashin' in my guts, man." He takes one of the key themes of *Born to Run* and flips it on its head – instead of the car evoking imagery of redemption, it's a head-on collision. It's not that I prefer the darker material as such, it's that I admire the artistic integrity of a still young artist (he was only in his late twenties when the album came out) who is writing in a way that's true to himself, rather than trying to maximize his commercial success. *Nebraska* is similar in that regard, but by then Springsteen was much more established.

SEM: I'm assuming you've seen Springsteen live, maybe more than once. Can you tell us about your favorite show?

AYI: My favorite was without question his *Born in the USA* show at the Richfield Coliseum, right outside Cleveland. It was the first time I saw him and I was in high school, and even if you remain connected to music and rock and roll throughout your life, there's a raw, primal quality to experiencing music when you're 16 that can't be replicated later in life. At least in my experience.

SEM: What's god going to ask Springsteen when they finally meet?

AYI: He'll probably try to find out if there's any way to get a hold of the 1966 recordings Bruce made with the Castiles.

Revolutionary Etude
The Surfers Journal
Spring 2019

The coastline of the Republic of Cuba is 3,570 miles, more than four times longer than that of California and more than ten times that of Puerto Rico. Let's imagine there's at least one decent break for every five miles of Cuban coastline – that's 714 breaks, give or take. Sets one to dreaming, doesn't it?

On January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro and the 26th of July Movement declared victory upon the flight of dictator Fulgencio Batista from the island, and Latin America's first communist regime inaugurated what has become almost 60 years of uncontested rule. That same year, the first West Coast Surfing Championships were held at Huntington Beach Pier, and *Gidget* flickered on drive-in screens across the USA. A very different revolution was in full swing.

Cuba was closed to Americans until 2016, when Barack Obama became the first American president since Calvin Coolidge to visit the island. Another visit, one accorded far less fanfare and much longer, about ten weeks, was made by Makewild, a Southern California collective of artists, filmmakers, photographers and writers. Adventurers and explorers each and all, the Makewild team has spent about five months traveling and surfing in Cuba since 2016.

The result of Makewild's extended surfing safaris is *The Cuba Unknown*, a combination coffee table photography monograph, Surf Report, travel journal and Baedeker. It's *Endless Summer* on a single island, and you'll find everything from a detailed hand-drawn map and guide to Makewild's favorite bars, cafes, restaurants and tattoo parlor in Havana to page after page of luminous aquamarine waves that set one to dreaming. Marco Bava, Seth Brown, Tyler Dunham and Corey McLean share credit for the exquisite photographs, California artist Allison Kunath provides delightful single-line illustrations, and McLean wrote the text and drew the maps. *The Cuba Unknown* is the first segment of an even larger Makewild project, *Havana Libre*, a feature documentary and part of the group's efforts to help make surfing legal and legitimate in the Republic of Cuba.

The Cuban government doesn't officially recognize surfing, which makes it just this side of illegal, and the country's surfers have to battle just to get a board or even wax. "When surfing began in Cuba," McLean writes, "surfers made boards from all sorts of material, but the most popular method was to find broken refrigerators and strip out the foam...the boards were shaped with cheese graters. Today, of the hundred or so surfers in Cuba, less than half actually own a modern board."

A few pages later McLean explains the impetus for the voyage: "...the sport was considered illegal and those who chose to pursue it did so with great risk. We set out on a journey to learn why the sport was off limits and how, in spite of this restriction, surfers chased the swell anyway. Fortunately, on an island of 11.5 million people, fewer than 100 of them surf and all of them

know one another by name.” The book is a work of “amor verdadero,” equal parts affection, awe and reverence: “At another spot we learned it was common to crush beer cans into makeshift sandals to walk across the reef to an entry point where you’d kick the can back to your friend.” Dios mio.

We are introduced to a number of effervescent and impossibly hospitable Cuban surfers who make the Makewild sojourners family over the course of the team’s first ten weeks on the island, including shaper and surfer Frank Gonzalez and the island’s lone female surfer, Yaya Guerrero. As you progress through *The Cuba Unknown* it’s obvious they are the first deities of a pantheon: Frank is its Zeus, forging tri-fin thunderbolts in his apartment cum workshop; Yaya is its Athena, giving the island’s youngsters the gift of her wisdom, courage and enthusiasm.

“For Cubans, the sea is the window into the outside world,” McLean writes. “It is the only clear path that promises freedom, clarity and space. In Cuba the sea acts as a border wall and the very end of communist control.” This is very much how Cuban novelist Reinaldo Arenas describes it in his autobiography, *Before Night Falls*: “The sea was like a feast and forced us to be happy, even when we did not particularly want to be. Perhaps subconsciously we loved the sea as a way to escape from the land where we were repressed; perhaps in floating on the waves we escaped our cursed insularity.”

In perhaps the most memorable photograph in a compilation of same, Yenia Exposito-Linares, Frank’s wife, eight months pregnant and wearing bikini, floats face-up six feet or so below the surface of the sea, a constellation of bubbles as round as her belly rising from her mouth and nose. It is the book’s purest, most visceral image of hope.

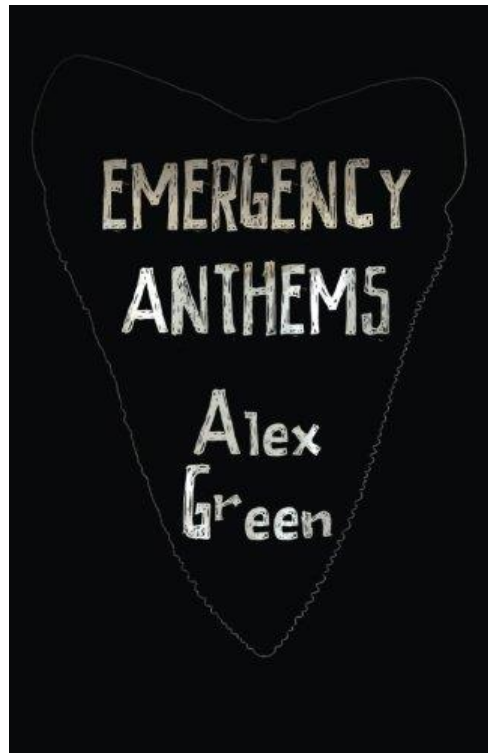
The revolution is long-finished: surfing is a core branding concept for global corporations like Citibank, Samsung and Subaru, a marketing tool to reach multiple demographics, and you can buy Billabong and Quiksilver clothing at Target. We are outlaws no more. What we see, in *The Cuba Unknown*, is one of the world’s last surf frontiers, a nascent culture of outliers, rebels and zealots. They have been forced to feel their way forward in darkness, and they have done so with delight, vigor and unimaginable ingenuity and resilience. They have built a community. It is a surfing revolution on the cusp, and *The Cuba Unknown* is one of its core documents.

Long-dominated by the USA and Australia, surfing, as both art form and professional sport, is a chorus soon to include the voices of some of the world’s tropical and largely impoverished nations. It’s only a matter of time, isn’t it? Here at home we have brand new boards, rash guards, enough cakes of wax to open a bakery, dependable rides to the water...traveling through *The Cuba Unknown* will fill you with admiration for our brave, hearty and joyous Cuban brethren while making you stratospherically grateful for what we have.

Cuba’s surfers want official recognition of their sport so they can surf for Cuba at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and, obviously, in other international competitions. May their love and devotion continue to inspire us. Hasta la victoria siempre.

For more information, please visit www.makewild.co.

January 2015
Alex Green
Emergency Anthems



Can a poem be a shark? The ghost of a shark? Its bite releasing over time, or always waiting offshore? Swimming beside us? In 1988 in Rochester, NY – a terrain and climate as removed as possible from the tear-streaked beaches and verdant suburbs of Alex Green’s poems – I was fortunate enough to take a class with the poet, Dave Mason, who told us we must memorize poetry in order to kill time waiting for ferries between the Greek Islands. At this behest, I memorized Philip Larkin’s “This Be the Verse”: “They fuck you up your mom and dad/they don’t mean to but they do...” To this day my hurried recitation of Larkin’s three-verse ode to dysfunctional families is a source of private amusement and a party trick far more impressive and literate than a balloon animal.

A few years earlier I had purchased my first Walkman, or my parents had purchased my first Walkman for me. This was prior to the birth of the CD, which, like love, as we’ve oft been told, should last forever, and also long before I became an inveterate record collector and committed myself to vinyl. For me, back then, in the shore break of the early Eighties, my favorite band was the Who, which meant my favorite poet was Pete Townshend, and I remember buying *Quadrophenia*, both the album and the soundtrack to the movie, and on a long drive from northern New Jersey to Hampshire College in central Massachusetts, where we delivered my brother to tennis camp, I sat in the back of my parents’ Peugeot 505 and played both cassettes

over and over. Both are gone, now that I've joined the light-speed parade into the digital age (I'm limping along), but should I find those worn little workhorses on a Southern California beach, or perhaps in a Sinai cave, stacked atop a heretofore undiscovered gospel, I would pocket them, take them home, polish them up and place them on a shelf. Those songs were, and always will be, on the list of my summertime anthems.

Digression! Yes, but what are we but the sum of these digressions, the maps we create, that we groove into the earth, as our hearts lead us astray, as our tastes change, as we thicken and darken? As Townshend wrote, "here by the sea and sand, nothing ever goes as planned..." I haven't yet made it to the Greek Islands, and "This Be The Verse" is the only Larkin poem I've memorized, but I remember a bus ride through the Algarve, circa summer 1992: I was bereft of my Walkman and my first love (entirely my fault), and I sang Jackson Browne's "Fountain of Sorrow" to myself as I watched the parched and hilly landscape stretch alongside the highway: "...you were turning around to see who was behind you/and I took your childish laughter by surprise/and the moment that my camera happened to find you/there was just a trace of sorrow in your eyes". My life has been a collection of digressions, a compilation. The anthems change but never disappear, and if I'm anyone at all, I'm the 19 year-old who sat at his desk at the University of Rochester, in front of an old Technics turntable, and dropped the needle again and again at the beginning of The Replacements' "Kiss Me on the Bus," because, for the hour or so that I played that song, I couldn't do anything else: I had no choice. A digression, of course, but these *moments*. There is rapture to be had, ecstasies; the ignition of our imagination only awaits the twist of the key, the press of one's foot upon the pedal.

What I want to provide here are the liner notes to Alex Green's contribution to the Great American songbook. This is some of the most beautiful poetry I have ever read, so passionate, so evocative (feline in its movement), so precise (canine in its attentiveness), so straight up and inarguably *good* it makes me giggle when I read it. The word stunning applies here; these are poems that sizzle. In Archibald McLeish's "Ars Poetica", by now so famous it should have its own exit, we read, "a poem should be palpable and mute." Fie! A poem should sing, it should be palpable and full-throated, melodious, a song you can't get out of your head, the soundtrack playing therein as you stand above the blue Ionian Sea, waiting for your ferry to Ithaka – something you can sing. There is no lovelier music for the quiet of your lonely room, for the wee small hours of the morning, for the deck of the ferry. As Alex writes in "Outside Tucker Luminar", "you just want to stand in the feathers of the foundation and lift the ashes into the air like a million dollars." Simply put, I love Alex's poems the way I love my favorite songs. These poems sing like a train on its rails.

So maybe a poem can be a shark? Like Brassai or Hopper, Alex captures darkness, nights, those underwater hours when we are most uncertain, when we can feel our exuberance, our hope, stagger like a boxer surprised by his own fisticuffs, that first slant and stumble when we realize we may not remain on fire. If we are lucky we live a burning youth; these are poems about our mortal shift toward adulthood, shadowy and desiccated where, from time to time, we sing ourselves on these embers. If we live with our truths, the truths Alex delineates in this slim volume, we are damaged photographs, cracked, underexposed, overexposed and burnt out,

hanging in battered frames. “Later when he sleeps,” Alex writes, “he longs for the nasty thrills of old crimes.” For better or for worse, we are living in a swirl of our ashes: “sharks burst from shipwrecks and start looking.” We are a history of shipwrecks, perhaps, chum for the ravages of memory. Alex’s poems are cities built of palaces, as smooth as vinyl, fountains, but they throw punches like middleweights and they swim like bullets when they sniff the thinnest stream of blood; in their presence, you will keep no secrets. “though wish and world go down,” ee cummings wrote, “one poem yet shall swim.”

The best poetry reads like a secret language in which you are already fluent. Alex’s poems are a map of a world fully-realized; its colors derive from Oscar Bluemner and Matisse, but its geometry is straight from Cezanne, the kind of shapes that withstand the press of your fingertips, that neither bend nor buckle. Alex is an illusionist, a magician – he tricks you into his ethers, saws you in half, makes you think this world is extant and, sad and darkling as it is, makes you wish you lived there, that its loveliness might always be yours. Once you’ve read these poems, you will memorize their species of light. They are muscular and sharp, pushing through thick water with a flick of the tail, the slice of a dorsal fin, sleek and streamlined, the break of a bite, a diagram of blood on the sand, the end of summer.

Lift these poems off the beach and put them to your ear, listen to the echoes of the greats: the loveliness of cummings, the desperate romance of early Leonard Cohen, the playful, vivid language of John Ashbery or Jim Carroll. Here’s Cavafy, “The God Abandons Antony”:

listen – your final delectation – to the voices,
to the exquisite music of that strange procession,
and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.

Here’s Langston Hughes, a six-line poem, “Summer Passing”:

Because you are to me a song
I must not sing you over-long.

Because you are to me a prayer
I cannot say you everywhere.

Because you are to me a rose –
You will not stay when summer goes.

Reading Alex’s poems, we find ourselves in the midst of an ecstatic geography, somewhere between Serguesa and the rest of our lives. It is always August, dusk, and we are haunted by calendars and clocks. These are poems that rekindle our love for language and its possibilities, flags of triumph for those of us who still believe that words can be as evocative, as cinematic, as shimmering, as musical as any other medium. I want to stuff myself full of Alex’s poetry. It makes me feel better. It makes me believe. Could life be this vivid? This lovely? This sad?

So is a poem a shark? Or a baby fox? Or a baby, baby, baby fox? Or a sinkhole in Santa Monica? The bloodless shoulder blades of your ex-girlfriend? A shipwreck? A species of light? A grove of

moments? We seek some clarification from Louis Simpson, who sort of addresses these issues in "American Poetry":

Whatever it is, it must have
A stomach that can digest
Rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems.

Like the shark, it contains a shoe.
It must swim for miles through the desert
Uttering cries that are almost human.

Uranium? Moons? Cries that are almost human? There's a thing in the woods, the city's gone silver, and it's been dusk so long they're thinking of calling it a season.

Toward the end of *The Bushwhacked Piano*, Thomas McGuane's first novel, McGuane writes:

"A famous man says that we go through life with a diminishing portfolio of enthusiasms: and these, these these children, these these these these little children, will soon not be able to feel this way about anything again." (p.111)

It's a novel I love very much, but I find it hard to agree with this particular coda. Here's an abridged version of the fourth poem in *We All Sort of Got What We Wanted*, "Birthday Poem in B-Flat":

The next day you stand
with the beekeeper's son
and stare up at the hive.
It throbs and breathes
like an organ doing what it's supposed to do.

Later the bees are gone, but nothing has changed.
It's still summer, it's still June,
you still hate your life so much
you can taste it on the back of your throat.

And in every dream the hive is bigger;
in every dream, breathless against the branches
the beekeeper's son raises it to the sky,
and it lifts him above the house.

And this is what Alex's poetry does. It takes me above the houses.

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