

AN OREGON POET'S REVOLUTIONARY CARROTS

By Stephanie Lenox

Like most people, I live in a constant state of interruption and distraction, thanks in part to my two young children. Yet their persistent curiosity has often compelled me to move at a slug's pace, to poke around in dirt, or to marvel over a beetle trudging across the sidewalk.

This urgent attentiveness is exactly the mindset that poet Charles Goodrich cultivates in his 2010 book *Going to Seed: Dispatches from the Garden*. Published by Silverfish Review Press in Eugene, this slim, earth-toned volume contains 52 prose poems that are, in Goodrich's own words, "missives from the interface with other-than-human creatures."

The title of the book suggests, for me, the form of the poems inside. These poems are not in the neat rows of lineated verse. As isolated dispatches from a man with dirt under his fingernails, they have overrun their margins. Gone to seed, they have shed stanzas and line breaks.

The book begins with a section titled "Summer" and moves through the seasons, ending with "Summer Again." On his knees in the garden, Goodrich finds himself encountering and relating to ticks, river midges, a wounded garter snake, corn, crows, and many other beings.

While I am not a diligent gardener, I can appreciate the perspective of a man who is frequently humbled by his work and who finds humor in it. In "The Master," Goodrich describes a bumblebee as a "clumsy, fat ballerina in a black tutu" that shows us how "evolution flirts with absurdity." This is "my mentor in accident and indirection," says Goodrich, "who has gotten himself stuck just now in a foxglove."

In "Another Futile Raid on the Ineffable," the poet goes out into his garden "hoping to be struck dumb by wonder." The anticipated epiphany never arrives. What happens instead is

conveyed through striking imagery: “The shadow of a single cloud passes over the bell peppers, narrowly missing me.”

Goodrich doesn't write poems of becoming one with nature. He writes of being *none* with nature—at best insignificant, at worst, an intruder. In “An Ant in the Gorge,” he comments ruefully on his relation to a carpenter ant climbing his leg: “I block its path, making it clamber from hand to hand, again and again, forgetting for a moment how small and lonely I am.”

At the beginning of *Gone to Seed* is a quote from Paul Cezanne, inviting readers to open their eyes: “The day is coming when a single carrot, freshly observed, will set off a revolution.” Goodrich, I think, is ready for the revolution.

After years as a professional gardener, getting up close and personal with carrots, insects, and all manner of vegetation, Goodrich now serves as Director of the Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word at Oregon State University. He is the author of two other volumes of poetry, *Insects of South Corvallis* and *Scripture of Crows*, along with a collection of essays, *The Practice of Home*, about nature, parenting, and building his own home.

With compassion and humor, Goodrich's poems remind me of the necessary, political, and often difficult act of paying attention to the world we inhabit.