

*Night & Ox* by Jordan Scott (Coach House, 2016)

Reviewed by Evan J Hoskins

I didn't want to stop. In fact, I couldn't. The poetic code says you can't quit a poem before it's finished. It's a rule that harkens back to the fake legend of Bach having to rise from his deathbed to rip his grandson a new one for leaving a melody only half played. *Night & Ox* is only one poem, so I was not allowed to stop. Not for all 68 pages of this poem. However, we are only talking about one or two words a line here.

Scott's book is a bric-a-brac of language. If you are up on your poetic avant-garde or your ab-normal/innovative poetic forms, this is a work that shows connections back to the Language poets, to the Kootenay School of Writers, to poems that don't fit in the mould/mold of mainstream poetry. But I'm quickly slipping into the dark hole of poetry categorization, which even the academics would say sucks the life out of it. Let's shoot the grappling hook and climb out of here: *Night & Ox* is not a poem that sounds like Robert Frost. *Night & Ox* does not look like your common poem, nor does it read like one, nor shall we sticker it with labels. This is a poem that ditches conventional form, ditches stanzas, ditches most punctuation. Take a look at some of it and you try and define it:

scorched

wormhole slur

slight Pleroma

it's form

for longing

for

slaughter

yes

everything's

vestibular sac

looms ungula (p. 20)

What *Night & Ox* has are waves. Even this little excerpt shows the troughs and whitecaps. It's a sea of forms, linguistic complexity, and rhythm, but it works. At some points the lines thin, slipping into single word lines, "for/slaughter/yes," and then later they erupt into dense, jammed-up lines of three or four words. And these crests are exhilarating: they are points when the rhythm and the reader are forced to slow down together to focus on the linguistic complexity – or if you're not ready, they are points when the lines slam into you and give ya a good rough and tumble. I wasn't kidding when I said *dense* lines; these are lines that can really batter you tongue and OED:

phonocule

bionic cosmogonies I

to electroluminescence

say groping in wrath err

our polarity

locks our

stutter frostwork (p. 49)

Metaphors aside, what Scott is doing is important. His politics have a purpose. This oscillating tempo, this critique of poetic form or pull towards something abnormal, the parataxis and non-sequitur, the thematic play and repetition, are all done for a reason. But it's not my job

to tell you what. What I can tell you is that *Night & Ox* is enjoyable for most lovers of poetic innovation. It is refreshing to see Scott take the line, turn it vertical, and then make it wriggle. What I can tell you is to read this book, and that you are not allowed to quit a poem halfway.