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Totem and Shadow: New and Selected Poems by Paul Hoover. Talisman House, $16.95.

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With its reliance on images and its constant perspective changes that jump-cut from close-up to monster pan, with its voice-overs and its special effects, the postmodern poem metaphorically approaches more than any other art the art of film. As amply proved in *Totem and Shadow: New and Selected Poems,* few poets have realized this connection more than Paul Hoover who for over twenty years has not only employed filmic technique in forming his poems but has also taken up film (cinema, television, and video) and its theoretical ramifications as subject matter.

Hoover's world is radically mediated; in it, everything has been thoroughly screened. Continuing from the opening lines of 1997's *Viridian—"Because* it has rained and the TV / is on, the world is not itself"—Hoover journeys in "Totem and Shadow" "near the Arctic Circle," near both Eliot's miraculous still-point and Jarrell's fatal "90 North." But unlike his predecessors, he finds no new information, for his vision is scrambled: "The world as act / is nimble as a shadow, / / but we haven't / even the language / / to speak its name. /Because the TV's on, / / we can only watch intently / as the word *bruise* / /darkens and the word / *light* brightens." Additionally, while the title of one poem, "Tribal Item," seems to indicate that some deep discovery is about to be made, the poem it names only recounts a minor squabble over movie trivia at a video store, indeed a piece of very accurate cultural anthropology.

Although they dream of pre-postmodern unity and correspondence, because they are shot on sets borrowing simulacra from Baudrillard's *America* and DeLillo's *White Noise,* Hoover's poems rarely represent such states. Throughout *Totem and Shadow,* nature—culture's challenge and cultivator, its haven and double—especially turns out to be a harrowed sign. "Local Knowledge," the collection's first poem, pictures nature as a tamed tourist—" Overadorned / / and catastrophic, nature / takes serial journeys / past historic sites"—and another poem, a section from Hoover's book-length work, *The Novel* (1990), helps to explain this transmutation: "Thinking altered nature like an exercise in style." For Hoover, the deconstruction of the natural object results in a deconstruction of a significant sense of self. In "Sunlight in Vermont," a speaker's meditation on a supposed nature hike shifts from envisioning nature as a construct—it includes "a stagnant pond / dammed by forest rangers / to look like a beaver had done it"—to mentioning Thoreau's retreat to Emerson's backyard then drifts—by way of the rock-and-roll playing at the pond-away from the meditation itself: "But who am I to say it? / / I'm about as involved in the matter / as smoke from an orange candle ... " Additionally, "The Nature Poem," from Hoover's first collection, begins as only a slight revision of the notion of the great chain of being—telling of beavers "swimming strongly among / the million water fleas, / which are fruit for other plankton, / more pure light than meat, / their bodies brighter than windows"—but delivers a radically removed deity, one who proclaims only, "I see it all on television."

While the poems of *Totem and Shadow* deal with similar subject matter and while the structure of the poems have much to do—in an effort to catch in their lenses the sheer mass of

stuff the world contains—with the list and the collage, the poems have great formal variety, ranging from sonnets to multiple-columned poems. Hoover's new poems are created out of a combination of the forms found in *Viridian,* joining poems that are robust, lengthy treatments of subjects—"Baseball," "Night of the Hunter"—with spare poems in which, according to *Viridian's* back cover, "meaning emerges through a filter of language." This difficult combination of two very different types of poems produces various results. Some poems are unbalanced. In "At Unrest," which states, "Diffusion / *is* a prayer," the diffuse form conflicts with the desire to make declarations. However, in "In Which City," heavy subject matter is nicely transmuted-in large part by the structure of language-into language:

> Note by
> note, we're
>
> mastered by
> the shape
>
> each wave
> makes ...
>
> Like an
> anvil on
>
> the table
> teetering toward
>
> the brink,
> the language
>
> of height
> breaks with
>
> weight. Each
> act is
>
> magic black
> as space.

While the new poems seem an outgrowth of the major strands of Hoover's work, it should be noted that *Totem and Shadow* also has been constructed to make this seem so. Some key elements of Hoover's verse have been excluded from this selection. For example, while Vietnam is brought up in virtually every book Hoover has written—even the very recent *Viridian* includes the poem "South of X" "[f]or Ted Studebaker, conscientious objector killed in Vietnam"—Vietnam is not mentioned anywhere in *Totem and Shadow.* Thus, readers new to Hoover might not fully understand the import of his message about the power of media, a message that not only

links the media with the emptying of the significance of generalities such as nature, but also—through recurrent couplings of the mention of the media with the mention of Vietnam—begins a critique by naming the events being dissolved. In the unselected section 16 from *The Novel,* Hoover writes,

> I had the time of my life
> in Saigon, Illinois
> night shifts on the home front
> a television war
> boredom and stardom
> in which we had
> deciduous interest
> Had 17 milligrams
> Enormous Changes at the Last Minute
> Invasion at a Distance
> Story of the Eye was mondo strange
> but Blue of Noon looks great
> I love my uncle
> completely straight

One can feel in this poem's bopping Beat rhythms—another element of Hoover's poetry underrepresented in *Totem and Shadow*—a sense of purpose, of opposition, even if mostly self-accusation. The poem provides not only the intellectual commentary of the temperate new poems but also emotional critique, a sinewy, vital resistance.

In a selected early poem, 'Words My Daughter Asked For," Hoover writes, "'Dated and somewhat prophetic': the goal I'd like to achieve / in the flat land of thought. I want to see and shout / so far it seems forever." The exclusion of Vietnam from his selected poems, however, seems like an effort to avoid being dated. This exclusion, though, results in the poems feeling a little less prophetic as well. Still, if *Totem and Shadow* does not record a voice crying out in the wilderness, it traces the outline of an active and necessary meditation which suffers and offers a sustained view of the postmodern screening which so far seems to have no end in sight.