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Nicholas Rinaldi, *We Have Lost Our Fathers and Other Poems*.
Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1982. 80 pp. \$7.95.

Review by Janet Krauss

“ . . . in this inner knowledge the thing-in-itself has indeed in

great measure thrown off its veil, but still does not yet appear quite naked.” With this inscription from Schopenhauer, Nicholas Rinaldi introduces his second book of poetry, *We Have Lost Our Fathers and Other Poems*. Schopenhauer’s words hold the theme of the book: we all yearn to attain some glimmer of the ultimate, whatever it may mean for each of us, but some of us never see enough of a glimmer.

Wit, humor, and surreal images continue to characterize Rinaldi’s writing. His first book, *The Resurrection of the Snails*, used these three devices as a means of understanding and halting the unsettling vagaries of life. In his second book, the three tools are a part of a lament and search. The reader goes on a multi-fantasy journey with the poet searching for the Answer to avoid a “Purple Silence / Where the Porpoises Forgot Their Dreams.” How bleak all would be if that happened. The porpoises would not leap and sing to stir us on.

In “Shadow of the Crow,” the first of the poems in the book, the persona undergoes a freeing and a searching at the same time. He wants to shake off his double who is “picking at his teeth / with his fingernails.” The double tells him that he can free him from himself:

From his pocket he takes the shadow of a crow —
unfolds it, lets it fly.

The shadow races across the sidewalk,
the passing of a sudden cloud.

“Do you feel better now?” he asks.
I don’t reply. We face each other,
gazing into the brown emptiness
of each other’s eyes.

My disappointment is more for him
than for myself. How well he did that, taking the shadow
from his pocket . . . a noiseless flutter of wings
yearning toward some implausible fulfillment.

The persona is confused: who is pursuing the fulfillment, which part

of him? He is left alone and notices how "small his feet are."

In the second poem, "Beggars at the Door," Rinaldi develops the idea that we, in seeking, return to where we started, our places of origin, the stamping grounds of our identities. The "beasts" are always there — the crow's shadows, the tormentors, our "imps of the perverse," to borrow Edgar Allan Poe's phrase.

Rinaldi turns to his impish humor to relieve his persona's sense of futility in the poem "Old Piano." This poem tells the story of his cousin who finds her way by willing the man of her dreams through her fantasies while she pounds the piano keys "as if it were a magic box." She finds her man and years later she still resorts to fantasies by playing the piano. After the piano is gone, she continues to live by dreaming . . . through humming.

In "Saying No" the persona becomes a missing person after trying everything to counteract the awfulness of life. Harry Blorr is his name, destined to blur out of existence with such a name. Black humor leaps from line to line. Harry Blorr has three heads, perhaps a parody of Dante's condemned Lucifer, or his three-headed dog. Hell is hell, wherever.

In the title poem, "We Have Lost Our Fathers," further alienation takes place. The persona has no connections with the father image. Kafka dwells in this poem:

He put
a message in the envelope, saying THIS
IS THE CARROT OF THE LONG SORROW OF
OUR EXISTENCE. WE WILL DIE. THEY WILL
NOT REMEMBER
WHO WE WERE. He addressed the envelope
to his father, then put it in a bottom drawer
and never mailed it.

The persona had peeled a carrot into seventeen pieces and ate all except one piece which he put in the envelope. He drank a glass of

wine, a sacramental act of sorts. There is a standstill, a giving up.

"They" is a further study in alienation and fright. All the tormentors, beasts, and shadows of the crows are the "they" in the poem. The persona is afraid to find them in moments of solace:

Afternoons bursting like thick, ripe grapes —
a whole summer of the warm, green life of grass.
Days of apricots and plums,
and always the moon, close and alive with light,
hovering above the trees. They are not the moon,
and they are nowhere in the sky — but if I go there,
to the trees, the moon, the sky, I know I will find them
where I never wanted
them to be.

We become our own enemies: that is the message of the poem.

One asks if the scuba diver in "Scuba Diver Found Dead in a Swamp" found the answer. He was buried alive and feared such a death all his life. Echoing Melville in *Moby-Dick*, Rinaldi talks about the dead eyes that "saw / life underwater / and death underwater, languid struggles / won and lost." For Melville, a similar figure intent on the sea, Bulkington, becomes a demigod in death. Melville wrote, "An ultimate 'water-gazer,' when he dies, the moment of his death is the climactic moment of 'apotheosis.'" Rinaldi senses this perhaps in the dead scuba diver but also feels guilty, "as if we were the ones who put him there. Maybe we are." Quickly the travelers move on to "higher ground" after covering the dead man's terror-stricken eyes with mud.

The man found dead on the tracks in the subway certainly doesn't have the answer. He recites "long passages from *The Day of Doom*." The guilt for his death is similar to the collective persona's guilt for the scuba diver's death, but walking on does not eliminate hearing this dead man's scream that "rises up from the deep water where we left him." The "we" in the poem cannot bury him deep enough and his screaming is the sound of the wheels of the subway

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car "screeching to a halt."

In "Forbidden Fruit" the poet finds what he is looking for, a tangible answer: a "broken temple, ancient, overgrown, / adorned with pineapples made of gold." The "we" in the poem take the gold pineapples back with them and after awhile they long to return to that exotic place but they are afraid: "the gods of the temple had been too stern." Only the memory remains in the shape of the gold pineapples and in "the weight of it, the burden" always with them. So that was not the answer either. They cannot return.

Finally in the poem "The Camel" it seems the poet finds the ultimate answer in his creation of the camel, the talisman that comes alive and passes among us, stays awhile giving "meaning to our lives." The camel even performs a miracle: it "passed / through the eye of a needle" and "was pleased with itself." It could do this because "we fed it / and kept it warm." Then the camel leaves. Only his eye remains and that disappears. The camel is only an illusion but it is captured on film before it goes. It is a shadow on the wall of Plato's cave but it becomes a talisman again even as an unreality. "We" even "disappear" like the camel. We become the camel. The charm works.

And the poet's good humor carries us through the murky waters, the staring eyes, the crow's shadows, and the screams.