



## On, Of, In the Heartland: A Review of *The Boneyard, The Birth Manual, A Burial: Investigations into the Heartland* by Julia Madsen

September 29, 2019 in [Reviews](#) tagged [Julia Madsen](#) / [Travis Sharp](#) by [Kristina Marie Darling](#)

In Julia Madsen's debut collection, *The Boneyard, The Birth Manual, A Burial: Investigations into the Heartland*, she presents scenes of a heartland town in precarity: the local economy, dependent on a meat packaging plant, has lost that anchor: "When the factory shut down, / everybody knew. Without saying. It was only a matter / of time. *Some of us would be handed / over.* To time" (55). This being handed over to time, to its vicissitudes and assailing vagaries, this being subjected to the violence of the changing times, this sense of laborers being thrown out of the present from being deemed surplus population: these are the scenes Madsen gives us. Through poems reminiscent of Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead," Madsen weaves together interview quotes from meat packaging plant workers, descriptions of the landscape rendered in prose poetry, a haunting narrative of revenge and desperation from factory workers with no factory to work in. The workers' words, so familiar to those of us from working class families, repeat one another, reinforcing the expense of poverty, the inescapable violence of money: "*I just wish there was no such thing as money to an extent. / 'Cause it hurts my kids, it hurts our family. / Can't always get what you want, and I know that, / but it's just hard sometimes*" (73).

The words of the workers and their families and neighbors, rearticulated as lineated poetry, makes one think also of the line in Rukeyser's "Absalom" in "The Book of the Dead," in which the speaker, a wife and mother of miners dead of silicosis, declares that she will speak for her son. And in a way she does speak for her son through Rukeyser's poem, a voice refracted but present. But what happens when the persistence of voice is not enough? In the case of Rukeyser's poem, the speaking for the son comes in the service of government-enforced reparations, in the obeisance of the dutiful citizens to the slow machinic turns of the wheels of government. Madsen's poems refuse this obeisance. The voices transported into the poem via interview transcription don't lend themselves to a public works project or reparations to the workers—because such an outcome is an impossibility. Instead, the voices of the workers, their families, their neighbors, echo into the reader the same sense of desperation and irreparable loss that marks their socioeconomic condition. There is no outside of the factory, and once the factory is gone, everything else seems to go, too.

Madsen takes us to a form of life in which meat exists primarily not as commodity to be purchased but as survival-labor: that which is worked on, and that which describes the laborer's body. The laborer, treated as flesh cog in the factory machine: "And maybe we knew then that the body was like a factory, out of steam and rundown, sputtering, on hinges" (56). The body becomes a tool:

*I pulled ribs with my fingers on the packing ribs line.  
My fingers and nails were in constant pain  
because the company wouldn't give us hooks  
to pull the ribs, and they wouldn't let us bring our own.  
They said that meat gets lost using hooks,  
and using our fingers pulls more meat. (61)*

And the body becomes a disposable and damaged tool, a tool that can be damaged, and whose damage isn't seen by management as requiring repair:

*“One cut! One cut! One cut for the skin;  
one cut for the meat.”  
The line was so fast there was no time to sharpen.  
The knife gets dull and you have to cut harder.  
That’s when it really starts to hurt,  
that’s when you cut yourself. (58)*

The meat factory worker, whose alienated and repetitive labor is quickened all the more for the squeezing-out of profit, begins to cut themselves by accident. In cutting the meat of the slaughtered animals with a dull blade, they cut through to their own flesh, exposing their meat to the meat of the slaughtered animals being processed for grocery store display, exposing themselves to damage:

*Two or three times a year I got infections  
under my fingernails.  
When I went to the clinic they froze my fingertips  
and cut out the pus. (59)*

These are poems on, of, in the heartland: that geographical measure that borrows its name from meat. Meaty land, the land whose visceral pulses and unceasing labor makes possible the survival and perpetual functioning of the body politic, the body national, the body cultural.

Consider meat: rounded chunks of it nestled comfortably within two forms of plastic, purchased by the pound. Disarticulated ribs spooning one another. The bone a structure not of bodily support but of keeping the meat in proper shape in preparation for its consumption. In focusing her poems around a meat packaging plant's closure, Madsen highlights the fleshy substrate of our capitalist reality. It is consequential to note that Marx, in describing human labor under capitalism, metaphorically figures it as *Gallerte*. As Keston Sutherland points out in “Marx in Jargon,” *Gallerte*, from the *Meyers Konversations-Lexicon*, refers to a “semisolid, tremulous mass,” a jelly, “animal substances industrially boiled down into condiments” (7).

Madsen's book suggests that, in place of *Gallerte*, the appropriate figure for the labor of the meat packaging work is the meat that the workers package. Packaged meat becomes a metonym for the simulacral form of contemporary life: the real with no seeming origin. Meat appears to most of us as those rounded chunks nestled in plastic, disarticulated ribs that emerge from an animal body as if by magic. Meat, and everything real, stripped down to its mere commodity-being, marks a stark divide between those who exist in a capitalist realism of commodity-beings with no incipience, and those whose very bodies are the substrate upon which that reality is made possible. For Madsen, “the heartland is the desert of the real” (48), though not in the sense of being a simulacrum without origin, pointing only to the virtual and nothing so real. The heartland is the desert of the real in that it has been desert-ed, made desert by desertion and desecration by those in and with power: it is the land underneath Borges' imperial map, the land left to waste and suffocation. It is that which exists outside of the capitalist real, but which props it up, makes it possible, supplies it with all its meat.

It's here that we come to the moment of flight or potential: Madsen's poems, unlike Rukeyser's, don't demand assistance from the capitalist real, knowing full well that they are already in its discarded underside. The removal of the factory is, in the end, not the end of the rest, for outside of the factory exists the always-there vibrancy of people living their lives: “We don't let go. We live in. Absence. That irradiated, small road. And we will remember the signs” (89).

**Travis Sharp** is the author of the chapbook *Sinister Queer Agenda* (above/ground press, 2018) and the artist's book *One Plus One Is Two Ones* (Recreational Resources, 2018). He's an editor and book designer at Essay Press, a teaching artist at the Just Buffalo Literary Center, and a PhD student in the SUNY Buffalo Poetics Program. Previous poems, essays, and reviews have appeared in *Columbia Poetry Review*, *LIT*, *Entropy*, *Bombay Gin*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Yalobusha Review*, and elsewhere.