

Amir Jaima, 2013. "The First Guitar," review of *The Ground*, by Rowan Ricardo Phillips, Antigua and Barbuda Review of Books vol.6 no.1, ed. Paget Henry, pp. 189-192.

*I plugged my poem into a manhole cover
That flamed into the first guitar,
Jarred the asphalt and tar to ash,
And made from where there once was
Ground a sound instead to stand on.*

-Rowan Ricardo Phillips, "Terra Incognita"-

The Ground by Rowan Ricardo Phillips is not only an elegant collection of poems, but also, as many of the titles suggest, a place. Sometimes that place is a physical one, a place between many places that, like Phillips' name, "straddles the seas in the sails of unseen / Ships" ("Proper Names in the Lyrics of Troubadours"). We glance, with Phillips, at the Caribbean Sea toward Antigua West Indies, and across the Atlantic Ocean toward northern Spain and southern Italy. But the place where Phillips lingers the most is New York City, which, as we might glean, is more his home than any other place. Like all great portrayals of places, Phillips' voice renders this city both familiar and foreign; we see the Bronx under snow, both the Hudson and East rivers at sunset, TriBeCa in the spring, and Ground Zero in the season of homesickness.

Yet to read *The Ground* as simply *about* places is too simple; as a place itself, "the Ground" is also something abstract: a metaphorical ground, a philosophical beginning, an occasion to feel and reflect, "a sound instead to stand on." ("Terra Incognita") Philosophers make much of beginnings—the beginnings of thought and reason, of knowledge and truth, of (in)justice and (un)ethical action—but frequently these projects are woefully abstract; when the surface is scratched, they prove to be un-grounded, presuming to be beyond time and place, beyond both history and home. This philosophical presumption, however, is naïve, since philosophy and reflection are always events, emerging somewhere at sometime.

The poems of *The Ground* are a compelling mediation on this double sense of place, a refreshing convergence of the geographical and the reflective. It is this aspect of *The Ground* that I wish to underline. My goal is simply to read a few of these poems "aloud" with you, the reader. As we will see below, the musicality of *The Ground* demands that it be read aloud. In this regard, the proverbial elephantine memory of the Internet serves us well. In January of 2011, Phillips read selections from *The Ground*—though not yet compiled as such—for an audience at *Poets Out Loud*. His set is available on youtube. Nonetheless, in this brief review I

hope to convey the ways in which *The Ground* functions as a geographical and philosophical place, a beginning here and now, a ‘sound for us to stand on,’ an occasion to feel and reflect.

The beautiful opening poem, “Tonight,” reads fittingly: “In the beginning was this surface. A wall. A beginning.” Here we are offered three beginnings to *The Ground*. First, we begin with the “surface”, which, having alluded to Genesis, conspicuously is suggested to precede the Word; at least *this* surface, the page, literally precedes the words of this poem. Or alternately, this beginning establishes Phillips as the ‘god’ of *this* ground. Second, we begin with Phillips’ birth, which is an actual place, within “the tattooed skin of the building I was born in”, viz. the “wall” of Harlem Hospital. And third, we begin, reflexively, with “a beginning”—a word, a sound, a moment (tonight?), an occasion.

We should note, however, that these beginnings, given on the same line, are to be taken together as, rather, three parts of one beginning. The coincidental convergence of Phillips’ birth in New York City with a poetic proclivity is the occasion to “[coax] music from a Harlem cloudbank”, and to imagine a “starlit lake in the midst of Lenox Avenue”. These beginnings are the rich conditions out of which “Tonight” in particular, and *The Ground* in general, emerges.

Having invoked music, the second poem is, appropriately, “Song of Fulton and Gold”. Phillips opens his set of *Poets Out Loud* with this piece. And so on the second read, I follow along as his voice animates the page. He reads: “The eye seeking/ home has to lower / lower / lower / lower. The eye seeking / home has to / lower.” Even if the title did not allude to it, the musicality is palpable. The stressed words—“eye”, “home”, “LO-wer”—are almost evenly spaced, slowing down through the ‘LO-wer’s. It is like a bright reggae beat fading into a dark Dub. The stanza then repeats three times, a perfect refrain, before abruptly breaking time with the arrhythmic denouement: “There are no / towers.”

At first blush, I am struck by how so few words can evoke such melancholy. From where does that feeling come? Is it born in the space between the unmusical last line and the melodic euphoria that preceded it? Is it in the history to which the paired title and last line seemingly refer? As a New York resident, I know that Fulton Street and Gold Street intersect in the financial district in downtown Manhattan, and that prior to 9/11 one could easily see the World Trade Center from there. As a reminder, I ‘stand’ on this corner using GoogleMaps/StreetView, facing Ground Zero west down Fulton; there is a large patch of unfamiliar blue sky. Is the “home” that the eyes seek the skyline that included the Twin Towers? The suggestion is, perhaps, that home is not simply a place, but a feeling of familiarity, a feeling that disappeared on this corner with the Twin Towers.

In “Grief and the Imaginary Grave” Phillips takes us to the Bronx. Again, I follow along on the page as he reads the opening lines: “November snowfall drowns out views / Of Grand, Summit, and Story Avenues. // Gone gone gonegonegone I choked / On the thought of ending this song. // Three Bronx streets go down under snow / That grays in the air like aging hair.” Unlike, Fulton St. and Gold St., these Bronx avenues do not intersect, and thus speak of a

different aspect of home. In *Poets Out Loud*, Phillips tells us that he lived on each of these Bronx streets. Yet, as noted above, these poems are not simply *about* places. As the next line suggests, the places that we live, particularly past places, are “Understoried. Dead and buried.” These places that at one time were familiar and vibrant become little more than nostalgic narratives entombed in our emotional memory.

The poem, however, does not merely tell us this insight; the poem is an occasion to feel this sense of entombment as well. The clean opening couplet throws into relief the moment when the rhyme scheme changes in the third stanza. The lovely internal rhyme—‘That grays in the air like aging hair’—preserves the musicality of the first two stanzas, but palpably suspends the rhyme that would complement “snow”. For four stanzas that follow, we lie ‘under the snow,’ musically unresolved like a dominant seventh chord, during which we learn that the rhyme has been deliberately ‘buried’—brilliant. When the rhyme is resolved in the last line, I read the new couplet together to glean a new double meaning: “Three Bronx streets go down under snow / [...] Among the other things that grow.” Phillips’ poem has allowed these streets to live again in a new way.

After three poems, I am willing to follow Phillips all over the city in order to see it through his eyes. In TriBeCa, a “crumpled paper” (“As the Heart of the Sun Descends on TriBeCa”) salvaged at sunset is an occasion to reflect on the ironic loneliness one can feel in this busy place. In the West Village, the view east down Morton Street from “the long hips of the Hudson” (“Two Twilights”) conjures thoughts of mortality and finitude. And over in the East River, “Over the shorter shoulder of Manhattan” (Hell Gate, East River, New York”), we read another story of death and burying. Each of these occasions to reflect is, as Phillips says of nature in “Mappa Mundi”, “a lapse in city life”.

Not all of the poems in *The Ground* are born in New York City, so to speak. Included is a beautiful series on the ancient myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. And, “Two Preludes”, one of my favorites, is perhaps the most philosophically compelling, a meditation on the difference between “nothing” and “little”. Whereas there is a quality of the infinite in “nothing”, there is a pragmatism in “little”; “little” can be measured, but “nothing” cannot.

With each poem, it becomes more apparent that *The Ground* is a very personal collection for Phillips, as I suppose first collections are wont to be. Nonetheless, *The Ground* is a fantastic beginning, a flaming “first guitar,” and I look forward to following him as he continues to write.