



**Robert Michael Pyle, *Evolution of the Genus Iris: Poems*. Sandpoint, ID: Lost Horse Press, 2014. 88 pp. Paperback \$18.00.**

*Evolution of the Genus Iris*, the newest book by noted lepidopterist and naturalist Robert Michael Pyle, may surprise readers familiar with his other publications—such as *Mariposa Road*, *Wintergreen*, and *Sky Time in Gray's River*—because this is his first full-length book of poems. Few may know of Pyle the poet, yet *Evolution of the Genus Iris* displays Pyle's scientific knowledge, the naturalist's awareness of his surroundings, an appreciation for what may be called the common greatness of domestic activities, as well as a bent for self-deprecating humor just as surely as his previous 18 books. As Pattiann Rogers says in her back-cover blurb, "We are fortunate readers indeed to have this new book and its poems abroad in the world."

Typically, the poems range from scientific oddity to moments of domesticity; geographically, they cover Pyle's homestead in southeastern Washington as well as areas where he has traveled, China, Tajikistan, and the Atlantic coast, to name but a few. The stances taken in these poems cycle through a sly and merry wink, as if sharing a pleasant joke; a quiet reverence for spouse and world; and a wisely subdued challenge to couch sitters and TV watchers.

In "Garden Catalog," three characters, the poet, the poet's wife and their cat, populate a scene of domestic tranquility. Pyle writes: "Washing dishes, I look up / and there you are—turning / gray earth to brown / as you ready the garden for spring. . . . The cat watches the stony drive / as if he expects someone to come." As the book's opening poem, "Garden Catalog" suggests that this moment, when his wife is working in the garden and he is working in the house, her hands in black soil, his in sudsy water, life has a balance and a resilience that brings the rest of the world into focus.

More comically, in "Rare Worm Doesn't Spit or Smell Sweet," Pyle riffs off a news item in *USA Today* about the "rediscovery" of a rare worm: "Old lore says the Palouse Giant / Earthworm smells like lilies." The poem concludes with the amusing thought that the Palouse Giant might be a bit chagrined to find that its reality does not match its lore.

In poems that are paired companion pieces, Pyle writes about banana slugs, those yellow slime trailers of the rainforest, and about Pulaskis, a specialized tool used in fighting forest fires. The banana slug, whose "four tentacles poke like pigtailed from its head," tops a totem pole, while the Pulaski, a tool used in fighting forest fires, appears at the top of a flag pole, "Lashed / to the top by someone who knew / his own true work all right, and knew / its worth as well."

Robert Michael Pyle's second book of poems, *Chinook and Chanterelle*, was recently released by Lost Horse Press.

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