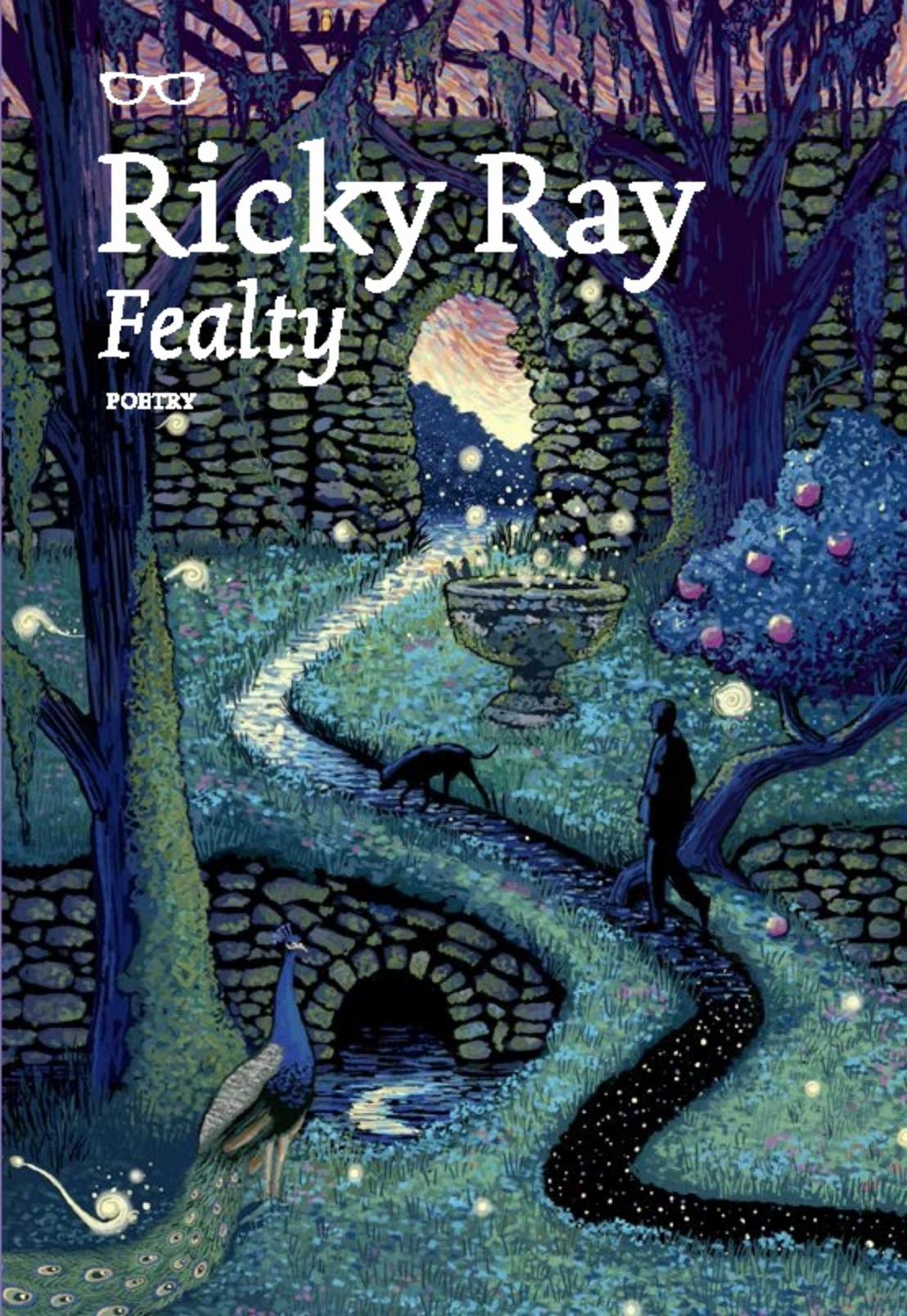




# Ricky Ray *Fealty*

POETRY



# *Fealty*



**EYEWEAR** PUBLISHING

The earth says have a place,  
be what that place requires.

—*William Stafford*

Ricky Ray  
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His awards include the Cormac McCarthy Prize, the  
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Their bed, like any good home of the heart, is  
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## The Seven Hundred Sights in a Horse

A wild horse ran through town.  
It was always running.  
Gospel was: something had  
to be wrong with you to see it.  
Everyone had seen it.  
Those who said they hadn't  
kept looking over their shoulders.  
Some saw only an eye,  
usually when they were blind  
to the bad side of a relationship.  
Some saw its mane, a mangy sight,  
while they went bald  
or took the bus  
home from chemo.  
Its tongue meant you should  
spit the liquor back into the bottle.  
The local bum saw its skeleton  
as he burned from the hollows  
of his eyes. He took up  
the guitar again and strummed  
until every bone disappeared.  
Its tail told secrets.  
Those who heard the swish  
knew what it meant  
but could never put it into words.  
They said it was like a higher  
form of balance. A little girl  
put out half an apple every evening.

The neighbor's dog ate it  
and she took it as a sign  
that she and the horse were friends.  
Her mother died young  
and she's the only one  
who ever saw the horse's heart.  
(Or the only one who confessed.)  
She married the man  
she suspected had seen it too.  
He kissed her when she asked.  
She and the guitarist became  
the resident horse interpreters.  
They often disagreed: on its name,  
its sex, what color it was,  
why it had come to town,  
whether it whinnied  
when the church bells rang,  
what a person ought  
to do with what they saw.  
Two things they always agreed on:  
you only rode it out of town,  
and by out of town  
they meant out of life,  
and if you saw its hoof  
you better duck.

## When to Reveal: In the Voice of an Old Brown Dog

In front of the vet she's stoic  
like her papa:  
nothing wrong, just give me a treat please,  
I mean another one, I mean yeah,  
these treats and I have something to settle,  
go ahead, you're billing us anyways,  
tip over the whole jar.  
Don't need to be weighed, my temperature taken,  
sure as hell don't need my blood drawn,  
imaging,  
or to go into the back room. I could pick this building  
out of two hundred by a quick sniff at the stoop,  
it's not so bad, the elevator smells  
and there's urine everywhere,  
but those are the joys  
a long-nose  
lives by. At home, though, I tell my papa:  
it hurts, I don't feel so well, help me  
on the bed please, it's midnight  
but I can't hold it,  
this aging thing's a hell of a way to spend  
a dog's accumulated wisdom,  
or maybe it's some trickster's prep course  
all creatures flunk  
on the way  
to meeting their mama's maker.  
Everything won't be alright, let's not lie,  
it never was, but another treat

and more where that came from,  
a roll in the grass  
and a nap in the sun,  
and if I don't get up to eat  
the giant cookie of the moon,  
at least I'll be  
the breeze I loved to drink,  
and my breath will drift to the edge  
of the world, where I'll keep on:  
sniffing the stars, digging black holes,  
lifting my leg and pissing on the gods' old feet.

## Something We Were Supposed to Do

White is the wound of history  
crying itself to sleep. Denying it  
in the morning. That gives violence  
too long on stage. We look at one another  
and see the ashes billowing up and out  
from under the eyelids. A boy turns to fire.  
A girl breaks and no one wants to touch her,  
and when someone does, she doesn't  
want to cut them, and when she  
does, they bleed. The trees twist  
in a wind that won't let them grow straight  
and our lives look less and less edible.  
Even the bears sniff the air  
and run away. We live longer  
and call it progress. Who knew  
the umbilical stink could be strung this far?  
And as the species disappear in droves,  
we nod our heads and tell ourselves  
there was something we were supposed to do.



## Two Postcards to Myself from April 1, 2017

I

Good morning, Sunshine. Not that one opens a lost missive in the morning, and is the good a wish, a curse, or an observation? A cold-fingered hand around a warm mug of coffee, a burnt-sugar soul ground out of Ethiopia. Enough of a pilfer to face the day. Hell of a cold rain last night. Hours without an umbrella, another quarter in the downpour before an empty cab. The chill went to bed with you, slept in the cusp of your marrow. Now your skin is dry, but your bones, still wet with it, still wet with the ocean they crawled out of, clamor for fire. Give them the splinters of your mind. And a match.

II

Let them rise and come out of your poem, failed, the one that said the clouds hung heavy and low, a blue to them you couldn't name, something between periwinkle and sky. This is taking two postcards because you're longwinded. The horses are up and quartering the little muscles in your back. The cats are sleeping with the dog and the dog is running on better knees in her sleep. All those years in the city. Think of the trees you could have had outside your window, the forms of thirst revealed after lifetimes of drinking light. Is thirst ever quenched, or merely shed like old skin? Maybe having one's fill is beside the point, and one of the virtues of experience is that it belongs to an art of waking up.

## Through the Veil

A woman sings, *when I was born,*  
*I stepped through the veil.* Her mother  
and father are myths she's still making.

His dark skin, whether sun or melanin,  
darkens as his Harley thunders  
down the highway, sweat in his beard,

a single point in his mind where  
she could curl up and fall asleep.  
Her mother has scars on her back

from where they removed the wings.  
No angel, she studied the butterflies  
and joined them; was caught the day

she picked up her legs and flew.  
The woman's friends trust her with secrets.  
She puts them where she came from:

she cannot reveal what she never knew.  
When she waves goodbye with the light  
behind her, her friends mistake her hands

for birds. They are, but she holds them in.  
She's afraid of giving birth. As a child,  
she couldn't find herself in the color wheel,

so she turned to soil, and in the sundown silt  
where her legs became flippers in the delta,  
she found her hue. Asked it, *why?*

It said something she couldn't hear.  
In her dreams, the words are coming  
clear as the coal cries in the mountain,

mixing men with rock as the tunnel  
folds, the pressures of life  
forcing us to bear diamonds.

They will be taken in blood.  
She tells the birds in her to build  
their nests over the shiny parts.

## In America We Long For

A savior because countries die,  
because death drags  
her shadow  
through the soil

and no one knows her name  
or what she wants  
when she sings the bottom  
of the heart to sleep

and blows two quick  
darts of breath  
that snuff out  
the candles of our eyes.

## Sometimes the Work Comes to You

A herd of horses gathered outside my cabin, their hoofbeats steady as a bonfire crackling green logs. At the same time I could hear them bent to the earth, nipping the young grass. It was the wrong season. I wore two sweaters. In my dream, from across the lake, a wolf howled to remind me of a wound left open in the soul. My blood flew with his howl. Then it turned in the air like a flock of pigeons and came back. The wolf sat beside me and watched. I asked to borrow his nose.

Caught the scent of decay and followed it to my heart.  
A ruin of promises I never kept.  
Lifted a lie and a pup with my eyes looked back.  
I knew which poem he was, and lowered my hand to feed him.

He said it was time to stop writing poems and start living them.  
A crow cawed in agreement.  
A squirrel dug up a nut and brought it for courage.  
I ate it and my eyes became light.

When I woke I could still hear the horses grazing. I went out to look and an angry wind blew leaves that bit the ground. The mountain dropped rocks, click-clack, into the valley. No birds at the feeders, ice on the day's tongue. I put on another sweater, thick gloves. My last piece of oak in the woodstove. It was time for work. I sat in the lap of the earth and closed my eyes. The wolf howled and I could feel it in my throat.

## Regeneration

Rising from the wheelchair,  
my legs hold me up—  
two withered twigs.

I love dead wood,  
the way it keeps daring  
lightning to strike again.

And I love lightning,  
the way it keeps reminding  
the heart it's on fire.