

# FAKE NEWS POEMS

Martin Ott

BlazeVox Books (\$16)



If you only knew what kind of trash  
Poems shamelessly grow in . . .

—Anna Akhmatova

The news cycle has sped up since Anna Akhmatova wrote these lines, and the processes of literary transmission and influence have also accelerated. Fortunately, however, the ancient art of poetry retains the perspective of the ages, in the sense that all poets of every time and place are contemporaries and neighbors, taking part in a single conversation about themes that don't often change.

Quoting a headline as the title of each poem, *Fake News Poems*, the new collection by Martin Ott, gives due emphasis to a *curio* of Americana, but the poems printed beneath the news items compromise the pleasure one might otherwise take in them as objects of fascination in their own right. Conversely, when one reads the poems and then looks back at the occasions affixed to them as titles, one senses a disjunction that's more than tonal and less than cosmological, an emotional mismatch. Despite Ott's facility with the verse line—an enviable prosodic smoothness—the poet's effort to conceal his natural vulnerability with the realia of clickbait only exposes it.

Some forcing thus occurs, as in "Taking a Knee," where the ethical authority of a poetry of witness ("I have worn a uniform, positioned flags at half mast, / and aimed a rifle in the air while caskets are lowered") yields a closing line that's as untrue as its rhetoric is ringing and conclusive: "Wind whipping our flag is the same no matter the stand." That false flourish, the dominant note of *Fake News Poems*, cedes place to lines of a truly poignant privacy ("I play the hip-hop station occasionally when alone," for instance), but only seldom. Ott is best when his technique gets the better of his concept:

It was a day  
like any mother  
would warn us about,  
  
the real babysitter,  
a chatterbox,  
square to be sure,  
  
bathing the man-child  
in his own image,  
an incorrigible game  
  
of mirror peekaboo  
except when his tiny  
hands cupped his eyes  
  
the world would  
disappear for a time,  
appear as a face,  
  
wink with aplomb,  
speak with such fire,  
he couldn't escape.

The grace of this poem resides in its measure, and its power dwells in the form it gives to a subject, the reduction of an adult human to childlike helplessness in old age. But again, the title yokes these lines to a circumstance that their timbre has nothing to do with: "October 10, 2017, Publication: Greensboro News and Record, News Headline: ANOTHER MORNING IN ADULT DAYCARE."

*Fake News Poems* does gesture in the direction of complexity, in lines about "the countless disasters I practiced // on my way to an ending I will / not consummate for fear of success," for example. Here one discerns an avenue for the poet to explore, a latter-day personism perhaps—a technique that allows Ott to declare the emotional dead-lock, instead of outsourcing it.

— Erik Noonan