Hamann, Dane. *A Thistle Stuck in the Throat of the Sun. Poems*. American Fork, Utah: Kelsay Books, 2021. 88 pages

Reviewed by Duncan R. Jamieson, Ashland University.

Though I never participated in organized sports in school, I have always been active. My earliest memories are riding a tricycle handed down from my older brothers before my parents bought me a two wheel twenty-six-inch Rollfast when I was in early elementary school. Alone and with friends I rode that bicycle all over eastern Queens, New York City, and out into Nassau County. Once in college I had set a goal for myself to run in the Boston Marathon; with all the hubris of youth I did this not really knowing anything about long-distance running, and not having anyone to train with. I managed to get to running ten miles at a time at a nine-minute pace per mile. Then reality set in when I learned first you had to run a qualifying marathon, and you needed to run at a pace much faster than mine. That’s when in graduate school I became more interested in serious bicycling, though never with any thought to racing.

As Book Review Editor I received a request to review the above collection in which Dane Hamann focuses on running and the outdoors. With an MFA from Northwestern University, he has been the poetry editor for *TriQuarterly* and is currently poet-in-residence for derailleur.net, a newsletter/website for professional cycling. He is also an editor and indexer for a textbook publisher. When no volunteers appeared, I decided to expand my horizons and offer a review, with the hope that my belief that cycling, like running, “captures the transcendence of moving under one’s own power and the biological need to connect with nature” (back cover, Mackenzie Havey, author of *Mindful Running*).

Not being a poet, it is difficult for me to catch all the subtle meanings contained in each poem. Some stand out starkly while others do not resonate as well or perhaps are more hidden from me. I read and enjoyed the poems but the collection’s title flummoxed me. Trying the internet all I found were references to the collection, but then in a flash of understanding I hit upon what seems to me to be its meaning. My wife and I had just spent a week at a great camp in the Central Adirondacks with another couple. The wife happens to be my wife’s mentor for her doctoral studies. Exceptionally bright, she is totally committed to social justice, and is a strong woman who does not suffer fools gladly. She stands up for students, encouraging them to dig deeper and to think through their work so as to make a difference in the world. More to the point relative to Hamann’s title, she is to her institution’s administration the “thistle stuck in [their] throat.” She refuses to “go along to get along,” and she wholeheartedly resists any attempts to dilute the program’s quality. She “calls ‘em as she sees ‘em,” just like the crusty old umpire told the manager who charged out of the dugout to question a called third strike. Whether others admit it or not, all benefit from her insistence on quality and integrity. Once I’d made this connection, I reread the poems and feel I have a better understanding of Hamann’s debut collection. It is the thistle that not only pushes the runner (or the cyclist) forward to achieve what seems to be out of reach but also stretches our boundaries to find meaning in who we are and in what we do. “Then I’ll go,/ tongue at last finding the sound for a stone/ carried in the shoe of a river of flesh./ Every word for further and further” (Thistle, 16).

The poems are divided into three sections, each beginning with an epigraph by a runner. First Alan Sillitoe describes how free he feels starting his day with a couple of hours “trot” (13). The second is led by Sam Shaw who sees the runner as ”haunted” (45), fleeing from himself trapped in a mediocre society. The last epigraph by Elizabeth Langemak suggests running “is mostly away,/ not chasing but chased” (53). Throughout each section there are poems, all of which center on the individual in competition with themselves, with the joys and challenges of nature and the surroundings. In the opening poem, Haman describes the wall of heat in late August, the crunch of gravel under his shoes, the taste of melting asphalt. While he counts each “light-peppered mile,” the “stick-straight/ road bestows only the notion of ending” (“August,” 15). In another poem, while running along a rail line Hamann tests his “heavy legs,” not sure when he will turn back to the trailhead. While in earlier days this right of way “used to be a simple/ distance over which things were carried. Now/ it carries only my desire to rest/ or be made of a younger self” (“Tracks,” 32). In “Personal Best: New Mile,” the reader can feel the agony and ecstasy of trying to achieve something new. “A silvery shine/ creeps at the edges of my vision,/ and the notion of stopping/ hurdles through me,” but the runner continues to “find that I’ve crossed that border of trees/ and I’m gulping/ unknown air and light” (37). The poem entitled “Why Do We Bathe in Miles of Dust?” addresses the age-old question concerning why mountaineering—“because it’s there.” “It’s hunger that cannot be satiated/ even with bright knives of open sky./ We’ll feast on gravel until we lie/ scattered like fallen birds in the fields” (55). In “Snapped Collarbone,” Hamann vividly recalls “the consequences of milliseconds”. Even as a child I rarely fell over on my bicycle. As an adult despite being sideswiped by an automobile I have only fallen a few times, none resulting in serious injury. Probably twenty years ago I had taken a leisurely ride around town and when coming back across campus I had slowed too much and turned the front wheel too sharply. As a result, I found myself sprawled in front of the administration building, my bicycle neither injured nor scratched lying next to me. When I stood, I realized something was wrong. Only a few blocks from home I couldn’t manage to pick up my bicycle. Security saw me and offered to take me to the hospital but I asked instead to call my wife who came and took me and my wheel home. This was late Friday afternoon so I hobbled around on crutches until Monday morning when an x-ray indicated a simple fracture of my pelvis. It quickly healed with no ill effect, but the poem brings the memory instantly to the fore. I can feel the disgrace of making such a stupid error. While Hamann wanted to “escape the exposed root,/ the impact of shoulder on earth“ (77), neither he nor I can erase the memory.

This review is only a small sampling of the forty-eight poems presented. For a non-poet like myself, I find reading these multiple times brings new images as they challenge me to be “a thistle stuck in the throat of the sun” in both physical and mental activities while encouraging others through example. These are poems of running and the natural environment, but they are also poems of challenge and contemplation. They are vibrant and gritty; they draw you to vicariously feel the tired, sweat soaked body as you see the everlasting beauty of the land through which the runner (or bicyclist or hiker) moves. I will come back again and again to these poems.