

Reviews of the Seven Kitchen Press's Rebound Series new edition of MIDWINTER FIRES:

# Midwinter Fires



Jeffery Beam

**The Introduction by poet and critic Joseph Donahue:**

Calling on traditions of erotic spirituality from Rumi and Haefiz to more immediate ancestors such as Robert Duncan, Jeffrey Beam, in numerous books, over decades now, has emerged as a contemporary master of that most difficult of forms, the short, ecstatic cry.

His early works, drawing on meditations, parable, and mythic narratives began the imaginative work of figuring how to most efficiently and convincingly fuse the worlds of myth and desire. Hermeticism, pagan idyll, radical Protestant vision, and nonwestern poetic forms all play their part in Beam's quest for perfect devotional pitch, for the exact balance of thought and feeling in the ache of utterance. His goal has long been

clear: to call a spiritual landscape into being. Despite being a legal resident of North Carolina, which he evokes with love and precision, Beam's true native land turns out to be a realm of utterance where the erotic and the spiritual are always intermingled, and almost always joyous.

Only the most unregenerate of readers would not want to be its citizen of this poet's ecstatic polity, to abide in the light of his collected works. But such a full reading was not possible until the publication of *The Beautiful Tendons* in 2008. This extraordinary collection of uncollected works revealed a Beam of even greater range and invention that readers of his books might have suspected. The 2010 publication in print format of his extraordinary collection *Gospel Earth*, finally allows us to see all, almost all, of Beam's poetry from the early eighties to the present. There could be no better time than now for lost or fugitive works to return to print.

*Midwinter Fires* is Beam at his most minimal and acute, summoning up angels, linking the realms of the heavens, the earthly seasons, and the passions in an intricate and celebratory music that assures us in our dark seasons. I suspect this work may record is a crucial turn in Beam's writing, where, as the first poem tells us, citing Lawrence, "Song of a Man Who Has Come Through," mysterious forces appear at the door and are admitted.

Like Lawrence, Beam calls back the pre-Christian pagan cosmos that lurks behind the modern solstice; these poems are tests of the power of ritual. In *Midwinter Fires* we observe a poet of plenitude and abundance confront the supreme season of abnegation and withdrawal. *Midwinter Fires* are words to be spoken at our furthest turn from the sun, at a time of year when the light becomes metaphysical, when the forests of the Piedmont seem to reveal the underlying structure of the world. In these pages Jeffrey Beam turns negation against itself, ritualizing the world around him, drawing forth, from the lowest moment of the earth's light, desire and song.

Beam's keen regard and clear eye for nature is notably present in the likes of *Cow-born Dionysus*, *Gnosis*, and the title poem itself. While his ability to delineate momentary emotions of hope (*Yule*), doubt (*Saturnalia*) and disappointment (*In my Jacket*) through the more mundane details of events can't fail to strike a chord in even the most seasoned cynic. *Midwinter Fires* is a book to cosy round the hearth beside your loved ones with. Its celebration of life amidst the darkest days of the year cannot fail to reinvigorate the ailing heart.

—Jillian Robinson in [Gloom Cupboard](#) (May 2012)

## From Reviews of the first edition of MIDWINTER FIRES:

*Nominee Pushcart Prize: The Best of the Small Presses.*

That light indeed cold. An opal dawn. Fallen into the streets. Across our paths. These Midwinter Fires. Enkindling kindness.

Simplicities of detail come into account. Fire. Frost. Evergreen. Hollyberry. A hand. One's own? Brushes our cheek. A rhapsody. // This fire which incites. Arouses. Makes us luminous. Makes us glow. Is what happens here a thing done? Or a dream we dream. Of ourselves. The kind in kindness. Traces of tend in tender. Of tender in tinder. Clues. Clews. Claws. Making our witness. // Sweetness and strength. Pleasure with surprise. A training of attention. Which at every moment seems. About to break through. Recovering, touch by touch, a loveliness of men. // Evidences. Affections. Raptures. // The absolution of gender engendering complete and open play. The body unbound by sameness. The sensual. A kind of ritual. Rites. Not affectation but effect. A trying for. The seeing for. Drawn up. Let go. // Asking. Questions. To detect the passion and strangeness. And unwind their own life. To rearrange the details of that life, often overlooked. That they might reflect and enkindle. // The poet's heart. *Ex forti dulcedo*.

—Thomas Meyer's introduction, *Midwinter* 1989

What I am so smitten with is its consistent sense of motion, never not moving, a feel for the undercurrent, irrational, motion in things.... ringing little poems of large scope. The other aspect is the all-pervasive sensuality beyond the surface-play, sensuous. I found it exceedingly controlled, yet with all the control indicating a passionate pressing at the control. Thus, I was quite enthralled with the balance achieved, nothing sacrificed.

—Novelist H.E. Francis nominating **Fires** for a **Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses** (letter to Pushcart)

Beam uses images of light and fire ... to exalt a life outside of life.

—Poet and journalist Dannye Romine in **The Charlotte Observer** (December 1990)

Jeffery Beam works ... in a style ... quiet and restrained ... exquisitely delicate poems ... quietly ecstatic. The words are as beautifully textured as the binding.

—Fiction writer Philip Gambone and editor Rose Fennell in **Lambda Book Report** (1990)

It's a pleasure to see someone writing these days so unafraid of beauty in all its manifestations. Your [poems] are fine to come upon and I welcomed them at once to my shelf.

—The late **Ronald Johnson**, poet and cookbook author (letter to Jonathan Williams)

Now I have my copy of **Midwinter Fires**. As I read these poems, I can hear you reciting them. Beautiful pieces they are ... in a beautiful-looking book. You are a poet ... and you sing your poems in the true Greek dithyrambic enthusiasm. Have no doubts about yourself.

—The late **Wallace Fowlie**, poet, memoirist, and scholar of Rimbaud, Proust and Dante (letter to author)

An invocation of elemental (as opposed to astral) demi-gods who might give strength and support. A strong appropriation of a myth central to oppression and fear and its beautiful transformation into a tale of healing, salvation, and acceptance. I find in it a courage and an optimism far beyond my earlier reading.

—Poet Paul Jones, introduction of Beam at **Bull's Head Bookshop**, UNC-Chapel Hill (April 1990)

Lifting plain speech into sudden eloquence, Beam brings to his poems the quality of a psalm or a pagan hymn. Like the spring lying dormant under the winter landscape, Beam locates the energy beneath the surface of his poems.

—**The Asheville Citizen-Times**, Book Editor Dale Neal (April 1990)

However beautiful they may be, however graceful, terrible, or overwhelming, they are complete in their self-containment. While the poet is not. He ... is human. And human ... is awkward. And that awkwardness is the empowering grace of Jeffery Beam's poetry. The unexpected word. The ordinary detail in an extraordinary scene. The sudden ornamental eloquence amid a plainness of speech.

—Thomas Meyer, poet and publisher **The Jargon Society**, introduction of Beam at poetry reading in Asheville, NC (1990)