

Alex Phillips, *Crash Dome*
reviewed by Jason Daniel Schwartz
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Dome Piece

On the fourth page of his testimony, *Crash Dome*'s unnamed narrator references Donovan— that whole ‘first there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is’ business—and even if you pick up the allusion and stop following the poem a bit to ponder how or if you ever liked that song, soon enough you’re born back into the current of the language. But Alex Phillips is too good a poet to let something as invasive and potentially-interruptory as a Donovan allusion just disappear. Like all objects Phillips’s speaker takes time to consider, the mountain of the allusion doesn’t go dead but dormant. Twenty pages after the Donovan reference, the speaker mentions his dreams of escape to an unspecified mountain where he believes relief awaits. And, as the poem progresses, the obscure mountain that seemed only an allusion early on becomes a recurring beacon, its mystery no longer a matter of its obscurity but of the potential answers and refuge it offers the tangled, busy mind conjuring it. Finally, by the end of the poem, the speaker has “slipped into the mountain”—perhaps figuratively— and has begun slowly squirming through it like a worm, eager for the time he can finally “give up movement of any kind.”

If you want to have a little idea what kind of poet Alex Phillips is, the Donovan allusion is a start: beginning as it does with the implicit humor of Donovan’s incoherent version of eastern thought to the way Phillips literally gives us a mountain, takes it away, and gives it back, to how Phillips knows, despite the conspicuousness of his mountain, that it’s not for him to say what the mountain is supposed to mean. Instead, the mountain will slyly accumulate its meaning in time, and it will do it in a way that is satisfying and indescribable.

It’s a risky move for the young Factory Hollow Press and the ludicrously-underpublished Phillips to bring out a 64-page poem without a single stanza break. But where in other hands such a thing might imply density and difficulty, *Crash Dome* is spacious and expansive. The lack of breaks contributes not to heaviness but motion and pace, ushering us swiftly through the speaker’s thoughts with a part-associative, part-narrative logic that permits Phillips to simultaneously establish an alternate world and a fully plausible human mind. “My most isolated/thought is connected to the most crowded/corner of the galaxy,” the speaker says, moving on to consider the sweet-but-scary minds of children and a “leaking sky” from which the stars are vanishing:

When there is nowhere left for the stars,
there will be nowhere left for people.
That is why we have to do so much
while we are still able. I should tell

children to carry little vials around their
necks, like I do, so they can put their tears
in them and if the stars ever go away
they'll have something to put in space.
I miss the children. They know amazing stories.

The details reveal a dreamed-up reality—the weird objects (tear vials, soul evaporators) and arcane physical rules are of a planet comprehensively different from ours. The moving between the objects, the thinking that takes us from the sad thought of the stars disappearing to children wearing vials of tears, reveals the humanity and empathy of their beholder. The spokenness of *Crash Dome* may invite you to read it sort of like a novel, but the real action of the book, its real business, is the revelation, through the associative movement of his thoughts, of a man.

I taught *Crash Dome* this semester, and when Phillips came to my classes, the narrator was all the students wanted to talk about—where did he come from? what's wrong with him? what exactly *happens* to him? does he die? They were reacting to something they hadn't ever seen or thought possible; one student actually told Phillips in the sweetest, most earnest way that his book changed his life. Another discovered by reading *Crash Dome* that you could instill emotional states in readers *through words alone* (I was tempted to retire happily, right on the spot). Maybe that doesn't say all that much about the book particularly, but these were two undergrads whose first real exposure to contemporary poetry was still in the middle of happening. They were looking for narrative; they were trying to find a thread, and, when faced with *Crash Dome's* consistent diversion from action back to thought, they weren't turned away, but, to their surprise and mine, pulled deeper in.

I've been hesitant to get too caught up in a discussion of what this poem's about. I'm going to assume that those are things most readers of this review aren't super worried about (Alex Phillips, so uninterested in distinctions between prose and verse, might find that statement repulsive). But knowing that readers often pick up books as much for what happens as for a kind of hoped-for vibe, I'll do this: Yes, *Crash Dome* is brainy science fiction, similar to Ohle's *Motorman* and Matthew Derby's *The Sound Gun*, though where those books have characters who go on adventures out there in some imagined landscape, *Crash Dome's* sole character goes inward. Phillips is a student of James Tate, and Tate's deceptively casual style and eye for funny, peculiar specifics that complicate the devastation of the subject matter have been passed down and are in evidence throughout. I also thought of recent Padgett Powell and, toward the end, *Molloy*. Also, the dirty sets of Russian science fiction movies, Syd Barrett, Robert Wyatt, and plug-in, motion-sensitive room deodorizers. Does that round out a vibe? One more thing: scuba diving/floating in some kind of gel.

Phillips work can be so funny, his language effortless and beautiful, the details peculiar and fine. Though the experience of Phillips's poems begins in the joy of these things, the composition of them begins in ideas. The speaker of this poem may exist in another time or world, but we know exactly what he is saying when he wishes for the days when water wasn't so smart and when there wasn't so "much going

on/in the air, on the streets, in our language.” You don’t have to be Luddite in our own machine-brained time of distraction, to pine like *Crash Dome*’s narrator for a time when people did not only “invent symbols” but were “imbued with them,” a time when animals did not only seem to live on TV but crouched near us, a time before mystery, the sublime, “all our old spells” were gone. As the speaker flies between a number of different identities or lives he is living at the same time, Phillips and his readers are able to investigate identity and the fragmentation of the self, the myth that is the concept of personal wholeness. “There is a connection between this life and/those that I am living,” the narrator says about the most prominent of his selves, “There is a disconnection/between them that is becoming corrupt.” *Crash Dome* is not didactic, but it’s pretty difficult for readers living in our own world not to see a little of themselves in the narrator’s reckoning with himself in his.

“We don’t believe in ourselves. We crave/the ineffable truth of the sacred,” the speaker tells us. But in the end, what that belief requires, what sacredness requires, is the silence and the stillness that permits their expression, that permits our seeing them. *Crash Dome* is a beautiful book, a weird book, an exhortation and a warning. It tells us to slow down, to be attentive and quiet, even a little motionless. That Alex Phillips makes this point in a book so swift to move, so constantly in flux, is a feat. And that in the doubting, harried, expansive investigations of our nameless speaker, we are left with such a breath-taking, stunning, stilling final movement is an achievement of the very object of the speaker’s searching. Early on, the speaker of *Crash Dome* says, “That’s the greatest story of all/Where did all the meaning go.” By the end of the book you might be forgiven for telling him, “Aw guy, here’s a little of it for you, right here. You did it!” Then you might thank him for changing your life. It will all be very earnest and sweet.