Hyacinths and Biscuits in David Groff's *Clay*

One of my favorite definitions of poetry comes courtesy of Carl Sandburg, who said that poetry is “the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits.”

Um... *What?*

When I first read this definition, I laughed out loud. Certainly this couldn't be the pinnacle of philosophy from one of the greatest American poets. I'd been writing poetry for a decade, and this quote had nothing to do with what I'd been trying to achieve that whole time. But the longer I sat with those words, the more they sang to me. Today, Sandburg's words suggest a number of things to me. First off, they suggest that sometimes mashing two seemingly unlike experiences together can spark a poem. Hyacinths (a natural production) combined with biscuits (a human production)? What could be more different?

Sandburg's words also suggest that the best poets take a certain pleasure in the *sounds* of their poems. I mean, Sandburg obviously payed attention to the sonics of his definition. The assonance of all the short i’s makes this the kind of phrase that I could say pretty much all day long without needing much else to happen. Sandburg easily could have said that poetry is “the conjunction of tulips and cookies,” and though the phrase would be matched for meaning, it obviously wouldn't have the same ring. The phrase would be forgotten among century-old tomes. But because he cared not only about joining unlike images, but also the musical value of the poem, I find myself repeating his words when I open the freezer for ice cream, when I settle into bed after a long day.

So in the poem “Clay's Flies” from David Groff's book, *Clay,* Groff combines some of the least likely themes and images: romance on the one hand, and horsefly bites on the other. What a strange pairing, but so memorable because of its strangeness. I mean, is there anything less romantic than horseflies? Groff is in good company here, as it's difficult to think of this combination without being reminded of John Donne creating one of the most striking love (or lust, maybe) poems in the history of language out of a blood-sucking flea.

The intertwining of these disparate images complicates Groff's poem. It turns out to be a blessing that his partner (Clay, of the book's title) gets welts. That's a sign of a somewhat healthy immune system. But as the virus that attacks his system acts up, he responds less and less to exterior stimuli. So, as Groff ironically states, “I wish him welts.”

When the right combination of drugs finally work, and his lover sneezes his way through the spring, Groff compares his mucus to nectar. In another quirky and memorable moment, Groff finds his fingers lingering with care on every swelling. In this poem, love and pain intersect in the most real ways. This is not Hallmark verse. The most real emotions contain a bit of their polar opposites. I'm wary of the cliché, but a tiny drop of black interrupts the white half of the yin yang, and vice versa.

And how about the sonics of the poem? Does Groff take pleasure in the sounds of the words rubbing up against each other? Absolutely:

“The bumps and sneezes that I feared/ flicker out like fireflies in the fall.” (hear all the “f”s.)

“...his veteran virus resistant to every trick but two.” (hear the “v”s and the “t”s playing off each other.

“I wish him welts.” Holy simultaneous poignancy and sonics!

The combination of such odd images and the attention paid to the sounds make for a memorable poem that can knock about in the reader's head all day. Groff's words have hijacked my brain, and I've never been more grateful for a hijacking. “The synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits” indeed.