Daniel Strasberger is a graduate student at Chapman University working toward an MFA in Creative Writing. He has been published multiple times by the Hi-Desert Publishing Company.
Book review

ST. FRANCIS AND THE FLIES BY BRIAN SWANN
AUTUMN HOUSE, 2016

St. Francis and the Flies, the 2015 Autumn House Poetry Prize winner and Brian Swann’s eleventh book of poetry, meditates on experience, spirituality, and nature. This book of free verse poems, varying in length from sparse to bursting at the seams, explores nature and Swann’s personal anecdotes with musicality embedded in each line, taking pause to experience the senses and understand the present moment.

From the very first poem, “Images,” Swann creates a natural flow, using repetition, like sounds, and line enjambment to lead the reader through the book. The first few lines “Thrush music drifts in so rich I can’t quite follow / its bent and fractured notes, the bent fractured, the fractured / bent, quick liquid rills, trills unpredictable, impeccably phrased” creates a certain movement for the reader, even in the absence of rhyme and meter.

This musicality is evident throughout the collection, often using a variety of line breaks and prose to shift the length of a poem. The poems tend to be shorter in the beginning of the book, the imagery tighter and more succinct. The poem “Hrafn,” for instance, keeps to shorter lines and stanzas:

Before day breaks
he’s already a shadow
on the snow, clipping
the porch, breaking

This particular eighteen-line poem is kept tight, but structure and line breaks vary across poems in the collection. As the book delves deeper and examines each moment more thoroughly, the poems lengthen. “De Volpini,” a115-line poem, leads the reader across the page:

We’re worming our way into the fifteenth century
grotto-cavern under
the house where St. Ignatius Loyola lived.

This poem stretches back and forth on the page, the structure and the sound in the words leading the reader seamlessly line by line. Even within the longer-lined poems, Swann succeeds at keeping the reader interested in each word. “Off the Pan-American Highway” begins with the following:
I can still see myself looking up at Shirley Jackson's widow's walk
in Bennington and thinking how thin the modern veneer
even though it was only a story and though it takes more [...] 
The forty-one lines of this poem cover the page in text and with imagery that creates meditative wonder. You don't truly know what Swann experiences.

Nonetheless, Swann delves deeply using imagery, spirituality, and meditation to examine each moment. The title poem, “St. Francis and the Flies,” starts:

It is good to be seated in front of the flaming logs
and watch the mountains rise under the sun as flies
buzz in the corners of high panes, die and fall on me [...] 

Here, the speaker takes a moment in time, sitting in front of a fire, and experiences that moment, the flames, and the flies. He then veers into the realm of spirituality with the next stanza:

and my book open at Bellini’s St. Francis, his state
amicable with donkey and crane and all God’s creation
where everything’s in place while he stands in front [...] 

From here, the poem takes another step back, this time from the spirituality of what the speaker has read and into his own personal meditation on the subject. In the fifth stanza, he states:

I've trained myself to like flies. If you can like flies
you can like anything, for flies are unavoidable
as death, and as they die are replaced as if there were [...] 

This statement is in response to his reflection of St. Bernard who killed a swarm of “demon flies.” In acceptance of flies, which are portrayed in death and darkness, the poem takes a step away from these specific religious references and meditates more on a particular spiritual understanding of the world around him.

This collection of poems itself is divided into two parts, each with its own part one and part two. The first part of the book has a focus in a moment of time. “Images” and “Hrafn,” both in on the first half of part one, zero in on a specific moment in time and how the images in that moment affect the speaker. “St. Francis and the Flies” starts the second half of part one and focuses on a specific scene of flies around the speaker as he reads. Part two of the book looks at experiences and small anecdotes, taking a step away to understand where each experience or anecdote resides in time. Both “Off the Pan-American Highway” and ”De Volpini” look at the speaker, presumably Swann himself, during his travels with people and examine how those experiences affected him at that time of the experience.

When reading this book of poetry, the reader mentally and emotionally follows along on a personal journey. Through the
imagery and words, through the structure and language, the reader understands each moment in time and reflects on our own understandings of ourselves and the world around us. St. Francis and the Flies is a book of poetry meant to be read and meditated upon long after reading the final words. I'm still pondering.