Who is Tom Thomson and why is he in Purgatory? After having read Troy Jollimore’s debut volume of poetry, I still do not truly know who Tom Thomson is, but I have an idea why he is in Purgatory.

Jollimore’s volume is divided into two sections. The first, entitled *From the Boy Scout Manual* is a miscellany of 18 poems that vary greatly in theme and approach. The second is a series of sonnets about or in dialogue with Tom Thomson, a poetic persona inspired by the early-20th-century Canadian painter of the same name. The poetry in this volume takes full advantage of the richness of the English language. Jollimore artfully uses rhyme—both internal and end-line—alliteration, and even a pentameter beat at times, and this formalism sets the poems apart from much North American poetry of recent years. Jollimore seems to believe in the power of poetic register and form to communicate his observations on nature, life, and writing.

*From the Boy Scout Manual* begins with a quotation from Henry David Thoreau’s *Journals* on the survival of summer life even in the dead of winter. There is indeed a Thoreauvian bent to many of the poems in this section. Excepting some miscellaneous material (like the winning “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, Ruined by Reading The Cantos of Ezra Pound, Or Song of My Shelf,” of which each line is a book title), most of the poems here offer a vision of nature that wavers between hope and melancholy. The first poem, “Mockingbird and Whippoorwill,” is a highly alliterative meditation on a metamorphosis of flight that connects the two birds. “Glass” describes the trauma felt by a child when he realizes that things break and come to an end. The first stanza ends with the question of whether the child, too, is finite. It doesn’t describe the conclusion that the boy comes to, but instead describes how he learns to observe by listening and watching the world around him. The poem ends with the child planning a “course of investigation” in his “corner room” while the natural world passes by “a featureless ocean identical in all directions.” In this poem, and others such as “Fireflies,” “The Divers,” “Devour,” Jollimore juxtaposes the natural world against the world of human knowledge and technology, and suggests that an ethics derives from observation of the natural world and from the realization that the human does not entirely belong there.

In the only poems of the first section that feature Tom Thomson, “Trout Quintet,” Jollimore sets the tone for the long persona poem that concludes the volume. Here the historical persona of Tom Thomson is less important than the legend that grew up around him as a naturalist. Mystery surrounds the circumstances that lead to his death (apparently from a canoeing accident, but believed by some to be homicide). Tom Thomson, at least in this poem...
and those that follow, is eccentrically anti-modern and seems to have rejected, urban society for a simpler, more authentic life in the forest. The first two poems establish the eccentricity of the character and accentuate his legend-like, folkish nature. The third poem of the quintet, and the most indicative of what Jollimore sees in Tom Thomson, sets the painter's naturalistic simplicity against a jaded, postmodern view of language that finds joy "in the imprecise usage of words." Thomson responds to this by asking "Who would call a trout a salmon/.../Who would call a trout an iceberg?" For him, nature does not allow for ambiguity. Nature exists simply, continuously, and it supersedes human construction. As Thomson says in the last poem of the quintet, "... the trout / that come to the place where water meets water / are the same trout every year. / They are not born. They do not die." The final quintet sets the stage for the character of the sonnet series by giving the image of a man in nature, alienated from human society and its self-created preoccupations.

If in "Trout Quintet" the idea of a naturalistic ethics is embodied and set in contrast to human society, the sonnet series Tom Thomson in Purgatory places the embodiment in an urban environment and reports his observations of himself and the world. I read these poems as primarily Dantesque, even though Jollimore's Dante is highly mediated by 20th-century recasts, such as those of Eliot and even Italo Calvino. The poetic persona is not the same as that of "Trout Quintet," but he is an innocent and often bewildered eye and ear that reminds this reviewer of Calvino's everyman anti-hero Mr. Palomar. Like Calvino's Palomar and John Berryman's Henry, he should not be confused with the poet (despite a few random similarities), but instead should be seen as the lens through which the poet explores facets of human existence in the world. As a second epigraph from Thoreau's Journals hints, Thomson tragically tries to become "prive" to the secrets of the gods. His purgatorial effort to understand himself and his world is often played for comic effects and sometimes borders on the absurd. Yet, like Calvino's Palomar, Thomson is the lens by which the poet confirms the frustration of meaning and happiness in the contemporary world. Thomson's circular climb up Purgatory is sometimes marked by a return to the stagnation of Limbo. Although he never comes to any conclusion about the world or himself, Thomson's search for Earthly Paradise, unlike Mr. Palomar's, does not end in death, but in a thoughtful indecision.

The sonnet series moves from "Tom Thomson in Love," which describes his endeavor to understand love and himself in love to his meditations on time in "Tom Thomson in Search of Lost Time," though the allusions to Proust are confined to the title. Thomson is always pondering something, whether it is his own nostalgia for time past or the infernal view from his apartment window. In "Tom Thomson in Situ," he observes the "dull plastic streetscape
improvised/from the last remnants of some actual life," and compares the warning sign in the window of his favorite deli, "Absolutely no outside food or drink," to the words on Dante's Gates of Hell, "Abandon all hope ye who enter here." At the end of this poem, he notes that his apartment window—his vantage point from Purgatory—faces the inferno of the city, but that Paradise must somehow be on the opposite side of his apartment, where he has no view. The ironic humor with which Jollimore scores his descriptions of an often hellish, modern cityscape in this poem are but one facet of his take on the spiritual conditions of everyday life. Paradise must exist, but only in speculation; we live in Purgatory with a view onto Hell.

Occasionally Tom Thomson's progression reaches a kind of neurotic stasis and instead of describing a specific state of mind, time, or place (in bed, in his office, in denial, in transition, in dreamland), Jollimore places him in Limbo. There are four "Limbo" poems in which Thomson seems to be overtaken with pessimism. Instead of moving upwards, he stagnates in an obsessive self-analysis. He seems to realize that he might just be walking in circles. The first and last of these Limbo poems use the image of the ocean to describe Thomson's loss of control over his being in the world. Thomson feels like his existence, past and present, is being eroded by the ocean's dynamo. Nevertheless, the "Epilogue" shows him standing his ground against the eroding action of the ocean, still having come to no conclusions, he and the reader are asked to think: "Tom Thomson, undecided, ponder that."

In Tom Thomson in Purgatory, Troy Jollimore gives his readers a taste of his talent with and love of language. Yet his penchant for comedy never comes at the expense of a sincerity with regard to the relation of language and world. A reader may be convinced, at least, that the poet still "believes" in the words that he uses and composes into poetry. The playfulness of Jollimore's verses is not that of a postmodern world-spinner, but that of an old-fashioned storyteller who finds joy and possibility in language. He has created a likeable character, if only for the bumbling and innocent nature of his inquiries. Nor are the ethics and naturalism that underlie these poems overly serious or heavy-handed. The ethics naturally follow the poet's observations and descriptions. Recently Jollimore's talent and wit were officially recognized on a national level. As I was writing this review, his volume won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry. This short volume of poetry is a pleasure to read and offers an original vision of the world we inhabit.

—David Lummus
Mantis
A journal of poetry, criticism & translation
Number 6: Geographies
Summer 2007

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Publisher
Armadillo Press, Belmont, CA
ISSN 1540-4544

Mantis publishes poems, translations and critical prose about poetry and poetics. Each numbered issue engages a specific organizing theme.

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