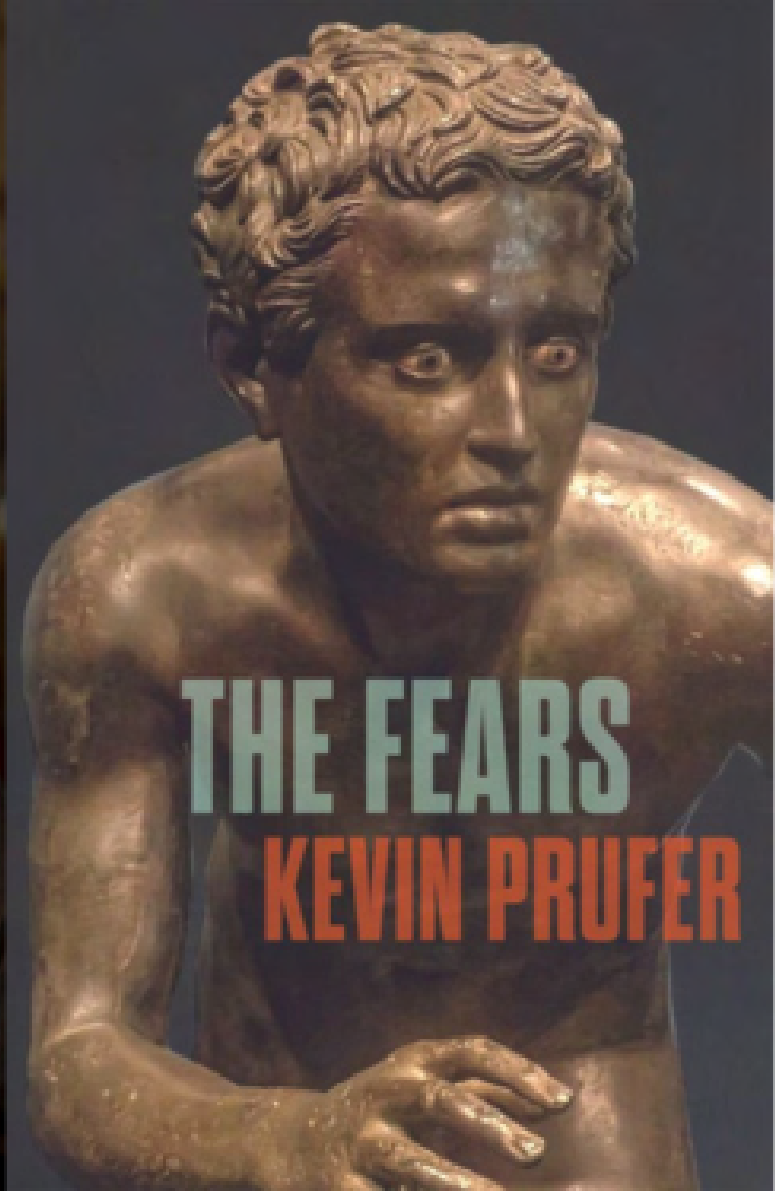

2024 UNT Rilke Prize

Kevin Prufer – *The Fears*

Kevin Prufer's *The Fears* (Copper Canyon Press) has won the 2024 UNT Rilke Prize. The $10,000 prize recognizes a book written by a mid-career poet and published in the preceding year that demonstrates exceptional artistry and vision.

In *The Fears*, his ninth collection, Kevin Prufer examines how each of us becomes "a dying animal body," eventually losing what makes us human to sickness, grief, and even the indifference of the nation state. The poems place the ancient Greeks and Romans alongside vivdly rendered portraits of loved ones---a father dying of cancer, for instance---so that the epic, heroic past becomes a lens for meditating on the small, intimate tragedies of the present. And those intimate

tragedies in turn yield ways of encountering the larger conflicts of our own historical moment. In lines that slide jaggedly across the page, Prufer moves between what he calls "mundanity" and "vastness," attempting to understand "the erasure of the self / into vastness" and, beyond that erasure, "the failures of empires." Bleak, clear-eyed, bracingly unsentimental, and insistent on the necessity of precise, accurate language, *The Fears* asks readers to remain politically engaged, to continue caring about the world. The poet urges us, even though we are mortal and will one day end up like Antigone, "nowhere," to keep paying attention to the vivid, haunting moments that comprise our lives: the broken finger of a mummy, a frozen bottle of wine, the "little pink tongue" of a lost kitten.