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## BOOKS IN BRIEF: Where Are We Now? (2)

The more I enjoyed pigeonholing poems in my last review as primarily "linguistic engines" or "repositories of felt experience" the more I came to recognize that those poems that engage and delight and move me are simultaneously two-dimensional configurations of variously-spaced alphabetical symbols and multidimensional enrichments of my intellectual and emotional life. Despite Larkin's claim that "Form means nothing to me" and Williams's notion of a poem as "a machine made of words," a poet can deliver felt experiences only in so far as the linguistic engine carries them. In this review I wish to explore three new books by poets the *BPJ* has published in recent years that exemplify three very different ways in which poetry's linguistic engine can enact felt experience.

**Janice N. Harrington**'s ***Even the Hollow My Body Made Is Gone*** (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 2007, 92 pp, $15.50 paper) is certainly a "repository of felt experience"—a spell of memory against the disappearance of a world. Harrington presents elegy in its primary function of perpetuating what was beloved and lost, in this case "family history, Southern rural culture, history, folklore, the labor that makes a life." "What Was There" conjures up the sacred specificities of this culture, refusing their abstraction to the generic. It begins its catalogue:

> Pine, catalpa, pin oak, persimmon,
> but not tree.
>
> Hummingbird, hoot owl, martin, crow,
> but not bird.

and proceeds in this prosodic ritual to the following stanza:

> My mother running away at fifteen,
> my grandmother lifting a truck to save a life,
> an uncle at Pearl Harbor, Webster sitting
> at the back of the bus when he looked as white
> as they did, but not stories.

The expanding progression transforms what might have been nostalgia into art. It rides the *this, this, this, but not that* rhetorical structure into the deeper world of place, of family, and of race.

Mourning is implicit in these elegies, however joyously they perpetuate their memories in song: "Even the cast-iron skillet sang / of grease, and heat, and bloodied meat, / summoned the

reaching flame, / gladsome despite its heavy skin"—suggesting metonymy more than prosopopeia. Among the singing lines of this poem ("Hands washed in a pan of well water sing / of soul and soap and splash and splintery light") are snatches of hymns and children's game songs. "Revival" enacts the walk home after a church meeting, the mother "humming and holding / her Bible more firmly than an axe handle":

> while the night begins its long sermon,
> and the miles go by, and the miles go by.
> If an owl calls from that darkness,
> then someone will die. If a hound keens
> one long, longing vowel, they will shudder.
> If a star plummets, that too will have meaning.
> This is faith, the road that takes them home.

The ritual structure of folk songs and wisdom takes on new life in Harrington's musical rendering. Read this passage aloud; feel the singing in the lines, each rocking on its caesura, and hear the clear assonance of *night, miles, by, miles, by,* up to *die*. *Shudder* resonates with *plummets*. "One long, longing vowel" is the onomatopoeia Harrington speaks as her own language. The vocabulary and syntax, straightforward yet rich and lush, convey a world of black southern girlhood that those who don't know directly can enter vicariously. The intensely realized memories, overlaid by occasional dark images, reverberate with meaning that seems clear but defies paraphrase.

In the book's final section, as the family moves North, memory of what has been left behind remains focused on a personal and collective past even as it encounters such parallel worlds as "pilgrims casting garlands into the Ganges" and "dark matter in the galactic halo." Of these she claims ironically that a "colored woman cannot sing" in an elegant performance of the rhetorical device called apophasis, in which the author declares she will not do something, all the while eloquently doing it. In "Benham's Disc," the penultimate poem, Harrington claims the whole globe and, indeed, the universe as her subject. That disc, in case you didn't know, is a children's toy in black and white which, when spun, produces arcs of color.

Ahsahta Press used to publish only poetry of America's West, but under Janet Holmes's direction it has expanded to produce handsome volumes of broader scope. The one that has most deeply engaged me is **Susan Tichy**'s ***Bone Pagoda*** (Boise, ID, 2007, 102 pp, $16 paper). The publisher enclosed with the review copy five pages of Tichy's explanation of her life in relation to her poetry, extremely valuable for the layers it adds to my reading of the appropriately difficult verse that enacts this personal and yet commonplace encounter with war. I could wish that the material had been included in the book as an introduction, yet to have done so would emphasize too strongly the autobiographical element of the volume. I would be foolish to try to better Tichy's own words, so will rely on them and on the good notes in her appendix as I proceed. Here is the opening paragraph in her "Author's Statement":

> In the realm of history, *Bone Pagoda* takes its title from an ossuary on the Vietnamese-Cambodian border, where the bones of 3000 massacre victims are preserved. In the realm of metaphor, it honors the first and final location of every war: the body. These poems are a journey through "Vietnam"—the country, the war, and the moral catastrophe signified by this word in American memory. They are also a formal investigation of how language behaves under pressure, poetic and political.

Tichy dedicates *Bone Pagoda* to her husband, Michael O'Hanlon, who served with the River Assault Force in the Mekong Delta in 1968–69, and died in a mountain climbing accident in 2002. In her marriage she learned what the war had been for him, and the poetry gains concrete authority from his experience. Strong poems about war often come decades after wars end, when poets have finally wrested from their psyches a way to speak of their experience and when history has provided its perspectives. *Bone Pagoda* is a collection of such poems.

The outer form Tichy has chosen, two-line stanzas and occasional single lines, allows her a wide range of rhythmic variations and the option of solo lines for heightened emphasis. Much of the dramatic effect is in these varied rhythms, which accommodate free use of mosaic, collage, quotations truncated or expanded, incremental repetition, sudden swerves, fluid rhyme,

and multiple meanings. Evocative clarity of verse such as Harrington's seems incompatible with Tichy's moral and aesthetic universe, but the search for meaning continues, even within the structural "illusion of simplicity." Tichy writes of her form's "potential for multiple readings and recombinations, uncertain transitions and stopping points," which belie its "visual serenity." I would value hearing her read the poems aloud, how she projects the various voices, the unpredictable rhymes, the wavering in the many either/or constructions, all of which are essential to the complex of meanings that unfolds within the non-linear chronology of the volume.

Within this non-linear structure, *Bone Pagoda* suggests the growth of the poet from idealistic teen-aged activist to scholar of the war, to wife of one who could represent what it actually did to him, and finally to war-zone witness three decades later. As a fourteen-year-old Tichy became deeply committed to the anti-war movement. "Versari" may be read as enacting in a "tangled stutter" her efforts to write about it then through false starts ("her anger no / Her fear no"), images that fuse the war with the act of writing ("A grammar is a gun," "Her own blood and black paint / Down to the size of a comma"), quotations from an interrogation manual ("'To begin interrogation / Wrap your subject in barbed wire'"), obsessive repetitions ("Begin again // . . . . Begin again"), and compressed syntax ("a // Raw war every daily lies"). Much of the book's first section, "Desk and Chair," lays out the struggles of a responsive and responsible young poet "Trying to paint a gun," discovering the need to break received forms as "poems turn unbeseemingly // Traditional," unable to find consolation in poetry though "They say that art consoles."

The second half of this passionate, unillusioned book centers more directly on Tichy's accompanying her husband on a return trip to Vietnam in 1998. One nine-part sequence, ambiguously titled "Blazon," articulates the poet's mature impression of that war (and by extension all war) and of "how language behaves under pressure." One section begins "Liberal lyric dies here." Twisting from self-reflective composition to reportage to eloquent sarcasm to literary allusion, the poet grapples with the unwitting collusion of poets, including herself, in the imperialist enterprise, in the erotics of violence. Here's the third section, complete:

A genre devoted to praise or blame
Satiric or descriptive

Much claimed, little done
But catalogue anatomy

A rocket went through his neck, or
A rocket went through his sternum

In amorous armorial
His hair hand or cheeky wit

Left behind on the battlefield
Try bracelet of bright hair, or ears

If *timor mortis conturbat me*
An outward soul, more useful now

Than rhyme

In this passage literary phrases weave into a catalogue of body parts (in which "cheeky wit" is suddenly no longer a metaphor). Consider "amorous armorial," which suggests the erotic perversion of this violence. Its juxtaposition of eros and an idealized heraldic warrior culture strikes with bitter irony at the poem's title, "Blazon." "Bracelet of bright hair" and "*timor mortis conturbat me*" bring Donne and Dunbar down to the body with Forché. Tichy's reading of world literature becomes one of her strategies for conveying "the true size of the 20th century and the vast, shifting nature of political insight in poetry." In section after section of this poem she insistently and bitterly challenges herself and other poets to watch, to see with "an outward soul" so that we "get it right." I know no other poetry so rigorous in disciplining its language, its syntax, its very music to honor "the first and final location of every war: the body."

**Jessica Goodfellow** has a background in mathematics, and ***A Pilgrim's Guide to Chaos in the Heartland*** (Manchester, NH: Frost Heaves Press, 2006, 47 pp, $10 paper) is a "repository of felt experience" only if I consider, as I do, a vigorous intellectual life as "felt experience." Goodfellow has translated to an