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MARK JARMAN

"Some Sang"

THESE DAYS POETS OF A CERTAIN AGE ARE SINGING threnodies for the past, for the future, for human life on earth, for earth itself, for the vanishing monuments of history, for their own vanishing lives. And yet, to paraphrase the poet Brenda Hillman, the memory of failure can fail for an hour and doubt walk beside a radical hope. I wonder if the elegiac tone which pervades American poetry is simply the pitch of an aging generation or a general response to the apprehensions of the present moment, a sense of dread and loss that has been dormant for a little while but now has re-emerged, at least for the time being. American poets of all ages are still singing, and singing well, and happiness and hope are not alien to them. If it is the poetry of those closer to my age that captures my attention, it is surely because of a shared time of life. Not everyone is grieving, thankfully, but those who are have achieved a notable eloquence and poignancy in their songs of loss and remorse and elegiac remembrance.

T. R. Hummer's latest book[1] joins his two preceding collections, *Ephemeron* and *Skandalon*, to make an ambitious trilogy of time, morals, and mortality. Of the three, *Eon* is the most down-to-earth and the earthiest. The book begins with an elegy for the Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney, a farmer's son, and ends with one for the poet Philip Levine, whose poems often came out of working-class Detroit. These two elegies bracket the book's three sections, "Murder," "Urn," and "Eon." The central section, "Urn," artful container, subject of the ode and receptacle of ashes, is a collection of memorials for artists, writers, musicians, even for the poet himself, all with birth and death dates. While the book's title, *Eon*, suggests that earth may experience time as immeasurable in length, life on earth, in particular human life, is severely circumscribed, sometimes by violence, as suggested by "Murder." The poems throughout the book are mostly short, in Hummer's signature sinuous line, and almost like thumbnail sketches, so to call some epitaphs, like inscriptions for gravestones, is appropriate.

Though one might read through *Eon* for a thematic or narrative thread, there are poems that simply stop you with their completeness and emotional rightness. The wrenching poem "Greek Fire," a villanelle, ends the first section and stands apart from many other poems formally. Dedicated to the children at Sandy Hook and implicitly

[1] EON, by *T. R. Hummer*. Louisiana State University Press. $19.95p.

to other victims of school shooting, it concerns a lesson in a classroom about the Big Bang. The repeated lines are versions of "We are learning how the stars are made" and "*The earth is made of stars*, the teacher said." Yes, the earth is made of stars, but a classroom is made up of children. The Greek fire of the title, if we remember any classical history, was a weapon of war, "an incendiary composition," my dictionary says. The inventiveness of human violence hovers over the memory of that elementary school in Connecticut like a bursting firework.

The poem "The most ordinary life" that ends the third section of the book is formally like many others yet serves both as an exit and entrance, a portal as Wallace Stevens might have called it, a place of transition. It deserves to be quoted in full:

> The most ordinary life, a glass of water, a potato
> bearing ideograms of earth onto the holy sideboard,
> An open window. Over the threshold of nothingness
> we step onto a porch with chairs watched over
> By a patient beagle. How simple that was. Do I remember
> a prophet wearing a sandwich sign bearing the legend
> *No way out of confusion?* No, I remember nothing
> but nothing, and the creak of an opening door,
> And eye-burning sunlight, and one step over the jamb,
> and you there as always, looking up and smiling.

For all its complex and at times grim witnessing of violence, loss, and almost infinite time, *Eon* pauses for a moment to remind us that *this* poet has been saved by *that* person looking up and smiling at him.

The grief expressed in Hummer's recent poetry is for other human beings, and so it is in Brenda Hillman's new collection,[2] but her underlying elegiac feeling is for the planet. For a couple of decades her poetry has been challenging, at least to this reader, in its experimentation with fragment, discontinuity, submergence of argument, and avoidance of narrative. This is the first book, since *Bright Existence* in 1993, in which I felt I knew where I was as a reader. But I cannot say for sure whether it is because I have learned to read Hillman's poetry or whether her subjects, particularly the death of her father and of a close friend, have led her to a more conventional kind of verse. The most compelling poems in the book are in the fourth section, "Two Elegies." One, "The Rosewood Clauses," is for her father; the other, "Her Presence Will Live beyond Progress," is for the poet C. D. Wright. In both poems the personalities of the departed become vividly present. One aspect of Hillman's work is that on the page something dynamic is always happening, so it is necessary to represent the following passage as it appears in print, looking like a profile. About her father, she writes:

[2] EXTRA HIDDEN LIFE, AMONG THE DAYS, by *Brenda Hillman*. Wesleyan University Press. $24.95.

He was
a cheerful person.
Why? Well, smart big
friendly handsome white
guy in the 20th century who
talked a lot. Women loved him. Not
all women. Most men loved him; &
once when he was 91 he said to his helper,
"Fred? I don't think much about the
afterlife, this life is pretty damn good. I'm
sure something exists besides myself, but not
much! Ha ha, write that one down, Brenda!"

In the lower right-hand corner where this passage occurs is a small color photograph of her father, in the Arizona landscape where he lived, in Tucson, and where the poet grew up. Like other small photographs throughout the book, it does not serve so much as a portrait of its subject—most of the photographs seem deliberately difficult to make out—but as a graphic symbol or a footnote. What I like is the way she has captured her father's voice and his humorous challenge to his poet daughter. Most elegies are as much about the elegist as the elegized. At one point, the poet admits, "It is hard to mourn a happy person who did not fear death / but there are things I can tell him now he's everything." Similarly, she captures her friend the poet C. D. Wright's voice and persona in the elegy for her:

& one time when she was supposed to be positive & say
nice things at the conference she said
I caint teach like that I'm mean as a snake

And whenever the poet Hillman gets too mystical, the poet Wright's response is, "You decide you're the one who believes all that stuff." It is clear that Wright is irreplaceable to those who mourn her, though in response to the metaphysical question "What is 'what's next' where you are," she is imagined as saying, "They don't have that much next around here." I finished both poems wishing I had known these people.

In any other collection, these two sequences would be the long ones, but this is a long book, and its longest poem, "Metaphor & Simile," makes a sequence of 24 journal entries, most of which have to do with one of the toughest forms of life on earth, lichen. Given the title of the sequence, the homophone "liken" should, I guess, be understood. All kinds of things enter into this meditation—political, botanical, geological, social. It seems to end about Christmastime, an anomalous season in California, where the poem is set, and to meditate on a time when, thanks to human depredation, all seasons may end.

Hillman's poetry increasingly brings to mind the expansiveness of poets from Wordsworth to Whitman to A. R. Ammons, poets who invited the world to enter their poems. Yet it also echoes the elliptical music of Pound's *Cantos* and Theodore Roethke's wish that he could "write nothing but fragments." Hillman can also remind one of both W. S. Merwin and Robinson Jeffers at their most ecologically dire. Yet in the book's last section, "Poem for a National Seashore," the poet imagines a crowd of people at "the edge of the sand" who "thought they'd never get over / the deaths." And yet, "Some sang." Hillman has always been a poet who knows, as she says in the same poem, "loss can be lost for a while." And failure can fail for an hour. And "doubt can walk beside a radical hope."

It is a pleasure to read Elizabeth Spires's new book,[3] the title of which reminds us that an elegy, while it remembers loss, is always created for some future reader. Since the poems hover in the realm of Zen Buddhist philosophy, I have a sense that the linearity of the elegy, as I have described it, is a boundary they are meant to transcend. Still, the title poem ends with an image of aging, there in the future, inevitably, but also one that is embraced rather than resisted:

> You'll see me, *there*,
> out by the horizon,
> an old gray thing
> who finally knows
>
> gray is the most beautiful color.

Spires is so deft a maker of lyrics that any formal experimentation which might draw attention to itself never intrudes on the experience of reading her work. So, when reading "The Road," with its epigraph from Thoreau, praising "a monosyllablic life" over "a ragged and muttered one," you may hardly notice that every word but one in its 16 tercets is one syllable. Mainly there is the sense of, as she says in line one, "A life: pared to the bone." In the poem "Sake," we are offered the quiet surprise at the end with the invitation to drink "while the sake's / warm. Drink again. / For your sake. Mine." I have always admired Spires's way with describing things, as she does with the "squat bottle" in "Sake" or the letter "I" in "I" or the zen circle of "Ensō." I think, though, I like best the poems in which she depicts the intangible, the invisible. Two face each other, "Picture of a Soul" and "Small Prayer." I will quote all of the latter.

> If my heart were scoured,
> if my soul were remade

[3] A MEMORY OF THE FUTURE, by *Elizabeth Spires*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. $26.95.

into a new and shining garment,
    then would I have to die?

Lord, if perfection is death,
    let me stay here
a little while longer,
    spotted and stained.

This has the intimacy of George Herbert, without the turn toward piety which he would have made. But also, as with allusions generally in this poet's work, the echo here of Hopkins' "Pied Beauty" is almost subliminal; that subtle allusiveness is part of the beauty of many of these poems. They cohere naturally, effortlessly, like clouds.

The entire book, including its cover, shows a love of the transparent philosophy of Zen and the art associated with it and perhaps a desire for its detachment. Yet the concrete world of loss anchors these poems, as children are mourned for growing up ("They Drive Through Childhood in Their Little Cars"), and places are mourned for existing in our lives only in their scheduled seasons ("Crab"). At the heart of these elegies is the poet's own life, as if that life were a child, were a place, were a vital thing which must be parted with, "A cracked bowl I hold in my outstretched hands. / A heavy cloak thrown down like twisted shadow. / A book, its pages full of writing, a few unwritten on. / A book, its pages turning blankly in the wind." The pages of this book are not blank, but replete with poetry.

As Nobel laureate Bob Dylan has reminded us, "Oh, the streets of Rome are filled with rubble, / Ancient footprints are everywhere. / You can almost think that you're seein' double / On a cold, dark night on the Spanish Stairs." And there is a wonderful sense of that double vision in Karl Kirchwey's new book,[4] subtitled "Roman Poems." One is seeing with the keen historical and artistic sense of the poet, a gifted student of the classical world, and also with the ghostly lens of the poet Anthony Hecht, who made the same magnificent city of relics and ruins a subject he wrote of, as Kirchwey does, in brilliant, often lapidary, traditional verse forms. Like Hecht, Kirchwey always suggests a personal subtext, so that we are never simply taking a scholastic tour with an engaging teacher. The poem that reveals that deep personal dimension, "A Letter from Istanbul," speaks in the voice of a father writing to his son about his experience of the classical world and its coexistence, as in a palimpsest, with the Islamic world. The poem is actually a long apologia for the father's absence and an argument for the role of art as a source of redemption. "It is art that hales us out of our graves, // if the Christian mystery is unavailable— / for I know that we have given you no belief // except the *capacity* to believe, over a lifetime . . ." Coming to this passage, I went back and looked at the two epigraphs for the

[4] STUMBLING BLOCKS, by *Karl Kirchwey*. TriQuarterly/Northwestern University Press. $16.95p.

collection, both from the New Testament, one from the first letter of Peter and the other from Paul's letter to the Romans. Peter refers to Christ as "precious" to those who believe, but to those who do not as "a stone of stumbling." But in Romans, Paul warns against leading others astray through disputation, as putting a stumbling block in another's way. If Rome's rubble is a field of stumbling blocks, then to some those blocks will be precious and to others treacherous, perhaps; but all are memorials, the archaeology of elegy.

What I take to be the title poem of the book, "Stumbling Blocks: For Pius XII," reveals that among the many cobblestones of Rome, *sampietrini* as they are called, are stones specifically placed to memorialize Jewish citizens of the Immortal City who were deported during World War II, some to the death camps, some to other lethal ends. One stone, the poet notes, has been replaced "with an ordinary gray basalt rock, / as if history were simply a matter / of what is removed, revised, held back . . ." A note on the poem refers to Pius XII's implication with the Nazis in the fate of Italy's Jews. The end of the poem achieves that kind of lifting chord that Hecht, too, could strike:

> but you cannot step on their graves, which are in the air,
> and the beam in your eye, you cannot lift it so.
> Without walking, how will you get from here to there?
>
> And the more you walk on them, the brighter they glow.

If I'm reading correctly, a nostalgia for faith runs throughout these poems. In "Pentecost," a moment of unity is recalled wistfully as it is remembered from the visitation, described in Acts, of the Holy Spirit upon a gathering of Christ's followers shortly after his death: "We were pricked to the heart / and had all things in common, // at least it felt that way for a while." But also, there is an everpresent yearning for that absent father, dreamed of in "A Return," standing at the doorway of a final house:

> Father, when shall I join you in that kingdom,
> as you stand in front of a door
> closed on so much empty air?
> And how shall I know it is home?

As with the poetry of Anthony Hecht, the poetry of Karl Kirchwey can startle you with emotional rawness amid its formal virtuosity.

Another poet who is reminiscent of Anthony Hecht, though in a different way from Kirchwey, is David Yezzi. He is of a younger generation than the poets I have covered so far, but as with many of the best poets in his generation, he is comfortable with traditional form. For

Yezzi the contemporary is always the adequate milieu. However, it is not clear to me how the title of his new book[5] is meant to evoke Ovid and his exile on the Black Sea. In the section titled "Black Sea," some location like the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland appears to be the place of exile. I'm not sure. It seems to me that the title may also suggest any sinister body of water, a black mood, an unsettling dark period of despair. And yet, unlike Hecht, Yezzi has never seemed to be a brooder in his poems. His tendency toward the satiric and self-ironic gives a lift even to the darkest of them, and this is more reminiscent of Hecht's contemporary Howard Nemerov. Also, when Yezzi does write an elegy, his penchant for the epigrammatic serves as an antidote to gravity. "Dying the Day Prince Died" is a good example. It begins with the title and continues:

> is the opposite of being born
> on the same day as, say, Marie Curie or Bach
> or even Prince, for that matter, or the artist
> formerly known as *The Artist Formerly Known*
> *as Prince*. Now, just Prince, as he will
> forever be known. Too bad I never met him.
> You, I met.

But as the poet reminds the deceased, "you never remembered my ever meeting you." As a kind of revenge, the elegy turns out to be for the rock star, not for the dead acquaintance, and it is a very good one. Another oblique way into elegy is taken by "The Hug," one of the best in a collection of bests, which remembers his mother (or a friend's mother—the poem is in second person so it's not altogether clear) catching a sleeve on fire at a Christmas party, until her husband, "stood amid the hoopla . . . and hugged the fire out." The husband and father has been gone "now for eleven Christmases," but clearly the remembered accident is an occasion for remembering him: "the clear-eyed man / who could tell in a flash the difference / between the lively / and the very life."

That wonderful contention between the playful and the earnest, the lively and the life, runs through the collection and brings to mind another great lover of classical poetry, Robert Frost, for whom work was play for mortal stakes. Satire is a Yezzi forte. "The Faculty Abroad," a ballade, is a mordant spoof of academics who vacation in Europe and share their adventures on social media. And the canzone "The Consolations" considers the modern isolation of despair consoled by TV soap operas and game shows: "The take-home consolation is a set / of matching steak knives . . ." Many of Yezzi's poems have an edge, though it is sheathed in those like "Living Room" and "Low Pressure," which are about fatherhood. If Ovid's exile is relevant here, then it inflects a vein of anxiety about how we will be remembered, how we may

[5] BLACK SEA, by *David Yezzi*. Carnegie Mellon University Press. $15.95p.

sound to a future which itself will wonder how it will be remembered. As the poem "Truepenny" implies, you may hear your life as a "Tin Pan Alley song // that starts out wistful, but then / you're dancing down the street in the rain, / insanely joyful, without the least surprise, / when, suddenly, you realize // there's music pooling in the drains." And that is when you hear yourself as a "voice still going on inside, / a ghost crooning to one who's died."

A sense of buoyancy pervades the new poems of Aimee Nezhukumatathil,[6] the youngest of these poets, and though there are blue depths, those are of the sky. I don't know when I have read a new book of poetry so given to happiness. She shares a generous knowledge of the world's flora and fauna, particularly the world of the sea. The tone with which she shares it is expressed in the opening of "Invitation": "Come in, come in—the water's fine!" The poems by no means express simple-minded uplift, but if anything, they have the exhilaration of Whitman: "Let's listen / how this planet hums with so much wing, fur, and fin." How does a poet like this come to be? There are poems of deracination and the otherness imposed by white majority society. In "When I Am Six," the poet recognizes that her mother's airmail letters from her grandfather, from overseas, are a source of pain. In "On Listening to Your Teacher Take Attendance," there is the embarrassment of a man who may mean well but who "butchers your name like // he has a bloody sausage casing stuck / between his teeth, handprints // on his white, sloppy apron." Yet there are many more moments of gratitude, as in "Mr. Cass and the Crustaceans," about a wonderful science teacher who gives each of the children in his Arizona elementary school a crawfish and allows the poet to come early to class to check on hers: "I hate to admit / how much this meant to me, the only brown girl / in the classroom." And in "My South," though she is new to the region, she's grateful when in a coffee shop "a handsome brown man slides me a scoop / of vanilla ice cream with my coffee // and even on my first day, never asked / if I'm from around here or just visiting."

Many of her poems celebrate bonds of belonging, especially the bonds of marriage, motherhood, and family. At times they are odd and witty, as in "When I'm Away from You, I Feel like the Second-Place Winner in a Bee-Wearing Contest," which calls her husband "my one faithful and true buzz." At other times they reflect the enduring tenderness of a long marriage. "Flowers at the Taj Mahal" ends:

> After two
> houses, four states, a new car,
> and two sons pulled from me—
> how could I love another
> mountain, monsoon, another
> man? How could I love
> a mausoleum I never met.

[6] OCEANIC, by *Aimee Nezhukumatathil.* Copper Canyon Press. $17.00p.

Just to be clear, there is also a sense among these poems that while the poet is enjoying her happiness, "on the other side of this planet," twelve-year-old girls are being abused as prostitutes ("Two Moths"), and closer to home, in "Meals of Grief and Happiness," separation may be inevitable: "I believe in wanting to wear only / dust, hear only dust, taste only dust. / I believe in wanting to touch nothing / and wanting nothing to touch you." But I would say that love and happiness inspire her to her most imaginative, and for some reason, as with David Yezzi, the Artist Formerly Known as Prince is a muse. An apparent homage to the deceased rock star, "Starfish and Coffee," begins, "Prince knows the sexiest meal of the day is breakfast—" and goes on, "And that's how you feel after tumbling / like sea stars on the ocean floor over each other." I have never encountered a more erotic starfish in a poem, with its "three hearts so full, so hungry, so purple." The poems of *Oceanic*, sensuous, earthy, marine, and lush, remind us that there is a time for elegy, and a time to defer the elegiac for the sake of life.