

## THREE POETS RIDE INTO LANGUAGE CITY

*Absentee Indian*. Kimberly Blaeser. Michigan State University Press, 2002. *Breaking News*. Ciaran Carson. Wake Forest University Press, 2003. *Macbeth in Venice*. William Logan. Penguin Books, 2003.

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These three books, *Macbeth in Venice*, *Breaking News*, and *Absentee Indian*, share no school or style. They all happen to be written in English at the turn of the millennium, but other than that, they are as disparate in form and voice as one might wish. They all, however, share a need to describe, or reveal, a complex negotiation of self and place. The poets respond with three very different strategies to describe their place (and displacement) in the world.

This negotiation of place and language is most evident in Kimberly Blaeser's second collection, *Absentee Indian*. Blaeser uses an elegiac tone to conjure a sense of the world that is as much American Indian as it is absent. She writes as though half-suspicious of the possibilities promised by English, the false trails and prevarications concealed under the veneer of American usage. This is writing that remains cognizant of the continued colonization of the continent by other means.

... Twin dreams with only a door between them.  
One spun of longing of need  
for old voices to speak on and on  
to ferry me across time on their currents.  
Fearing your life song will fall silent  
and with it the pendulum of meaning.  
("Kitchen Voices")

Perhaps as a strategy to circumvent the evasions of English, the poet has attuned her ear as much to the rhythms of nature as language. These are poems of landscape; place and creature precisely observed:

small brindled calf  
muzzle open in panic  
bleating my presence...  
("Of Landscape and Narrative")

She is also alert to the impress of the world on the human, its quick appearance in the quotidian. This is poetry that points to those moments that linger stubbornly outside the sometimes acquisitive power of language.

...each moment  
 on the verge of transformation.  
 We are something else.  
 We are more truly ourselves.  
 And with the brush of night  
 we are all of one darkness.  
 (“Lines from an Autumn Liturgy”)

In “Students of Scat” she parses the territorial delineations of animals—what those with too much time on their hands call “non-verbal signification”—open to those who have the eyes to see:

Tracing each pattern.  
 Finding where badger burrows,  
 or raccoon fishes.  
 Who climbs the apple tree  
 and who’s eating who.  
 (“Students of Scat”)

Surely this is a sensitivity that should not be left to the weekend hunters, or poetry critics. Ms. Blaeser is fond of the 5-7-5 tercet and the concision the form enforces. She picks her way along warily, exercising a careful diction that carries us with her into this poet’s particular sense of place. There is respect here for language, or what language can do. Poems such as “Recite the Names of All the Suicided Indians” have the power to remind us of the power to re-member the world, the power to name the world:

...we gather here  
 in his house,  
 until someone’s ghost  
 begins to sing  
 and this year  
 finally  
 we learn to join in.  
 (“Recite the Names of All the Suicided Indians”)

The poems are most successful when she conjures rather than describes the voice and the music she hears. In the poem “Are you sure Hank...” she recalls how Native Americans, in singing ‘country-western’ songs simultaneously identify with and subvert Hank Williams’ ‘country.’ I’m not sure W.C.

Williams did it this way either, but this is vital work and needs to be heard.

Last lonely laments  
 criss-crossing voices  
 camping out on the edge of everything known.  
 Nowadays quests.  
 Songs  
 surfacing around us like faces.  
 (“Are you sure Hank did it this way?”)

Ciaran Carson, a poet from Northern Ireland, performs a similar feat of remembrance and subversion in his collection, *Breaking News*. He manages to invoke the places and people obscured by the blank common names of life in English. This is the sort of work that questions one’s assumptions about the intentions of language. For example, Carson points out and writes about the fact that many of the streets in Irish Belfast bear the names of English Imperial history. In the poem titled “Exile” the poet walks the nighttime streets of his city:

...Inkerman  
 Odessa  
  
 Balkan  
 Lucknow  
  
 Belfast  
 is many  
  
 places then  
 as now  
  
 all lie  
 in ruins.  
 (“Exile”)

Carson describes a life of exile in his hometown, an experience eerily similar to the Native Americans singing Hank Williams’s songs.

The places of past war are alive in Belfast’s car bombs and the thumping rhythm of army helicopters hovering overhead. The poem “Skip” is written, we are told, in a police notebook gleaned from the wreckage of a bombsite.

Carson uses the juxtaposition of events across centuries to collapse the distance between Imperial England’s ambitions and violence and its present-day legacy in modern Belfast. The vertigo of recognition is as close as

the daily headlines as the extended rancor of Northern Ireland becomes the modern condition of urban life from South-Central L.A. to Belfast to Baghdad. The poet performs this trick of summoning the past to bear witness to the violent present throughout the book. The sources Carson uses—from Belfast street names to the forgotten Crimean War journalism of William Howard Russell—are at once close at hand and haunting. This slim volume (which draws so heavily on history) may prove prescient of the future of urban life—as jotted down in a police notebook nicked from a bombed precinct house.

Carson pays homage to the American poet William Carlos Williams, translating Williams' poem "The Forgotten City" into a peculiarly Irish take on the city. Williams' 1930s poem of an unexpected detour through an exotic suburb records the American poet's surprise at the then-new phenomenon of suburban sprawl. Again, the play of juxtaposition between past and present enlivens the poem. Williams detours from his usual route home because of a storm; Carson cycles into his unexpected suburb because of a military roadblock. Both poets express wonder at the calm lives they discover slightly off the beaten path, but Carson's encounter has an ethical urgency that Williams' poem doesn't. They both circle around the unexpected meeting with that thoughtless mode of life (or appearance of life) that they encounter, but Carson's situation begs the question: "how can this veneer of consumer society percolate along just over the hill from Lucknow?"

It's not accidental that Carson would settle on the American Williams for his template. The automobile has crushed American urban life and is doing similar work now abroad as well. Williams could well be the world's premier drive-by poet.

It's intriguing that the American poet William Logan's book is set in the city most off-limits to the automobile. The title of Logan's book *Macbeth in Venice* suggests one of those high-concept notions that the film producers Merchant Ivory would come up with. The title alone would sell the ticket: Shakespeare adrift in that romantic place where the people are so quaint they haven't got a Fiat, much less an SUV.

Logan's book starts off well with an evocation of J.M.W. Turner's painting "The Fighting Temeraire." The poem gives us Turner's moody painting of 1838 of the wooden hulk of the old sail-powered warship towed to its salvage yard. This elegiac image of the sunset of the age of sail, seems to acknowledge the tawdry future of the new industrial age as England settled down to ruling an Empire. Turner's painting suggests that Empire may not be as interesting as what came before—surely an appropriate opening chord in any American poet's book published in 2003.

...the battered warship  
 hung with dawn lights like a chestfull of medals,  
 the barren canvas of the Thames, empty out of respect,  
 the steam tug beetling to the breaker's yard.

The sun lay on the horizon like a vegetable.  
 ("The Ship")

The theme of Venice (another of Turner's subjects) is the constant through the four sections of Logan's book. The first section, titled "The Shorter Aeneid" envisions Venice as an underworld; "Each choked canal a circle of the dead." The five-poem sequence "The Other World" is the most successful of Logan's work here.

You cannot see the starving corpses stand  
 up to their necks amid the pea-green sewage,  
 their toes like snails upon the leathery slime.

Tourists are rowed among them as if blind.  
 The six-toed cats can see, see the old doge  
 hauled on his barge, his gilded trumpets roaring,

the painted sailcloths taut against the breeze,  
 his sails the flayed skins of his enemies.  
 ("VI. The Other World")

This is rich, allusive work. One is tempted to say self-reflective. The section is full of evocative, bittersweet moments of a world passing away. It's a modern visit to the underworld where the seeker is turned away, empty-handed:

The two ghosts you have asked for cannot speak.  
 The woman turns her face away and laughs.  
 ("VIII. The Other World")

Eurydice refuses the summons. Kore doesn't stir from her place. The poet's jaundiced eye turned on the scene produces an anti-tourist's guide that is, by turns, bitter and funny. This isn't satire; one doesn't have the impression that the poet expects to affect any change in the public sphere because of a poem. Logan rounds off this section with a product placement to "...the temple of American Express, / where each lost soul redeems his ancient pledge." With that the poet's "stooped guide" disappears and I'm afraid he's sorely missed through the remainder of the book.

The rest of the collection plays with various exotic and touristic themes that were sung better in Logan's last book, *Night Battle*. That book took us to Byzantium and perhaps the remoteness of that city (and its language) allowed the poet more room to create than here. The second section of *Macbeth in Venice* is devoted to the clown figure Punchinello. It's very droll. At best it may be read as a lugubrious pilgrim's progress through Venice. The final, title sequence plays upon the conceit of a discovered manuscript of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, commissioned by James I as a present for the Doge. This rewrite of Shakespeare suggests the fascinating addition of a daughter to *Macbeth's* family, but then has her commit suicide before things get out of hand.

It's Logan's elegiac play with Venice that interests us here and as his poem "Leaving Venice" points out, in this time of global warming, Venice is leaving us.

...and the oily tides will drown  
 even the sins of history  
 when Venice in its evening gowns  
 surrenders to the sea.  
 ("Leaving Venice")

In comparison to the other two poets considered in this review, Logan has no apparent disagreement with his language, or the baggage of history encoded in that language. If a language is a city, here is a poet who's comfortably installed in a penthouse—or the Doge's palace. Yet, surprisingly, here he's chosen to write about Venice—a city facing the deluge. This is a book that evidences as much insecurity about language, albeit from a very different perspective, as the poets Blaeser and Carson.