

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Genre Bending

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In *Bright Felon: Autobiography and Cities* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan U Press, 2009, 110 pp, \$22.95 cloth), **Kazim Ali** offers an image of writing “not in a book but in loose pages or cards. Not to disassemble but to assemble oneself into oneself.” Assembling and reassembling is an ongoing impulse in all of Ali’s published work, from *The Far Mosque* to the recently issued *Fasting for Ramadan*. One manifestation of this is the poet’s resistance to traditional forms of coherence in narrative, point of view, and syntax. Another, closely related, is his restlessness with received genres, as if to conform to genre (generic) expectations were itself a form of dissembling.

Ali’s work keeps shape-shifting as it assembles itself from silence. “I came to New York to write poetry though unable to speak,” he writes in *Bright Felon*, and if we track the body of his work chronologically we can see a writer (re)learning to lay down first isolated words and phrases, and finally sentences that stand on their own. These are units of integrity for the writer, the “lonely threads” he floats out over silence. They indicate by indirection the journey he is making toward a home in ontological uncertainty, all the while shuffling locales, verb tenses, and pronouns (“Any pronoun here can be misread”).

The felony implied by the book’s title is the poet’s self-silencing, an outgrowth of family history, cultural practice, sexual identity, and the poet’s own temperament. Writing in the third person, Ali notes that he “dared himself into the future to find himself, to say what he wanted, say who he loved.” “Who he loved” is a man much like himself, and *Bright Felon* could be read on one level as an autobiographical tell-all whose plot is: Son of culturally conservative East Indian American family discovers he is gay, can’t tell his parents, as a result can’t commit himself in a relationship. He wanders the world, returns home, and succumbs to anorexia until the will to live asserts itself.

Ali deflects us, and himself, from this reductive reading, self-deprecatingly speaking of his manuscript at one point as a “little canvas,” with “a little autobiography littered on the surface.” Indeed, he deflects us from any pigeonholing of *Bright Felon* into genre categories, interspersing in the loose cloth he is weaving threads of politically infused travel sketches, spiritual odyssey (“All of us here are really citizens of wind traveling without papers”), and meditations on the writing practice:

Anaïs became my hero because her novels and diary were the same way.

Because you could not tell what was fiction and what was autobiography, what was poetry and what was prose.

To be in love like that.

One of the book's tutelaries is that master of passionate fragments, Emily Dickinson:

Judy was also the first to teach me about Emily Dickinson, that her books had been broken apart, that her poems even in their "authentic" versions had been relineated.

So everything I knew had actually come through decades of editing and authorizing.

So it was possible after all for a suppressed voice, a redirected voice, a suffocated or strangled one, to still speak.

Given his preoccupation with suppressed voices, it's apt that Ali keeps returning to the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, a foundational narrative of Islam as well as Judaism and Christianity, though in the Islamic tradition Avram (Abraham) calls Ismail (Ishmael) rather than Isaac to sacrifice. Ali sees himself not as the son "who cried out . . . against his father," but as "the obedient one. The one who said, 'You asked me to lie down and I lay down.'" He reads himself also into the infant Ismail, abandoned by a desperate Hajira (Hagar) in the desert. In *Fasting for Ramadan* Ali revisits the story: an angry Ismail hammers on the ground with his heels, a spring bursts forth, and he drinks. (I'm irreverently reminded of May Swenson's marvelous "Fable for When There's No Way Out.")

He reads himself into the Hajira figure as well, the mother who bolts, crazed, in search of water, from the scene of her son's dying. This he praises as her refusal to believe in her abandonment by her god. A similar refusal sustains the dream of coming home to the parents' circle of love and faith that brackets *Bright Felon*. The book opens with the Islamic tenet that "paradise lies beneath the feet of your mother." Toward the conclusion Ali invokes the "dear mother in the sky" who "could unbuckle the book and erase all the annotations," the *hadith* that guide behavior in Islam, but his father has already framed the choice for him: "Are you a Muslim or will you love."

The poet's response comes in the volume's last lines: "I will not choose. / Fathered by sound I am. / Kind mother your kin." He claims a tenuous kinship with language, through which he seeds himself—fathered by sound, I *am*—and acquires the qualities of the nurturing mother. The pleasure of reading *Bright Felon* derives in large part from its invitation to us to give ourselves over to the music of language as well.

Though it differs in voice and occasion, we might profitably read ***Fasting for Ramadan: Notes from a Spiritual Practice*** (North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2011, 208 pp, \$19.95 paper, \$29.95 hardcover) as a sequel to *Bright Felon*. The starvation artist of the earlier volume here disciplines his body to a spiritual and political purpose: "The point of the fast is not to flagellate yourself to nothing, but to sharpen your attention, to diminish your worldly attention and distractions so you can better perceive what is actually around you." *Fasting* comprises two autobiographical accounts of month-long, sunrise-to-sundown fasts, a practice Ali began as a child in the company of his mother, the two of them being the only ones in the household who sustained the tradition ("Fasting was a secret between my mother and me. / We held hands invisibly throughout the day"). The first account, "New Moon in the Western Sky," constitutes a month's worth of blog entries that he terms "Ramadan essays"; the second, "Absence of Stars: A Fasting Notebook," is a set of journal entries written through the course of a Ramadan fast a few years earlier with no thought to publication. We thus encounter the later writing first—and travel back in time within the two accounts as well. Ali describes the blog essays as "the mind's reaching out, with the intention of external communication," the journal entries as "grounded in the body and the body's experience, which was internal, a practice of reflection." The former read for the most part like casually composed prose; with the latter, we enter more meditative territory. As quotidian details fall away, the beloved enters, no longer unseen or unspeakable. The ubiquitous pronoun is *you*—as in Rumi, ambiguously lover, God, or self—and paradox is the dominant trope. The effect is of entering a private space apart from the din of public exposure to hear one's thoughts. But the motive impulse of both pieces is, Ali tells us, to move between mind and body, reflection and expression.

The mix of quotidian detail and the extraordinarily rich vocabulary Ali has cultivated through the discipline of inwardness for raising subverbal impression to the level of speech locates the reader both

in- and outside of the fasts. We encounter observations on Islamic texts and practices alongside breakfast menus (oatmeal with pear chunks, soy milk, and rice powder), etymological musings (the name Ali means “restraint”), accounts of yoga practice (from the Sanskrit *yoke*, *yolk*, we discover), lines from Dickinson, Rumi, the Indigo Girls, and the Bhagavad Gita, ruminations on hunger, and scenes from *The Matrix*. All of these serve as spiritual sources, as does the love of his parents the poet is rediscovering, as does the mystery of the relationship between body and spirit: “And what if a human is not a separate entity after all but a microcosmic amalgamation of universal energy? // Tell me the difference between entity and eternity.”

If fasting for Ali is a spiritual practice that heightens attention, keeping the Ramadan journals becomes a parallel practice through which attention tunes creation. On the fifteenth day of the earlier fast, he gives this account of a reading:

When I was asked questions—about the difference between poetry and prose, my love of music, the role of sound in poetry, I seemed to answer not personally, not about myself, but broadly, even politically.

Aftermath of exposure is cloak.

Also for the first time ever I read from my autobiography of sentences.

The lonely threads that enabled me to speak, because I would speak in sentences not paragraphs.

Literally without consequence.

From the threads a picture emerged; I found I had to explain nothing.

Pure speech bracketed by time, and by writing all this down I lived.

We might call this practice the discipline of undiscipline. Within the structure of daily writing, writing frees itself of expectations, unconditions responses. Language grows comfortable with silence, from which renewed language can emerge.

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Brian Teare's work, much like Kazim Ali's, burrows down into a prelapsarian state of being to transform trauma that has attached itself to speech. "Circa," the first poem in his first full-length collection, ***The Room Where I Was Born*** (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 2003, 112 pp, \$14.95 paper) returns to words before they

had grown adult,
 meaning like bones still soft

and accommodating, and the shape behind me not yet *house*,
 though soon enough it'd be

a noun as solid as a contract, as if two men shook over the good dirt
 of its name and one of them

built the thought inside it. Intrinsic as salt, aspirate—\h\—
 so soft in mother's mouth

it laid a body down dreaming and rose up around that boy:
house: a noun but with arms

inside. . . .

Pleasure (Boise, ID: Ahsahta P, 2010, 88 pp, \$17.50 paper), Teare's second book in terms of composition though released just this spring, opens with the Hopkins-influenced "Dead House Sonnet." Again we encounter, this time with a subjectless speaker, the house made of language, whose doors and latches "endlessly open" and shut to echoes of Gertrude Stein, whose history the poet strips, dismantles, and reconstitutes, but cannot silence:

gave to stain
 structure, made gone what touched him, stripped paint, grain of
 floor, made gauged the gouge of form, form the firmament fallen,
 made whiteness a wall, made framed the fallen lavish tragedian
 shadow where a picture hung, made what's left a nail, nib, of
 shadow, made it mine tongue unto nothing, made it quite, it query,
 quietude's quill, that silence : writing : then sirens

Though trauma fuels the need to write, language bears the wound. The "old forms" are not just rigidities of doctrine or cultural bromides within which cruelties shelter, but literary forms as well. For a poet such as Teare whose work is in passionate dialogue with the history of poetry and ideas, literary genre would seem to offer "a boundary

between death and life, / a line to control, a repetition, a ritual / I could shape in safety. . . . / I'd make the couplet / marry my thinking to centuries." But "received generic gestures" prove unequal to the task. Nonetheless, as Hopkins renewed the sonnet by stretching the definition of foot and line, so Teare redeems the lyric by interrogating it.

The deeply moving poems in *Pleasure* eulogize the lover Teare lost to AIDS in 1989 while they engage in—to quote the author in "An Extended Bio" (Ahsakta website)—"a dialectic between autobiography and the languaged page." In their search to stay grief, they confront, parse, rail against, and indict death and dying as framed by a particular juncture in contemporary American history. The rub of lyric form against the cruel indignities of the lover's dying generates a volatile verbal energy that has for me no contemporary equal. Teare writes of growing up with the prosody of the King James Bible and a Southern speech that "gave the vowel pride of place." Hopkins, among others, has added muscle to his consonants. His words proliferate, self-aware, material in their sensuality, encountered, like Stein's, on the cusp between sound and meaning.

The poems in the first of the two sections of *Pleasure* address the lover directly. Their project is to construct out of language the lost Eden where the two can be together. "Fuck the real," the poet says. His "lyric . . . courts the senses." It "places the rose / . . . among / the flowers in paradise." But the act of naming is "the beginning of systems," every word "a vehicle for annihilation," as much for the poet as for the medical personnel who reduce the existence of the lovers to positive and negative HIV/AIDS test results. In a culture dominated by a scientific worldview, the poems argue, the lyric can survive only by challenging its own nature as "a conceptual / system whose codes / and complications deny nature, / subject it to force, and shatter it." Within this turbulence, and fleetingly, the lyric voice might "mak[e] it beautiful, the tracheotomy's puckered / flesh a flower."

Through this territory the Eden poems move with formal dexterity from couplets to staggered stanza forms to fragmented texts. One virtuosic example is "Eden Tiresias," grounded in the Gnostic vision of "Thunder: Perfect Mind" from James Robinson's *The Nag Hammadi Library*. The poem tracks the process as Wisdom enters Eden in the form of the sibilant snake, luring the poet to exchange apocalyptic (derived from the Latin for "uncover, disclose") chaos energy for "a mind / to hew with wounds" until intellect became "its own elegy."

I loved it all.

What a heart muscle this poem has! Whoever can make their way to the final “and the bee gives suck to the book : *Ave Incunabulum*, love’s // first work : *Ave*, // *In Memoriam*—” without weeping has a tougher heart than I.

The second half of *Pleasure* constitutes a “coming to” from the intimate indwelling with grief. Three poems in this section, all titled “Californian,” return the poet to a real world place and moment: California in drought, dust coating everything, “feral / cats interring piss into nasturtiums,” the hills on fire. The backroom dealings of power company executives have resulted in rolling blackouts. The world’s body, too, is in extremis. “To Other Light,” the central poem in the section, first published in the Winter 2005/2006 issue of the *BPJ*, finds the poet working in a bookstore. From its dim ambience, surrounded by the weight of literary and philosophical tradition, the poet sees the world outside “as if upon a screen . . . / a quotation.” In what Teare describes as “the phenomenological, God-haunted afterworld of grief—and reading” he comes not to “the enigma of mourning” but “finally to suffer a clarity in language sufficient // to pain.” Six of the poem’s twelve sections emerge as if from the mind of texts he has been reading: Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*, *The Lives of the Saints*, Hans Jonas’s *The Gnostic Religion*, *The Nag Ham-madi Library*, Maurice Blanchot’s *Writing the Disaster*, Buber’s *I and Thou*. Though intertextual, their form and language are spare; the linguistic friction that resistance generated in the Eden poems gives way to quieter expression, as here in a section responding to *I and Thou*:

Sensation of time passing
without him : moth wings’ gray powder
on the fingers, regret

the understudy of capture, its dun
brief stain . . .

The poem concludes with the speaker listening as someone, perhaps a customer, narrates a vision of people flickering out one by one on a subway train. Meanwhile, beyond the bookstore window, “the spectacular disaster / of the actual” awaits.

In ***Sight Map*** (Berkeley, CA: U California P, 2009, 96 pp, \$16.95 paper, \$45 hardcover, \$14 Adobe PDF e-book), most of which was written after the poems in *Pleasure*, the poet’s search turns from the

lost lover to an ineffable God. He takes to the road equipped with guidebooks and the writings of transcendental philosophers. The landscape is not the mythical garden but America, albeit one informed by literary heritage as much as by the senses. Three of the book's four sections are identified by latitude and longitude coordinates corresponding to Pennsylvania's Susquehanna Valley; Goshen, New Hampshire; and Oakland, California. The other section, "Pilgrim," a single poem first published in 2004 as a beautiful limited-edition letterpress chapbook by palOmine press, serves well as a name for the seeker we track through *Sight Map's* pages, both because he is taking leave of a stern childhood god and because his journey is in search of transcendence.

In the course of his travels, he encounters the god of rhetoric, self-created in the image of his earthly father "when I don't // know to love / language other // than to run / a larceny // all machine and god- / likeness, gear // and hinge, pocket / watch, tie- // pin, money clip and wing / tip." How economically that little run of words creates a world of artifice and calculation. And then the poet reflects, disarmingly, "It isn't // mastery I'm after. / It's certain // other terms / than my own // I wait for," as in "To Other Light" equating the poet with the listener.

In the New Hampshire section of *Sight Map*, God appears to have taken up residence in the fields and woods. "Morphology," a delicious poem for me as woods dweller, draws on Boughton Cobb's *Field Guide to the Ferns*. Its taxonomy offers "an organic syntax"; the lover has become earth's body. In "The Word from His Mouth, It Is Perfect," based on the Gnostic myth that "the speech of God . . . formed matter," the poet asks, "what remains remembered in flesh" of what "God spoke to matter // during creation . . . // is it longing / is the birch its shape." In "Long after Hopkins," a prayer of sorts, "The field kneels / under white pines," a posture that elsewhere in Teare's oeuvre is emblematic of sexual gratification of a lover. The poet longs, as is evident from the pun in the title, to know "what principle / animates the natural," but what is knowable is only what is visible, and what is visible turns into nouns ("Twenty dandelions gone to seed; / tent worms slung in the articulated / tree") we set in generic syntax and use as "scaffolds to hold up scenery."

A key means of genre bending in all of Teare's work, as in Kazim Ali's, is deconstructing the impositions of syntax. He uses punctuation,

spacing, and counterpointed line breaks to generate syntactic ambiguities that encompass contradictions (“Your mind rid of / nothing is the one thing / you love”) and enrich the possibilities for apprehension. The poems like “Eden Tiresias” in which he lays out sections then weaves them together are the most conspicuous examples of the use of these strategies. In *Sight Map*, he gives us two more of these poems, “To Be Two” and the extraordinary “Sanctuary, Its Root *Sanctus*.” That poem is set at Lake Merritt, a bird sanctuary and a sanctuary for the poet, who walks by the lake to sort out his thoughts. The sun is glaring, the water making ticking sounds against a containing wall as he replays scenes from a love affair that has ended and considers the relationship between praying and fucking, all the while observing other people and resisting turning the physical reality of the lake into a metaphor as his writer’s mind works to compose the scene. These elements combine and recombine, repeated phrases morphing as they roll over each other like wavelets (ouch, the lake as metaphor) in patterns too complex to track. Formally distinct sections seem to conclude (“the impossibility of emptiness : being”), only to have their syntax extended by the first line of the next section (“fucked is a version of prayer”). All the concerns of Teare’s poetry converge in this reenacted moment, language moving (“The lake water ends / with an *ĩ* in it, slip lipping to lip”) and mind keeping up with it, mind moving (“I desire // something / neither received nor seen”) and perception following on its heels. The pleasure is in the unpredictable recurrence, in the “*language entirely wakeful.*”

The formal inventiveness integral to both Brian Teare’s and Kazim Ali’s work is inseparable from this wakefulness, their impulse to true themselves continually to a self made of memory and perception in a world of changing circumstance. Ali might describe this process as an emptying; Teare, as a delving into “chaos’ energy.” In either case, the quality of attention this requires of them defines for me the integrity of their oeuvre. “It isn’t // mastery I’m after. / It’s certain // other terms / than my own // I wait for.” I take a moment here to express my gratitude and wish more poets engaged with poetry on these terms.