BOOKS IN BRIEF: Shadowed in Sunstruck Fields

Melissa Crowe

Vievee Francis, ***Forest Primeval*** (Evanston, IL: TriQuarterly Books, 2015. 92 pp. $16.95 paper)
J. Scott Brownlee, ***Requiem for Used Ignition Cap*** (Asheville, NC: Orison Books, 2015. 76 pp. $16 paper)

We're travelers. Few of us stay for life where we were born and raised. We escape, or we're exiled; we seek love or work or adventure. Writers may seem particularly suited to relocation, to traveling light—slip pen and notebook into ditty bag and disembark, wake up new in a new place. But the notion of truly leaving home is a fantasy; in truth, transplants must always reckon with two places at once, the point of departure and the point of arrival. No matter how vivid the new location, home clamors for attention and, for some writers, demands its place on the page.

Texas-born poets Vievee Francis and J. Scott Brownlee contend powerfully with these demands in their new collections. In Francis's *Forest Primeval*, the wild beauty of her new home transports her psychically and involuntarily to the place of her birth, and once there she grapples boldly with difficult emotional terrain. In *Requiem for Used Ignition Cap*, Brownlee seeks reentry into the home he left behind, deliberately inhabiting its natural and social geography in order to know it and himself more fully. Both books test the boundaries between self and world, revealing how the culture and landscape of a place shape and complicate a life.

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The poet's relationship to place in *Forest Primeval* is characterized by ambivalence. From her East Texas birthplace to Detroit to her new home in Western North Carolina, Vievee Francis moves through rich, vivid landscapes and is often seized by their complex beauty even as she resists it. We learn quickly that however much she may wish to maintain a firm boundary between herself and the world, she can't always control what she takes in.

In the poem that opens the book, Francis writes, "Don't you see? I am shedding my skins. I am a paper hive, a wolf spider, / the creeping ivy, the ache of a birch, a heifer, a doe." Almost against

her will, she connects so fully to the wildness of this new wood that it returns her to her own nature, what she calls her "nocturne." Her current surroundings, the Blue Ridge Mountains, act as proxy for the raw and wounding beauty of her homeland, recalling the "landscape under [her] breasts / topography of pines, clay bottomland, roofs / of tin" ("Salt"). She writes, "I have fallen from my dream / of progress," suggesting that however far she traveled from her origins, however many years she spent in urban or urbane locales, the "blinding / beauty of green" ("Another Antipastoral") transports her to the primordial and primal place—home.

Returning to the South, a region Patricia Smith has said some elders consider "a shameful and oppressive place that's best forgotten," might constitute a risk for an African American writer. In this book, Francis's psychic return to her Texas past may be unbidden, but once there, she plunges with courage into difficult territory, turning up both terror and treasure. In "Skinned," we glimpse the internalized racism and sexism her grandmother endured. Francis writes, "She had been skinned herself (so to speak) / in that her skin was so often examined and found wanting," and the speaker reveals that as a child she tried to burn off her own skin to "find the pink [she] was convinced lay beneath." Along with this legacy of shame, the speaker inherits a crucial tenderness toward self and loved one:

> She'd stroke my cheek and say "good baby,"
> and I'd feel good in my skin,
>   in that moment.
> I'd hold her tight and whisper, "You are the prettiest,"
> and she'd feel good, in hers. I want to forget, but I have my mirrors.
> And there she is, shadowed, in a sunstruck field.

We may try to leave behind the fields of the past, but we won't be able to, these poems suggest, and we won't have the comfort of selective recollection. In "Lightnin' over Fir," Francis writes, "No way to get away. / That's how memory comes, like an incubus / over you." Here the past is figured as a predator of supernatural strength, one that arrives in the night and enters with or without permission. It's worth mentioning that Francis sometimes grants that permission in *Forest Primeval*; after all, the poet can't be a constant resister and must plumb painful memories to make art.

In "Nightjar," a dark ars poetica, she writes:

> Not wanting to frighten it I did not reach, though
> I wanted to. It remained just inches away. Reluctant incubus.
> Crepuscular darling. How could I fear it? So urgent—
> my muscles relaxed as I concentrated
> all of my attention on the intruder—so hesitant.
> I mouthed, *Lower*. I lay still as an invitation.

Neither the poet nor the person who wishes to achieve peace may avoid the challenge of a troubling past; rather, one must try to reconcile what cannot be expunged. The forest surrounds and inhabits us whether we face it or not, the wolf always at the door. "It's licking your doorknob," Francis writes. "You know it's there," its "tongue like a language // all its own / And you know it" ("Wolf").

Even when she's located firmly in her new (and chosen) home, joyfully occupying the present moment, that moment is tinged with the past. In "Husband Fair," the speaker celebrates her egalitarian marriage, one in which it feels good "to tell him 'no' when I feel like it, and 'yes' and 'maybe.'" In this relationship, she's able to be open, generous, knowing she can also refuse, married to someone so different from the man with whom her grandmother lay. That man "owned so very much and her, pinned beneath him [. . .] his face a heavy drift / over hers, her face brown as earth below, brown as my own." A gesture of gratitude for all that's changed, this poem also reminds us that the past (both personal and cultural) is with us always, its harrowing imagery under our sweetest tableaus.

This layeredness of time and place is certainly figured as burdensome in *Forest Primeval*, but the speaker's decision to carry that burden may yet yield blessings. These poems caution that reluctance to reckon with our origin stories, to truly know where we come from, keeps us disoriented, confused about who and where we are now. On the other hand, finding "the source," Francis tells us, may let her "ride the beast that haunts [her]" ("White Mountain").

In "Still Life with Dead Game," she writes, "I'm describing the body tethered between worlds." Indeed, her speakers straddle

various divides—home and away, girlhood and womanhood, fierce self-containment and tender, playful gratitude—and they seem unlikely, even unable, to fully disengage from either. Still, even if it's impossible to completely control the psychic terrain we occupy, Francis insists we have choices to make. Where, now, will we set up house? Once we find our little place in the woods, our sanctuary, who and what will we welcome in? In the end, Francis's house is poetry, and *we* are invited:

> . . . up from my wounds—
> From this goat's body—
> Up from my wood-smoke lungs, from
> The milk of me, comes a song, a melody
> To open yours, then lick them clean.
>
> ("Chimera")

If Vievee Francis finds herself involuntarily transported to her birthplace, J. Scott Brownlee returns to Llano, Texas with striking intentionality in *Requiem for Used Ignition Cap*. Home after decades away, he too inhabits a body "tethered between worlds"— Texas and New York, past and present. This book also investigates the breach between the male role he was raised to assume and the man—tender, searching, empathetic—he's become. Brownlee's poems often speak through or accompany the men of Llano as they engage in traditional rituals of manhood. They're former soldiers, their wounds "proof // of what [they've] witnessed / outside church." They're hunters who eat what they kill, laborers whose work shapes their bodies, swelling their backs and hardening their hands, and athletes "whose skull-white / collisions chorus like rifle fire" ("City Limits").

Brownlee's poems wrestle with uncertainty about whether he can consider himself part of this community. A collective "we" recurs throughout the book, but he only sometimes uses it to speak from the perspective of men; other times he speaks in the voice of wildflowers that bloom in the town's ditches, suggesting he may identify as much with local flora as with the townspeople. In "Wildflower Suite," he writes, "Blown here to bloom, we are one / and legion" and later:

We have managed to thrive

in this bleak caliche—carving out
our own lives without any regret.

If you stare at us long enough,
stranger, you may call us angels.

Through these personifications, so imaginative and empathetic, he seems bent on forfeiting the firm ego boundaries commonly associated with conventional manhood. For instance, in more than one poem he writes from the perspective not of the hunter but of the deer. In "Self-Portrait as Buck in *The Pope and Young Club Record Book,*" he writes, "Am I gutted out / now in their floodlight or has my spirit // escaped it?" and the concerns of deer and poet seem to blend. The buck laments that the hunters don't know his narrative, and again I sense the poet's own anxieties at play as he returns from an eighteen year sojourn with stories—a whole adult life—to which friends and family in Llano have not been privy. In the final lines, the poet inhabits the buck's story with striking intimacy, imagining the scent of the mate now lost to him: *"sweet corn, salt lick, sage, juniper, lavender.*"

Perhaps what I admire most about this collection is that although Brownlee's isolation and bewilderment are palpable, he declines to focus solely on his own pain. He struggles with a sense of permanent displacement, unable to linger in Brooklyn or Llano "without grief." But Brownlee endeavors in these poems to understand the impact of Llano's landscape and culture not just on his own life but on the lives of those who have stayed. The work in *Requiem for Used Ignition Cap* is personal, but its concerns move beyond self as the poet tries to heft others' heavy cargo. He presses himself, for instance, to imagine "PTS wounds after ten years at war— / the fragmented Iraq in each soldier from here" ("Riverbank Elegy"). Brownlee reckons repeatedly with the power and the limits of connection as he writes about and in the voices of boys and men who murder their mothers, commit suicide, cook meth and "cough ribbons of blood" ("The Gospel According to Addicts in Llano, Texas").

If it's hard to understand and complicated to love human beings, Brownlee finds some consolation in the natural world. This book is a love song—to the people of Llano, yes, but most simply and beautifully to its fields and trees, its birds and flowers, its white-tailed deer. These things, straightforwardly and unapologetically themselves, make sense in a way the cultural landscape never can, however hard he works to see it clearly. Brownlee's Texas is a place of Walmarts and Baptist churches, football stadiums and Dairy Queens, but it's also a place "where the river splits / light like a straight razor's edge" ("Disappearing Town"), a big-sky place of sun-bleached cow bones, cicada song, and mesquite scrub. If, as Brownlee speculates in "Catfish Heads on a Clothesline," the spirit finally "returns to its source," here—among bluebonnets, cactus, and catfish—is where he will surely wind up.

The poems in *Requiem for Used Ignition Cap* and *Forest Primeval* speak to the ambivalence we travelers feel about striking out *and* coming home, about distinguishing ourselves from those who raised us and returning in some manner to the fold. Brownlee deliberately seeks to re-inhabit his home place, and despite discomfort and alienation, finds empathy for a community that may ultimately not include him. Vievee Francis dramatizes the struggle to mediate the ways her childhood culture ambushes and inhabits her. Her poems recognize wounds as evidence of collisions with the world and as sites of potential connection with others the world has also bruised.

I'm engaged and moved and convinced by these poems: elegies and love songs lush and ferocious, tough and tender negotiations with the past and with Texas, written with both longing and trepidation from afar. A fellow traveler, always neither here nor there, I'll stand with these poets over the divide, knowing this straddling, this stretching, this brave reaching out is itself our truest nature.