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Bedlam Cowslip: The John Clare Poems by Jeanette Lynes (Hamilton, ON: Buckrider Books, 2015, 80 pp., \$18.00).

Karyotype by Kim Trainor (London ON: Brick Books, 2015, 97 pp., \$20.00).

a tree planted in summer by Ling Yu (Paris: Vif Éditions, 2015, 46 pp., US\$10.00).

“Here is a delicate and graceful hand naming the fragile materials of poetry.”



The above quote is Dionne Brand’s vivid and insightful blurb on the back of Souvankham Thammavongsa’s volume of poetry, *Small Arguments*, published in 2003. Thammavongsa’s minimalist pieces sparked off the “fragile materials of poetry” illustrate how it is that the same elements of this art can be taken up daintily or ... otherwise. I make this point to draw attention to the differences between, on the one hand, the heavy and hyper-referential style of two of the volumes reviewed here: Jeanette Lynes’ *Bedlam Cowslip* and Kim Trainor’s *Karyotype* and, on the other, the spare imagistic turns in *a tree planted in summer*, by Ling Yu. All three poets are accomplished in their own right and do not need comparisons to other poets to be appreciated. But, there are birds to be terminated here and, in a review of this length, only a few stones at hand.

The subtitle of Lynes’ *Bedlam Cowslip*, is: “The John Clare Poems.” References to the life and writings of Clare and some of his fellow romantic poets and assorted Clare scholars appear regularly in Lynes’ poems, and archaic 18th and 19th century diction — including slang — peppers many of her lines. In fact, there is a sixteen-piece bibliography



confusion is the right way to respond to something so close and yet so distant. Mixed metaphors and strings of synonyms pour out onto the page as if the speaker is surrendering to a rather helpless insouciance.

The crocuses that were stiff blue flames
are broken now, their wrung necks
laid on banks of moss. All the same.

Life furls somewhere below.
I lie with them in pearls of bone,
in dark earth that shudders faintly

without a sound.

“XXII”

Another of Kim Trainor’s centres into which her poems lean is Eastern European and Russian literary and political history (section two). Again, these are book-based and library-bred poems. But, unlike better known poems spun off of urns or paintings or symphonies, they are not paeans to high culture. Rather, they are raw responses to the suffering of dead ancestors, both the famous and the unknown.

The fourth and final section of *Karyotype*, entitled “Nothing is Lost,” is based upon the second *Book of Belongings* published by the International Committee of the Red Cross containing “2,702 photos of clothes, jewellery and other personal effects found on exhumed bodies of persons who disappeared” around Srebrenica, in eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina. Trainor responds to these photos in a series of 26, eight-line abecedarian poems. As an example:

has entered into the interior of the other person’s seeing
hat drawn over contours of hair, skin, bone threaded with vein
hat lined with felt for warmth
having small stitches
here a hand laboured
here in this earth
hundreds of artifacts worn and carried
husks

The format fits for its stark simplicity: how elseto react to a catalogue so harrowing?

The final volume under consideration is *a tree planted in summer*, by

Taiwanese poet Ling Yu, translated from the Chinese by Fiona Sze-Lorrain. These are 15 poems — the original Chinese on facing pages — taken from Ling Yu's collection, *Fields and Gardens / Five Forty-Nine P.M.* (2014), which won New Poetry Honourable Mention for the Wu Zhuoliu Literary Award (which I *did* google). These are stand-alone poems that strip the "fragile materials of poetry" to their contemplative bones. They expect very little from the reader beyond a close and intense attentiveness. Human beings are seldom a force in these poems. Instead, nature abides.

now the garden darkens slightly because
fruits enlarge gradually, leaves fleshy
and a deep green
diffuses

white —
a mysterious visitor —

.....
I like the fact that he has no scheme —

quietly he walks to the front
heard by some unheard
by others

from "Autumn · September"

The translator's introduction explains her principle of selection for this smaller volume. These are "train poems" written during Ling Wu's "frequent train rides from Ilan ... to Taipei.... Like a train, these transport us from one time-space to another, back and forth from the pastoral to the urban." Dylan wrote that it takes a lot to laugh but it takes a train to cry, and Ling Wu knows this to be true. Her irony is light but her pathos is dramatic. In "Toucheng — *Elegy for F*"

... the train passes through a tunnel
and trees blacken

and pale blue drapes brighter than cobalt blue
slowly fall off the train windows

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at that moment you hear
a clock fall off a valley
cry softly like a cicada
skim past water on the right stirring
the light slumber of Turtle Island

a conductor punches the tickets and not knowing why
he says *thank you* and *bon voyage*
the words I want to tell you

It's the *not knowing why* that best captures this poet's particular handling of her fragile materials of poetry.

Indeed, for all three of these poets, it would seem that the yearning is all. More and more of our poets abjure painting big pictures. Of course, we don't accept grand narratives from our social scientists or teleologies from our natural scientists, but it is puzzling to me how and why *not knowing why* has become the safest place for our artists to stand. Go looking for certainty and there's only Kanye, et. al. left! Of these three poets, only Ling Yu lets God in, but always with self-defeating reservations: "I know God's strength is limited," ("Tail"). (And neither would I take seriously iron age religio-fantasticals anyway.) Would that the subtleties implied in Brand's phrase "fragile materials of poetry" not preclude verdicts. Or what's a heaven for?

September"

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