

REVIEWS

Andrea Brady, *Wildfire*. San Francisco: Krupskaya Press, 2010. 80pp. \$15

It's interesting to read Andrea Brady's *Wildfire* in Beirut, where the stenciled graffiti reads "War Makes Coffins and Castles" and old relics of the civil war still stand, thirty or forty years later, like the bombed-out Holiday Inn in the otherwise rebuilt hotel district. (I've heard that inside are outlines of bodies against walls, penumbraed in soot.) "Triangulated City," reads another graffiti, meaning a city divided between Sunni, Shia, and Christian. *Wildfire* is a triangulated text: a "verse essay," a "Note on the Text" and a website re-printing passages from scholarly sources (see <http://www.krupskayabooks.com/wildfire/poem.html>). The contingencies of one's situation bear heavily on reading this kind of citational verse: the citations start to look like a kind of graffiti, and the real graffiti like quotes from an elusive textual body just over the wall.

Wildfire aspires to a wide, if not comprehensive, citation of the history of incendiary devices and metaphorical usages of fire: Heraclitan, Pentecostal, aphrodisiac. It is grounded too in current history: infamous battle zones of the Middle East, like Fallujah and Tora Bora, flash across the page. (*Wildfire* started as a response to the second Iraq invasion.) But Brady wants more than to write an antiwar or anti-imperialist screed. "I hope that *Wildfire*'s position is not ironic," she states in the "Note on the Text." She does not want to be spared from collective blame, nor does she want to wring her hands over her complicity, so part of her stratagem is to acknowledge not just the horrors of fire, but also the wonder of it. Our monkey brains love a fireworks display; our young sons love guns before they even understand what they do; to be "Promethean" is the apotheosis of heroism, because the demigod's gift of fire laid down the foundation for civilization itself. All this we can agree on, in the spirit of Robert Duncan's essay "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife," which opens with Heraclitus's adage, "War is both King of all and Father of all," and concludes, near the end:

It would be easier if our fears were not identical with our hopes, and clearer if the forces of evil—of whatever would bind us against our will—which we see men give themselves over to could be disowned. To disown them from our own character, from the decisive stamp we created as our immediate "self" in being, we are resolved, in so far as we would contribute to the good; but we cannot disown these evils from the fate of Man in which as men we share.

That is, to be human is to be in contention. All change, including change for the better, arises from various kinds of contention.

Wildfire is a work of high poetic intelligence, gorgeous and garbled by turn:

The search for a purer fire recedes
deep in the angles of history: wildfire,
a boy's own myth, its obscurity fastidious
as its composition unknown:
 concocted oil, sulphur, resin, willow
 charcoal, sale nitro, aqua vitae, and camphor
the hectic business of the living day
 bitumen, slaked lime,
collect the death certificate from the
 bones, charcoal, lithium,
and wrap and pacify the spirit in Ethiopian wool
 sodium, incense, tow,
 paste of talc, eggwhites, gum, and salamander
whose skin is our asbestos

As this passage demonstrates, Brady's microscopic focus on the exotic substances used in burial wrapping makes us forget an instinctive aversion to physical decay. Sometimes her garbledness is part of a strategy of obscurity ("fastidious" obscurity, even) for its own sake; sometimes it demands a skeleton key. The strange lines, "Of the two donors, the doctor / ceded to his poisoned fetlock, forethought / donated his liver and got life—," are hyperlinked in the web version, and lead to a backstory about Hercules inventing chemical warfare by using the Hydra's poisoned blood on the centaurs; Cheiron the centaur, who relinquished immortality to end the chronic pain in his wounded foot; and the fact that napalm damages the liver. These bits of information complement the poetry's prosody. Brady adopts a form mimetic of the speed she values thematically; the poem ignites and races across the page. It has the run-on sentences of the creative polemic and then sudden, concentrated moments of lyric combustion. Rhythmically, it flares, and dies, and smolders. Keats told us to load our rifts with ore; Brady's verse carries a maximum payload.

But the polemic aspect—the essay part of the verse essay—explained in "Note on the Text" is at odds with itself. How can Brady say right at the start that *Wildfire* "is trying to persuade us, to recognize that certain catastrophes and felicities are not inevitable" and then later claim it considers "how the fates of empires and individuals depend on accident"? And given her Heraclitan intention to show that life itself behaves like fire, and that humans have "deep affections for fire," she fails to spread the guilt evenly, giving us clichés like the "doting wife" who "burps Tupperware," or "American drains"

catching blood and piss. This reliance on cliché signals contempt for individuals complicit in a particular empire, undercutting the general skepticism that human behavior can reject its worst instincts. The poem's ambiguities, however, never entirely serve the assumptions and ideologies embedded in this broad polemic. The poem's speaker says, in the manner of Plato's description of all poets, "remember I am / on fire / cannot be trusted."

Wildfire, you could say, approaches orthodoxy in its insistence on irrationality. Any grounding, even in rationality, is irrational: "secularism is another orthodoxy we can't shake" is a line from a passage equating the Muslim woman's religious veil and the profane fashion industry (as tyrannical dress code for professionals; as dictator of women's wallets; as driver of sweatshop labor). A female suicide bomber serves as an example of radical contingency intrinsic to prosaic secular life:

Fame puts her away nowhere, in Arab mountains
she loads a rifle or weeps her eyes out or writes
to the directorate of football, and it is waiting
for death to explode from her zipper as she walks
downstairs from a cookery class

The section works associatively from guerilla warfare to a cooking class, from the tyranny of dress to the dressing of wounds, which then segues into the metaphorical "garment of fire" (the suicide bomber's combustion as a fashion statement), back to a cooking image—of shocking, offensive bathos: "child... in shredded lettuce, dressed sort of uh aioli." The book's best moments are full of an outrage that is almost religiously passionate—in its classical etymon of "suffering" as well as the sense of a deep-seated emotion.

This verse essay makes its most successful argument in favor of "fuming," that is, blowing smoke to obscure the view. By saying outright that *Wildfire* is both "about obscurity and illumination," Brady makes illumination harder to come by. The sources on the internet help a great deal, but to dwell with the poem alone is an exercise in the luxury of fuming. That it is actually pleasurable, providing gems of language just as poems ought to, for the furious beauty of it, makes this poem an argument for poetry as the modern hearth of the vestal virgin.

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