

The impossible space Martin surveys can only be formally articulated or measured via abstraction. But as both subject and object of these pithy investigations, Martin asserts her rights—the rights of her “black female body”—even if these rights can neither be anchored to a material ground nor tethered to what passes for the transcendental:

What are the dimensions of the field? They’ve put me here in the tallest grasses and the strangest fruit and have demanded at gun point that I bend into it over and over, but I’m so tired, and my limbs are sore, and I feel disconnected, or I disintegrate, a shadow figure hovers over me as I exhaust, body buckle, ballast removed.

Though their inflections branch off in other directions, those “tallest grasses” echo, for me, Harryette Mullen’s “Tree Tall Woman.” The differences in tone and attitude are instructive. Whereas this early poem by Mullen celebrates (black) female self-affirmation ([she] “made herself / from wind and earth”) and boundless strength (“Her arms surround the sky”), Martin’s poem refuses this gesture, which has too often been conflated with the superwoman trope of black matriarchy.

Insofar as Martin’s book covers ground tread by Mullen, Renee Gladman, and (even) Rita Dove, it goes without saying that *Life in a Box Is a Pretty Life* is a risk. Nevertheless, Martin’s accomplishment here is singular, by which I mean distinct from that of her peers. But that doesn’t mean she won’t find herself being shoved—even with “praise”—back into a box. This is why every single word of description—*black, female, body*—in her book, as well as here in this review (including the pronouns I use), must be read in quotation marks. These too are boxes, no doubt, but different kinds of boxes. And for Martin that may make, if not mean, all the difference.

Tyrone Williams

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Thomas Meyer, *Essay Stanzas*. Brooklyn, NY: The Song Cave, 2014. 140pp. \$17.95

Thomas Meyer begins *Caught Between*, the first of three long poems in his new book *Essay Stanzas*, with what seems like a quiet apology:

This won’t amount to much.
A handful of flowers
put on the table.
A souvenir unheard, unseen.

This table setting quickly turns. What follows are thirty-six pages of short stanzas that interlink ecological myths in easy language to describe

as much of the natural world as Meyer can: ocean becomes cloud becomes lightning becomes mountain becomes desert becomes lamp becomes shadow. Relations overcome nouns, and dominating these relations everywhere is playfulness. A cloud, first appearing as an embezzler of “the sea’s capital,” disappears in poverty:

Now, cloud, this monsoon season
nothing much to you today,
no moisture, nothing to give.
No more than a toy for the wind.
And your good friend lightning has left you.
Who wants to be a friend to the poor?

The poem’s length and reach are dizzying, like reading Ovid or Meyer’s translation of the *daode jing* for the first time. In his translator’s note to the *daodejing*, Meyer refers to the work as “table talk,” like the talk of an old man after dinner “just telling someone what he knows”:

The tone was conversational, not canonical. Honesty and simplicity foremost, rather than piety or complication. There were no themes, ideas *per se*. Following one upon another, things circled, darted away, appeared again, or vanished altogether, with the natural ease and bonhomie of good talk.

This notion of table talk is the key to *Essay Stanzas*. It’s what Meyer’s mentor and friend Basil Bunting called, in his explanatory note to *Briggflatts*, “old wives’ chatter, cottage wisdom.” It’s what Meyer offers in *Essay Stanzas* with “A handful of flowers / put on the table”: ordinary discourse that nevertheless contains hermetic recesses of wisdom, or a common way of telling that still somehow gestures toward the “unheard, unseen.”

Table talk manifests diversely throughout Meyer’s work. In the form of elegy, as in *Kintsugi* (2011), written after the death of his longtime partner Jonathan Williams: “There // were flowers. History isn’t more than this. / Or this. To discover the story // all over again and to love it and not / the people in it.” In storytelling and myth, as in Meyer’s recently published translation of *Beowulf* (2012): “NIGHT came. He went / to check out those Danes / boozing at home in their / big house & pay them a call.” In the aphoristic wisdom of the Dao: “Brevity is natural / it makes sense // a storm doesn’t go on all morning long / nor does a sudden shower all day.” Or embodied in the physical world itself, as in the early, Objectivist-inspired poem “Table”: “The perfection of / a blue bowl / of eggs // remains constant / in the mind, / as simple // as clear / as a cold / glass of water.” In *Essay Stanzas*, the length of the poems allows Meyer to layer these modes—elegy, myth, aphorism, objective description—and quietly shape a sense of ongoingness. The book feels exhaustive without being exhausting; the poems do not resist

containment or closure, but neither do they inscribe language's lack. They are acousmatic utterances we are lucky to hear:

The trees nod. The wind
tells them secrets.
They agree. My heart
can't help overhearing
what they say, and try as I might, I
can't stop listening.

Here, Meyer bridges the Greek of *akousmatikoi* (students of Pythagoras who would sit in silence to hear his teachings) with its current use as a term in sound studies (unknown sounds in a tape collage or off-screen sound in a movie). No matter where or whom the sound comes from, in these poems everything speaks and everything listens. *Caught Between*, like *Essay Stanzas* as a whole, is best read while drifting next to a window, with a cat, rather than at the desk, bearing down. Like the table talk it aspires to, the essayistic style of Meyer's interlinked stanzas is both compact and excursive, diffuse. For the reader, Meyer's combination of simple speech and the dilations of interior reflection—table talk and lyric utterance—makes reading for long stretches both a wide-ranging conversation and a wandering into and out of oneself.

The book's second long poem, *Kept Apart*, keeps the interlinked stanzas of *Caught Between*, but here the short narratives they contain shift from ecology to psychology. Myths and fables that explain the outer world now sound archetypal depths:

When he saw inside his hut
an immense gilded palace
he was suddenly shy.
"Where do I sleep?
Eat? What do I sit on?"
Here he was, a stranger in his own home.
With fond memories
of his old hut.

Given Meyer's Poundian understanding of translation, the poem feels deliberately cobbled together out of a will to syncretic knowledge—many myths becoming one. The young man hopes to discover Death's secret; the woman remembers that she was once a river; a stepmother beats a young man until he bursts into flames. Such tales of transfiguration and metamorphosis pertain to a remote world of myth, but in Meyer's stanzas they are also made to belong to the more immediate world of simple pleasure. The best tales interweave the two realms, as in this telling from an unattributed source, one among the poem's fluid cast of unnamed characters:

“I took off my clothes, piece by piece
until with the last go
my soul was free,
stripped by birds.
(Well, they were actually dice changed into birds.)”

With a casual “well” tossed off and an eyebrow raised, that last line exemplifies the tonal pleasures of the work itself, which bring fable and myth back within the modest court of table talk. Mythical storytelling is a pleasure in and of itself, an activity to be shared with intimate company, and in Meyer’s stanzas it combines with the pleasures of a flirtatious body. Both find a common language at the table.

If Meyer’s approach to poetry as table talk brings it back to the world of everyday life, to read *Essay Stanzas* as table talk brings the work back to the ordinariness of literary history. In the Basil Bunting birthday issue of *Paideuma*, the journal’s founder and editor, Pound scholar Carroll F. Terrell, describes a visit he made to Bunting in Northern England in 1979. Bunting takes Terrell to Corn Close, the cottage Meyer shared with Jonathan Williams in Dentdale, Cumbria. After visiting the nearby Briggflatts Meeting House, Bunting, Terrell, and Williams return to the cottage and, after several glasses of wine, sit down to a dinner cooked by Meyer, “a huge tureen filled with a stew with Polish sausage and winter vegetables,” served with “a heavy garlic sauce which had a consistency heavier than sour cream.” The group shares a Balkan cabernet with the meal, and afterward, to Bunting’s delight, they drink Bruichladdich Islay Scotch. Throughout the evening, talk abounds. Was Hadrian a good emperor? Flaubert was good, but Dickens was better. What do you eat and drink when you spend a night with Brancusi? (Oysters and white wine.) Terrell flips through chapbooks of Meyer’s and then asks Bunting to read a little. Bunting reads page after page and then refers to Williams and Meyer as poets. He turns to Terrell with a “pixy-like smile” and says, “You’re not a poet. You’re a predator.” Terrell can only agree.

So the critic comes to Meyer’s work. *Been There*, the book’s third and longest poem, is once again about the wisdom syncretic learning brings. But this time the stanzas are thick with disappointment, their interlinking movements now the working through of an older poet’s frustrations: career, money, memory, death. For someone just coming to the table, the poem starts off as a difficult read: the real wisdom it wants to offer may be the secret knowledge that poetry itself was perhaps a poor choice of occupation. But underneath that frustration, Meyer is deeply worried about what happens to poetry when the wisdom it harbors hermetically, or pours forth freely at the table, is assigned economic value. For Meyer, the “predator” is not a critic, as Bunting had it, but anyone who weighs wisdom against gold:

gold scraped beaten and burnished
weighed with potatoes
in the other pan
shocking
gold sought after prized and worshipped
in this world
but how philosophical
to set in equal measure
with potatoes
making it earthy
but maybe
this is some kind of con
what the hell
is there any wisdom
untouched by dubious
intentions

Meyer's chief concern here is how words and their wisdom actually work—how they have worked for a long time, not how they might appear to work right now. This is the long view the poet arrives at in *Been There*, and it forestalls some of the disappointments: “talk can be poetry” but only because its meaning seems to hold together “in a way that makes us ask / about meaning itself / today tomorrow the day after.”

But not even this wisdom can allay Meyer's final disappointment—that wisdom itself can be betrayed by the violence carried out in speech. Late in *Been There*, Meyer has the voice of “justice” speak a brutal admonition by casting a bloody image: “the red of tongues cut out of the mouths of my enemies.” Their crime? Thinking “they could speak out against me.” When the wisdom of the law speaks, it may pronounce a moratorium on all other speakers. Meyer finds a way out in the last, and shortest, poem of the book, a love poem stitching together translations from Hippocrates and from a poem attributed to Akhenaton (for which he shares credit with Alan Gardiner). Meyer's solution to the impasse is speech that does not limit but rather encourages more speech. Here writing gives itself over to the very “breath” of the other:

*Its sweetness. Your breath takes away mine.
I look at your beauty every day.
I want loving you to give me a life.
Let me hold your hands, and your heart in mine.
To take it then live by it.
Say my name. This will last a long time.*

For Meyer, translation, too, is an intimate form of colloquy, perhaps, strangely enough, the closest poetry can come to true table talk. Appropriately, the book ends with Meyer silencing himself, allowing someone else to talk at the table.

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