

STAR LIGHT, STAR BRIGHT

The poetry of James Beall

If there were ever an ideal candidate for the the 2018 William Meredith Award for Poetry, James Beall is close to the top of the list. First off, his new collection of poetry, *Onyx Moon* is such an exquisite work, poems from a master poet like Meredith, whose classical background and artistic talent combined with a scientist's curiosity and attention to the details of the wide world match those of his friend and colleague William Meredith. Wind, rain, volcanoes, jungles, mountains, and always stars weave their way through his poems, and like Audubon he paints his subjects with exactitude of color and precision of detail.

A working association with Meredith is not a pre-requisite for awardees, but in Jim Beall's case, their history as colleagues in the art makes an even stronger case for this award which the William Meredith Foundation is honored to present as the 2018 Award for Poetry.

In 1978, Beall approached William at a poetry reading at the Folger Library while Jim was a Congressional Science Fellow at the Office of Technology Assessment for the U.S. Congress. As the US Poet Laureate, the Library of Congress had approached Meredith about putting together a symposium on science and literature which led to an invitation by Meredith to visit him in the Poetry Office. Their collaboration led to *The Science and Literature Symposium* in 1981, with Beall as co-moderator. The program featured lectures by the the Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, George Wald, O.B. Hardison (then director of the Folger Library), Sir Fred Hoyle, Gerry Pournelle, and Gene Roddenberry of *Star Trek* fame, among many others.

Stars shine brilliantly throughout *Onyx Moon* as one would expect from a physicist. In his poem, "The Fire on Magdalena Mountain," he recounts travel to the large array of radio telescopes near Socorro, New Mexico:

They are like flowers tracking a dark sun.
Those distant instruments listen to the sibilant
stars, stars that mimic no human speech. It is a sound
similar to the wind blowing across old ruins,
a level just beneath hearing, that conjures
beyond our capacity to understand or comprehend.
But like the camouflage worked into the coat of a stray buck
who crosses their path, "mottled with the color of pine bark and
rock," the poet intuits, "a sort of randomness, a kind of plan." One
thinks of the "bright watchers" in Meredith's poem, "Country Stars"
comforting the near-sighted child on a winter's eve, to have no fear,

or “only proper fear,” as elsewhere in Beall’s poem, “Pavane,” the poet lassos the stars with similar lyric beauty and ambiguity:

Then will be silence and a beauty there
upon the snow: a thousand crystals drear
and cold, refracting pale light, the sun
late in the winter slant walking
its rainbow speckles upon a frozen sea
crafted by storm and left so we may wonder
at the wasted, dormant time, where yet
the cold night comes and with it
other wastes of stars.

James Beall’s work is at first an enigma. What to make of his challenging vision, his unique voice, the round-about syntax, his penchant for unfamiliar diction, his seemingly schizophrenic take on the world. For here is a poet blessed with double vision, a man who sees the world with both brain and heart, who is fully at home in his bicameral mind, scientist and mystic at once.

The literary landscape is rife with physician poets, of course. Poetry has long been linked to medicine; in mythology, the Greek god Apollo was responsible for, among other things, both healing and poetry. Poets like John Keats, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. and William Carlos Williams were all trained as doctors. One thinks of the late poet, Dannie Abse who wore both “white coat and purple coat.”

But fewer poets who are also physicists come to mind unless one considers Einstein whose theory of relativity reputedly came to him in a dream, or the kinship between theology and quantum physics found in the work of John Polkinghorne who is both a theoretical physicist and Anglican priest. One thinks of the Jesuit scientist Teilhard de Chardin who posits that even the very rocks have a kind of living energy or “rayon” which is accumulating into an omega point from which mankind is about to make an evolutionary leap. It is not an exaggeration to find the same sort of philosophical insight in Beall’s poetry.

Here we see both the careful scientific method of observation leading to a thesis as well as the appreciation of synchronicity that informs the reality of a Reike practitioner or a shaman. The two chevrons, orange-red on a blackbird’s wings at Gettysburg mirror the late sun, the way the speeches of Pericles or Lincoln help his imaginary listeners understand a cause. In “Military Intelligence,” soldiers digging a foxhole “will make of his or her small space/ a home of sorts, as carefully in place/ as any nest or den the animals/ or insects in their pantomime of thought,/ would take as ease.” The soldiers here imitate the creatures around them as do the creatures imitating thought.

Often in Beall's poetry, a poem traces the poet observing his own thought process like a poem by of the late John Ashbury. But in Beall's case, the poem is more accessible, more, frankly, "beautiful." The poetry constantly goes beyond the surface with a kind of x-ray vision. He is as interested in the shadows a moth creates, for example, as the creature itself:

"The sun swept on. The small window of shadow opened out./ As if it knew, the moth shook and shivered, warning/ the reedy center, prepared to fly." Walking the fields of Gettysburg, the scientist "... lingers to read the gentle lines the land/ makes, caused somehow by the layers of rock/ below these peaceful fields." In a short poem memorializing 911, "the shiny pastures of his thought" could not finally befriend nightmare. Only after he describes the explosions with extraordinary metaphor, " the lesser suns/ began to blossom and bloom, before falling into darkness"

can he afford the almost biblical summary at the poem's end: "Thus, the Angel of Mercy, made Fury again."

The final stanza of the final poem in the collection, "The Convergence of Meridians," mirrors the idealist philosophy of Eckhardt Tolle in his remarkable book, *The Power of Now*:

There is a moment when all the past
and future come together in the timeless now,
a place with no part showing save the heart.

In 2015, astronauts and Star Trek actors performed the Vulcan salute upon the death of Leonard Nimoy. James Beall is no Pollyanna, but *Onyx Moon* is also a kind of greeting and blessing. As William Meredith writes in his poem, *The Cheer*, "Words addressing evil won't turn evil back, but they can give heart." James Beall too is one of the "bright watchers." *Onyx Moon* seems to say, as would Dr. Spock, "dif-tor heh smusma,": live long and prosper.

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