

Bojan Louis, *Currents: Poems*, BkMk Books, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2017. 66pp. ISBN: 978-1-943491-11-7. <https://www.umkc.edu/bkmk>

Currents: Poems by Bojan Louis is a book in at least five languages: English, Navajo, Spanish, Aztec, and the electric charge of an unsettled spirit. Not an easy read, this writing is laden with blood, silt, shit, and bone, bleached by sun, whittled away by wind, sculpted by anger and lament. The poems inscribe an Indigenous story: fury at injustice and inconceivable desecration, the scars left by coerced conversions, forced marches, foreign and domestic violence, some done in the name of religion, some in the name of politics, or love.

Currents is a good title for this collection. I sense a number of them in the broken bits of language strung together in a syntax that only just holds meaning, as if the trust in a single language has become a thing of the past, an artifact from a by-gone era when a “common language” seemed possible. At this moment in time, Louis seems to say, poets have to take great care with the spoken/written word, maybe because of the witchery of “text,” its ghost-trail of ones and zeroes—and because the word has become so cheap and deceitful. It once was said to be—and was held—sacred. Louis’s language(s) feels like something that comes unbidden from some recess of pain and witness, though, at the same time, it is shaped, honed, impressionistic.

The reader might want to start by reading through the “Notes” at the back of the volume, and if primarily an English-speaker, jot down the translations and other data in order to trace or track where the poet is heading. The choice of language is not arbitrary. Different sound-maps occur, with a variety of “knowings” that just one language cannot represent. While a single-language speaker likely will not “get” the range of resonances possible in this multi-lingual world, still it can be imagined, acknowledged, and appreciated. The gift of these poems that Bojan Louis has brought forth must be seen in the light of this frayed/flayed world, the never-ending cycle of birth and death, where the sacred and profane touch shoulders, and our humanity is always being tested and often found wanting.

The geography that these poems encompass maps places in the west: Alaska, Arizona, the Navajo Nation. The first poem in the volume, “Breach,” is a good “place” to begin. Situated (imaginatively) in or near Sitka, Alaska, the poem moves through a series of motifs, like a triptych, each part also sectioned into three unrhymed tercets. What does this prosodic structure do? It seems to provide a scaffold for both uncovering and recovering memory, desire, and cognition, somewhat like a dream. In a breach, something breaks through—a wall, a womb, a body of water. A force is at work; this, too, resembles the potential in a dream. We might assume that a poem offers a moment, or moments, of insight into the human condition, into the heart or mind of the poet, into what connects us in this disconnecting world. If that is the case, I look for things done by or done to the speaker of the poem, the subjective pronoun paired with a shifting series of verbs. “It’s years,” the poet tells us, in the “breach” of life and work in Sitka, Alaska, “I’ve been recovered.” Is that good? The language is a bit tricky. One reading of “recover” suggests surviving a catastrophe and being renewed, gathering up what has been lost. Another reading suggests getting covered-over yet again, being obscured, maybe even suffocated.

The tension between these readings is interesting, and Louis tends to move in this way, tightening and releasing the threads of meaning, weaving the piece into a discernable pattern that, on one level, can be understood with the mind, but on another level, must be comprehended with the spirit. The poem opens with images of “parents,” “Mom” and “Dad,” the first humans in a child’s life, first woman and first man. They are mythic figures that provide a pattern of being and doing. Yet in this case “Mom [is] alone, her own decision,” and “Dad, how he was always/ asphyxiated until rolled over.” These figures seem to form or point the way to

The frontier I’m abandoned to,
 exposed root ribcages above ground,
 rained on so much there’s no dust,
 no blow-away—traceless surfaces.

The mix of images/ideas here is characteristic of Louis’s work as a whole. The last line of the second tercet, “The frontier I’m abandoned to” tells us, “I’ve been abandoned to the frontier,” presumably by the parents. But it tells us, too, “I’ve abandoned myself to the frontier.” Is this the same as a banishment? And why does the poet write “the frontier” and not “a frontier”? “The” suggests a definite locale, a border place known and named, though still unexplored, or in the American context, unexploited, the breach between “wilderness” and “civilization,” between history and myth, maybe a place of reckless abandon and a stifling loneliness, unfettered desire and chaos, remote and removed from the “mainland,” a place suggestive of “home.”

Are we encumbered by language or liberated by language? Are we abandoned by language, or do we abandon language by denying the possibility of truth? And human striving, what is it about? For some, it is about name and fame, about accumulation of wealth, material comforts, power. That glittering world dangles before our eyes, telling us, “This is what it’s about.” My sense, in reading these poems, is that they are an act of unearthing, of coming out of the grave that is America, of arriving at the opening into the next world and casting off the dross of lies and dirt that distort our ways of knowing, that distract us from seeking the next level, a way out. At the end of “Breach,” we are in the belly of the whale with Jonah, a “lucky fuck” who was swallowed whole and remains “undigested,”

Hung from the beast’s spine,
 feet eaten, body untouched.

This seems an inescapable situation, to say the least. Where is our integrity if we have no feet to stand on? If the body is “untouched” in “the belly of the beast,” what are we being saved for? Is the “breach” suggested by the title a promise or a betrayal? I’m not certain I know the answer as I thread my way through Louis’s poems. They raise many questions for me, not as many answers.

I want to look at the title poem, “Currents.” Its structure is similar to “Breach.” Like the first poem in the collection, this poem is a triptych composed of three numbered parts. In each part are three sections, each section constituted in three, three-line stanzas. Like “Breach,” this poem is given a locale, Phoenix, Arizona, almost the opposite of Sitka, Alaska, an arid desert

landscape, although the poem seems less rooted in place than the Sitka of “Breach,” despite some of the city imagery: “a crosstown bus,” “a stiffened step/on concrete,” my sense is that the poem means both to acknowledge and to transcend the limits of place and the memory of place.

Robert Hass, in *A Little Book on Form*, writes, “Two often regarded as an aspect of one, so that with three number as such, the many, begins. And is infinite. Oddness. Not divisible. So that—the trinity, for example—mystery begins here” (53). He shows us the difference between the rhymed verse, triplet, and the unrhymed, free verse tercet, a shape Whitman used in “Song of Myself.” Hass writes, “Formally, you can get to three at least three ways: 1 + 1 + 1 . . . : 1 + 2 . . . ; 2 + 1 . . .” (63), meaning the sequence of images, one piled up against another, or against two, or two piled against one. He says, as well, “In free verse stanza, patterning is partly visual, but it’s also partly aural” (64), and he gives some examples of how various poets employ stress within each line, often two stresses within a line, but sometimes more.

We can think about Louis’s “Currents” (and other poems) in this way too. Right away, we encounter a three-stress line in the first stanza, formed by trochees, augmented by rhyme:

Each new sun asks: be
no thing more than me,
have nothing beyond need

We could read the first two lines as a couplet—“be me,” the words say, but since the sun “asks” this of the poet, it may be a prayer, or the reciprocation of a prayer. In fact, the poet tells us in his “Notes”: “The poem opens with a version of a prayer, or offering of corn pollen, done at sunrise in Dine tradition and knowing. It’s my prayer/offering, and I share it with you.” “Have nothing beyond need” leads us to a new stanza, but before we go there, I want to point out that the third line is in excess of the first couplet, and it allows for generosity, a generosity lodged in humility (“be no thing,” “have nothing”), and also in an act of replenishment (“each new sun”).

If “mystery begins here,” the next stanza ushers into that place, providing an image of the human being at prayer, not with bowed head, on the knees, but “opened”:

--send opened your whole
being, lifted face, arms spread.

The words are reminiscent of Joy Harjo’s “Eagle Poem,” the concluding poem in her book, *In Mad Love and War*. “To pray,” Harjo says, “you open your whole self/ to sky, to earth, to sun, to moon/ to one whole voice that is you . . .” (65). In Louis’s poem, the speaker attempts to pray in this opened and opening way, but acknowledges, “. . . only part of me” [stanza break] “is blessed, a body exerted/after long hours, responsibility,/ and the need to ease tremors.” The longest line in this tercet is “after long hours, responsibility,” which departs from and disrupts the stress pattern of threes, as if the world has broken in here with its busyness, its dutiful “responsibility.” If the sun asks the speaker to be “beyond need,” the speaker recognizes the body’s limits, the difficulty, whether physical or psychological, when there is a “need to ease tremors.”

While Louis employs the three-stress and two-stress lines in this poem, line stress tends to be variable, creating a kind of syncopation that feels nervous and anxious. The effect is a bit unsettling, and the idea, intertwined with the image, adds to the effect:

A dark hall's corner
 a damask of lines,
 the call-to mom uses,

 telling me I don't add up.

Is this a poem about the mother's disappointment in her son, the ways in which the patterns she lays down, as in a Navajo rug, do not "add up" in her boy? Is it a poem about the ways mothers sometimes mistreat their children, the "embarrassment" a child is made to feel, the punishments of "slap—freezing feet"? I can't say with certainty, but as with many poems in this volume, I find Louis's journey interesting, his language alluring and his images compelling:

I left and arrived months before the rainy season,
 through cuts along the cliff face
 over Crystal shimmered with mica.
 Like stars burnt out taking eons
 to reveal their absence
 in myth-heavy constellations (from "Arc Flash").

Cliffs shimmering with mica like burnt out stars is gorgeous, and the image is intertwined with the stories of stars, their patterns part of a people's mythic history. The here and now re-emerges in "Arc Flash," as in other poems, and the mechanical world of men and machines seems to impose itself again and again:

Here, a few cars idle
 without drivers,
 warm up before the workday
 while smoke from houses vanishes
 and releases the night sky.

There is much more to say about this absorbing and powerful book of poems: the ways Louis is alive to the labors of the poor, the bent, migrant bodies, the wanton destruction of earth, the poisons of civilization. *Currents* is about our current life, about the human currency which is bartered with blood and sacrifice. Contemporary Native American writing, especially that of younger poets, seizes the fragments and shards left in the wake of colonization, and builds a new edifice of language and experience. Bojan Louis's writing seems to me a struggle to find strength among broken pieces, to rebuild the spirit with determination and love.

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Works Cited

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