

Sherwin Bitsui. *Dissolve*. Copper Canyon Press, 2019. 67 pp. ISBN: 9781556595455.
www.coppercanyonpress.org

If you have ever been in the southwest, the landscape, without the houses and towers, is a layered one—the tan earth, the wide sky, mountains that mold themselves between the two. Sherwin Bitsui's book, *Dissolve*, incorporates this layering in brilliant and many-faceted ways into one long poem.

At first reading, it is Bitsui's images that become the book's top layer:

A field of moonlight
 double-parked in snowmelt

or

...a tow-truck
 hoisting up a buck
 butterflies leaking from its nostrils

or

Cranes pass as swans
 through runnels underneath this dreaming

or

Feather-wrapped mountains
 unclutter veins to what remains
 before sparking fires
 where moonlight warms knuckles
 wriggling in the slick throats of the drowning.

You can read through this top layer and underline one image after another, until there seems a surfeit of image. However a slower read (“...breathe it in”) is necessary.

Bubbling beneath this layer is the poet's use of verbs. This is important, because Bitsui's mother-tongue is Navajo, or Diné Bizaad, a language of verbs, full of movement, phrases and elegant construction. Phrasing contains motion—the verb of movement “to go” is a basic phrase. Description is done by the verb aspect of it, how something is made, is being made, in the present tense.

For example, [in discussion with poet Joy Harjo](#), Bitsui relates trying to re-translate from its English translation, into Navajo, a Li Po poem, which uses the word “wall.” When I asked Bitsui about this in a phone call, he told me, “we would describe the ways it was composed—a cement rounding the house.” Phrasing in Navajo contains motion, description is the action of the noun,

how the noun came to be. Or, what it does. For example, “clock”, would be derived from “it is moved slowly in a circle.”

And, for this poet, both languages congeal inside his imagination and poetry.

Amber clouds of bone marrow
lathered over corn husks—
 are crushed sideways into toothache,
 where waning daylight's tongue-scent
 bleeds through a flypapered horizon.

or

This mountain stands near us: mountaining,
 it mistakes morning for mourning
 when we wear slippers of steam
 to erase our carbon footprint [emphasis added]

And of course, Mountaining, flypapered, steam and footprint all achieve movement or the hint of possible movement.

Here the poet's blend of language, of scene, and of movement shifts between what seems to be worlds: one of landscape and city, of the huge spaces of the Navajo and the jammed town. But also between the poet and reader, or speaker and listener. Through both image and motion, we are brought into voice and feeling, and into what I consider another layer, that of Beauty and its disappearance.

One might remember and consider the now famous, much-repeated section of the [Navajo Blessing Way Ceremony](#):

With beauty before me I walk
 With beauty behind me I walk
 With beauty above me I walk
 With beauty around me I walk

This becomes in Bitsui's language, here and not here, present and taken:

There's a way out—
 with the dirt road into cerulean dawn,
 tap with clear fingerprints
 the windows of cars and trucks
 rattling down Highway 77,
 and clasp the nine eyes of the desert
 shut at the intersection of *then* and *now*

or

The camera sees a storm
its eyes bullet blasts
stacked stop
 gas-soaked magpie wings.

or

A lake, now a tire rut pool,
leaves bitter aftertastes
on single-roomed tongues.

Over and over the poet upturns the landscape, revealing the scabbing beneath. And also, sometimes, it works backwards:

Neighs spasms onto songs
braiding their highest leaves

 into our necklaces of smoke.

And then, like cactus-needles thrusting up through the desert floor, comes yet another layer in this important and timely and lovely book. The anguish and anger of the present day and its history, especially for Indigenous peoples. The remaining uranium leakage, climate change, water contamination, drugs, exile.

 Bluing under a dimming North Star...

 the Reservation's ghost..
 Rising out of the uranium pond—

or

 This plate's shape is pawned for bread.

 Paper lungs collapse ...

 When they seed guns with powdered bone awls,
 Who will be injured by such blue dark?

or

 on the shores of evaporating lakes.

 This plot, now a hotel garden,
 its fountain gushing forth—
 the slashed wrists of the Colorado.

Here, at the heart of what I see in the book, is the madness of a world that slashes the wrists of the Colorado. Bitsui, by using image and unique juxtaposition, arrives at a kind of rubbing against the stones of the past-present world. History of this country's ravage of the Indigenous peoples, pebbles through the poem: "bison-bone," "gun's shadow," "hatchet," "scalped hair," "we sleep/ collared to our children's nooses."

These poems are rich in affective and spiritual associations, seeking to put words together in such a way that they release a spiritual and vital action. They give the reader an experience that enriches, opens a door to the present-past/the past-in-the-present. This is done with a sure hand.

Veronica Golos

Works Cited

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