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Voices Bright Flags by Geoffrey Brock (review)

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The mind's movement toward perfection
is joy, said the Jew who continued to grind
the glass that would kill him—and sorrow is in
our knowing we're leaving perfection behind.

I opened this review through reading a line of poetry that is separated and connected through the cut of the letters. I'll move towards its close with a variant of the same, Cole's "Song of the Shattering Vessels." The title refers to the "breaking of the vessels" in the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, another myth and another Isaac on which and whom Cole broods. Here are its opening and closing stanzas.

Either the world is coming together
or else the world is falling apart—
here—now—along these letters
against the walls of every heart.

...

The dream, the lure, isn't an answer
that might be plotted along some chart—
as we know the world that's coming together
within our knowing's falling apart.

Harold Bloom ends his introduction to *The Invention of Influence* with a sentence that I'd like to share with him. "This is a book to which I will often return in my remaining years." My own coda returns to the wisdom we read in Cole: "The mind's movement toward perfection is joy...and sorrow is in our knowing we're leaving perfection behind."

—Michael Cherlin

Geoffrey Brock, *Voices Bright Flags* (Waywiser Press), 103 pp.

Geoffrey Brock's second book *Voices Bright Flags* was selected by Heather McHugh as the winner of the 9th-annual Anthony Hecht Prize, and in its preface, McHugh aptly heralds the collection as a "cautionary paean to America itself." No poet worth his salt could aspire to write a collection about America without reckoning first with the ghost of Whitman, of course, so perhaps it is appropriate that Brock's vision for this collection crystallizes in his poem "Whitman on Broadway: Apr. 13, 1861," dramatically set at "the moment [Whitman] first heard news of the attack on Fort Sumter," according to the end notes.

Whitman "tried to write a *poem* to bind us," Brock writes, with a tone of incredulity, but in the end, Whitman "read that news in silence." These

lines suggest the ultimate failure of *Leaves of Grass*—Whitman's multitudes silenced by the news of the Civil War. Through this negation, these lines also provide us with insight into Brock's approach to writing about America: these are not poems meant "to bind us" together as Americans.

In fact, in these poems, the speaker himself cannot be bound to one vision of America. Instead, after an asterisk, the perspective of "Whitman on Broadway: Apr. 13, 1861" shifts from pure description, and in a stanza enclosed in brackets, Brock continues:

[Instead of all the statues of generals on horses
give me Walt that night at Broadway and Prince
buying a *World* or *Times* from a barefoot orphan
and trying to make, of the kosmos disorderly, sense.]

Even if the sense Whitman created out of America's chaos wasn't sound, what Brock admires about Whitman is the boldness of his attempt. However, taken as a whole, the poems in this collection question the integrity of American identity, each poem's perspectives restlessly shifting, as though to embody the splintered nation America has become. No poem can be written to bind America together because no single, indisputable history unites us. Whitman's failure is not his own, but a failure of our culture writ large. This sensibility cuts to the bone in *Voices Bright Flags*—there is no one America to be bound together, no one story that speaks for us all.

Instead, Brock presents a choir of dissonant voices from our nation's past, each one staking its own "bright flag" on American identity, claiming its rightful place in our history—from newly freed slaves to Two Moons, a Cheyenne Chief; from native Hawaiians to Wah Lee, the inventor of the Chinese laundry. Brock is drawn to forgotten or suppressed American narratives; individuals and communities that have traditionally been marginalized in our history, neglected in our collective imaginations. Lesser-known American figures like Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Alexander Wilson, and even Charles Graner are also given voice—but you won't find a George Washington poem in the lot. Patriotism, in this collection, is a fraught and difficult concept. Even so, the very premise of the book seems to suggest a deeply conflicted desire to reconcile the ideals of patriotism with the complex, inconsistent, and troubling realities of American history and culture.

Throughout the collection, Brock deftly dissects "our weird mythologies"—like "Uncle Tom whipped to death for his defiance; / or Klansmen, even their horses hooded, racing / to Elsie's aid as *Ride of the Valkyries* blares; / or Scarlett picking cotton to save Tara"—and like a chemist explaining a reaction, Brock cleanly exposes how these beliefs backfire and ricochet in response to the increasingly sharp pressures of culture:

Uncle Tom, like some poor mortal in Ovid
 who slights a god, becomes himself a whip;
 Tara decays on the Forty Acres backlot

(only the façade was real); and the troops
 (integrated now) of Colonel Kilgore
 (you know: *the smell of napalm in the morning*)
 blast Vietnam with *Birth of a Nation's* score...

Here, the differences between the mythologies and realities of America are thrown into high relief—but both remain powerful forces. Brock interrogates these fissures in American society, where building pressures have forced the façade of American unity to break, especially in regard to racial politics.

Brock sees race as the fundamental crux of American identity, and the Civil War as the defining American crisis. In the unrhymed sonnet "Angela's Passage: 1619," Brock draws a parallel between the passage of the first slaves and the mythological rape of Leda, alluding to Yeats' famous rendering of that scene: "Engendered there," Brock writes of the first slave trade, "Fort Sumter shelled, Atlanta burned to rubble, / and Abraham Lincoln dead. Its trading done, / her ship set sail, indifferent as a swan."

Brock traces these tensions through to the present day. In "Shades of Tucson," Brock writes of two neighbors—one family black, one Latino. James, the son of the black family, tells the speaker of the poem that the patriarch of the Latino family, Old Chávez, "tried to drive / his family out because they were black" but after Old Chávez dies of cancer, as the speaker watches from his stoop, James cares for the widow Chávez:

James goes out his gate and in
 the Chávez gate: he brings her paper up,
 waters her plants, does little things she can't.

While the speaker initially thinks of these acts as selfless, he comes to realize that for James, "Every daily kindness to the widow / is a shovelful of dirt on the past's grave." While some may want to bury the past, Brock thoughtfully exhumes what has endured American history, with a meticulous eye for the luminous details that will light our way forward and back in time, as we fluidly navigate the intersections of the personal and the political worlds.

Voices Bright Flags presents an insightful, complex vision of ourselves and our country, all the more convincing because of the grace and intelligence Brock brings to these poems. Venture alongside Brock into the depths of the ambiguity of American history, and as you follow, you will find yourself "walking into the mist, / hand in warm hand, that minimal

touch— / into a swirling eggwhite mist, not knowing / whether it's following us or leading the way."

—Ashley Anna McHugh

***Mimi's Trapeze*, by J. Allyn Rosser**

In the title poem of her fourth collection, *Mimi's Trapeze*, J. Allyn Rosser wonders if all mothers don't fantasize at moments about life without their children:

She joined the circus, and left her son behind,
my Grandpa Louis.
Shocking, yes, but
at some point I bet every mother imagines,
in a little corner of her heart—
Well no,
not that we'd actually go. Not that we *would*.

With characteristic irony, Rosser considers life caught "in the middle," between one's past and family history and one's present decisions and their implications for the future.

The speakers in Rosser's other poems face similar dilemmas as they come to terms with their own backward and forward looking. In "In the Middle of the Old Man's Talk," for example, an aging man realizes that his memory, so central to his sense of self, may be abandoning him for good: "It's the first time he can remember / not remembering. He has / hesitated before, but never / about this, whatever it is." Selfhood itself is usually twofold here: "You half-liked the left-handed attention," the speaker of "Dyahe" admits, "and you half-loathed yourself / for putting yourself in that position." This simultaneous sense of self-regret and self-satisfaction consistently animates Rosser's language, offering what Ellen Bryant Voigt has called "double vision": the awareness that two contradictory feelings may occur as simultaneously true, and that a poem depends on such multivalent revelations.

Mimi's Trapeze embodies a past-future double vision even in organization. The collection opens with a section of memory-driven narrative poems, many of them in blank verse, and ends with formally intricate, visionary (even apocalyptic) poems, like "Swan Song of the Last Believer," a 17-line series of questions in interlocking rhymed tetrameter, a "Sonnet Predicting the End of the World with Bumper Stickers" (recalling "Fourteen Final Lines" in one of Rosser's earlier collections), and "Children's Children Speech," a tour de force terzanelle broaching our global and collective responsibility to the future.

But it's not just time that the poet has to come to terms with; Rosser's sense of "middleness" extends to a conflicted relationship toward art. The