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BOOK REVIEWS

Bullroarer: A Sequence
By Ted Genoways
Northeastern University Press, 2001

In *Bullroarer*, which won the 2001 Morse Poetry Prize, Ted Genoways successfully navigates the limbo between nostalgia and nonfiction in capturing his heritage. Specifically, he focuses on how his relatives survived the Depression working in Nebraska's cattle industry, and we see a grandfather's experiences form an allegory for the poet's own youth.

Genoways's precise poetic structure balances the gritty reality of the stockyards. Several lines into first poem, "Outside the Slaughterhouse," a sonnet glimmers from beneath the visceral subject matter and slant rhyme: "Calves look up from their pens, eyes like polished / stones. In the distance, the Missouri twists / in its bed." The speaker then gathers stones into his pockets and realizes that "these too were mountains before I was born." With this casual yet pithy aside, Genoways acknowledges the task before him: to recreate and respect the heft of a generation remembered only through anecdotal memory and hand-me-downs ragged from hard use.

This collection features numerous smaller sets of poems, grouped into four thematically distinct sections. In the one of the strongest sequences, "The Cow Caught in the Ice," Genoways begins the arc of a three-day period by reporting the "Premonition" of his grandmother, Catherine Genoways, that a Holstein calf has been birthed and lost to a cold winter. Genoways then follows the efforts of his grandfather, Lewis Cass Genoways, to find the calf. Although some of the language overstresses the elements and implements of life in the Midwest—applejack and dillspice, ballspeen and chain—Genoways is also subtly convincing the reader of the maternal instinct that binds owner to beast just as strongly as it does Catherine to house or husband. These efforts culminate in the final poem of the sequence, "Annunciation," where Lewis finds both calf and mother frozen out on the lake and must drag them back to the barn. Wrestling with the heavy corpses, "he boots her purple udder / and the bag splits like a single-stitch seam but no / blood, no milk." This striking imagery echoes when Lewis comes home to Catherine and whispers an apology "into the sagging moons of her breasts, her weak heart / drumming so hard he wonders if her ribs might split."

From these central figures, Genoways branches out, particularly in Sections II and III, to a larger constellation of relatives. Of these standalone poems, one of the strongest bears the quirky title of "Uncle Earl and the War to End all Wars," and is set in the contemporary contrast of 1995. However, the core of the poem is still a generation earlier in World War II, when "the first lesson the DI taught was hold on to your rifle. / But keep the lids from K rations / in case—more than one man's life saved / by fisting the enemy's hair / and slitting his throat with the tin." Genoways skillfully heightens the ironic distance between those days of simultaneous inhumanity and glory and the modern

malaise of "[Living] long enough / for one stupid nephew to show you / his plastic jeep and ask if you want / to fight." The casual use of "stupid" is a strange relief from the heightened vernacular that dominates many of these poems: although farm life is visceral, Genoways never confuses that with undignified.

In *Bullroarer*, while an occasional poem works too hard to satisfy form, many of the best are the least constrained in terms of meter or rhyme; instead, Genoways focuses on injecting fresh insight in the final lines. In "Blaze," the speaker observes a cow's blind apprehension at being branded. The speaker is detached, knowing "These are not my cows . . . The work of slaughter / belongs to others I'll never meet." But by the end we realize the speaker's callous tone is actually a protective measure against his empathy with the animals and their surprising degree of intelligence: their panic actually functions as an uncanny interpretation of the fact that "The gloves covering her eyes are cut from leather." This simple but insightful twist wrenches the reader's attention from the writhing cow back to the true source of fear—our hands, and the blood shed by them.

Upon skimming the table of contents, one could mistake this book as simply the best damn poetry about cows that money can buy. And yes, playing the odds of the market, it probably is. But *Bullroarer* is also much more than that. Overall, this slim volume runs full of lifeblood, labor, and wry irony—the indelible imprint of a past generation.

—*Sandra Beasley*

Editor's Note: Ted Genoways is the founding editor of *Meridian*.

Austerlitz
By W. G. Sebald
Translated by Anthea Bell
Random House, 2001

When the acclaimed German writer W. G. Sebald died in a car crash last December, it was easy for fans to feel a sense of outrage that so haunting and gifted a writer would never complete his life's work. At the same time, many readers must have sensed that Sebald had himself become an instance of the sober melancholy that was his constant theme. For in a series of four extraordinary, mysterious works of fiction—*Vertigo, The Emigrants, The Rings of Saturn*, and now *Austerlitz*—Sebald quietly explored the densely textured sadnesses evoked by loss, accident, and the touch of history itself.

Like Sebald's previous books, *Austerlitz* is a novel of incomplete resurrections. It tells the story of Jacques Austerlitz, a Jewish refugee now living in England. As a young child in 1939, Austerlitz escaped Prague and the Nazi persecution that would murder his parents. Decades later, after a lifetime of suppressing searing memories of his origins, Austerlitz is driven to search for traces of his parents' fate and of his own lost identity. His wandering researches lead him to forgotten childhood photographs, decayed archives, Europe's major railroad stations, and slowly to a confrontation with the stark intersection of naked destruction and vanished memory that is the Holocaust.

The autobiography that Austerlitz gradually assembles is often poignant, almost always beautifully clear. In one dreamlike flash of memory, Austerlitz sees himself for the first time as the small child who had just reached London: "He was sitting by himself

on a bench over to one side. His legs, in white knee-length socks, did not reach the floor, and but for the small rucksack he was holding on his lap I don't think I would have known him." And later, on his return to Prague, Austerlitz recalls his mother as a young woman: "I see her wearing an ashen-gray silk bodice laced up in front, but I cannot make out her face, only an iridescent veil of pale, cloudy milkiness wafting close to her skin, and then, said Austerlitz, I see the scarf slip from her right shoulder as she lays her hand on my forehead." Austerlitz, like Sebald himself (they are versions of each other), is movingly drawn to tiny details that grant a lifelike reality. Such memories, lovely in their uncanny precision, seem to offer a powerful resistance to the decay and forgetting that form the novel's backdrop.

However, the unfolding contents of Austerlitz's life, vividly drawn as they are, do not give the novel its real tension and power. Its true energy stems from Austerlitz's vexed and painful *relationship to* his past and to the complex processes of remembering. For what Sebald offers above all is a meditation on how the harrowing yet often intangible legacies of history scar and corrode the very emotions and perceptions of his characters. At one point, a quiet Austerlitz imagines that "I can turn back and go behind it [time], and there I shall find everything as it once was, or more precisely I shall find that all moments of time have coexisted simultaneously, in which case none of what history tells us would be true, past events have not yet occurred but are waiting to do so at the moment when we think of them." This passage offers a thinly veiled despair. The anguished hope lying behind it is that an unfettered access to the past will make Austerlitz more transparent to himself and so heal his ruinous sense of deracination and exile.

Yet in the world of Sebald's fiction, memory is not enough to heal such wounds. Perhaps nothing is enough. Even in moments of intense recollection, as in the first two passages above, the threat of non-recognition is often near ("I don't think I would have known him," "I cannot make out her face"), and like facts, objects, people, and even history, memory is opaque, inscrutable, illegible, and therefore only partially consoling.

There are other tones in *Austerlitz*—unexpected humor, melodrama. However, stitched throughout is Austerlitz's troubling sense that at "some time in the past I must have made a mistake, and now I am living the wrong life." But in Sebald's world of gigantic historical events, and of an unreadable past and present, what can it mean to have made a mistake? It is an absolutely secular form of damnation—marked by inexplicable guilt, anxiety, and solitude—to believe that one has erred when there is no right way. Sebald's characters wander and persist in this condition. All that they can do is to continue to search for (or create) some pattern in the chaotic welter of their experience. It is no coincidence that *Austerlitz* ends with its protagonist setting out anew in search of his father, and with its shadowy narrator reading the life of a Holocaust survivor while sitting on the outskirts of a Belgian fortress that became a Nazi prison and is now a museum. But Sebald intimates that such quests for pattern and meaning must remain inevitably, mournfully incomplete.

I know of no other writer who evokes Sebald's slippery realism, who suggests so

deftly the imperceptible ebb and flow of meaning that we, like Sebald's characters, all experience. We also experience it in reading Sebald himself. The odd coincidences, subtle repetitions, verifiable facts, and coy, document-like photographs that punctuate the text all force us to wonder not only what they mean, but *how much* they mean. Sebald's work turns on the astonishing paradox that it is its own dense structuring that evokes and explores the sense of a disturbing patternlessness. It stands on the tenuous border between reality and fiction, as only fiction can do. *Austerlitz* is a very beautiful novel of this boundary condition, which is both textual and human. That it has become Sebald's final novel is a fact deeply to regret; we may still be grateful that Sebald's sad, mysterious, unfinished vision is as complete as it is.

—*Christopher Jackson*

Shadow of Heaven, Poems
By Ellen Bryant Voigt
W.W. Norton and Co., 2002

Ellen Bryant Voigt's sixth collection of poetry seeks to reclaim the landscape of her childhood and unite such themes as family and death in a luxurious blend of song and story. A native Virginian, Voigt's poetry remains entrenched in the scenery of the South, and she reconciles life and death through unveiling their undeniable place in the order of the natural world. In her poems, the voices of the past whisper from beneath the rocks of the land in which they spent their lives, the land that she too finds to be an undeniable part of her. In the poem "High winds flare up and the old house shudders," she states, "The dead should just shut up. Already / they've ruined the new plowed field: / it looks like a grave." For Voigt, it is indisputable that the dead remain in their surroundings, permanent as stone.

Shadow of Heaven follows Voigt's critically acclaimed previous book, *Kyrie*, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. In *Kyrie*, she adhered to the strict form of the sonnet as she created a sequence dealing with the 1918 Influenza plague. Here, in *Shadows of Heaven*, Voigt returns to the variety of form that marks her earlier work. Her poems are lyric by nature, but she still proves to possess a defining voice and a natural ability to tell a story without sacrificing the beautiful sound and description that the lyric poem allows. Voigt, a classically trained pianist, has an undeniable talent for structuring a poem rhythmically without having to resort to the use of rhyme and meter. These poems recall a time when poetry was meant to be sung, and she is clearly singing us her stories.

The heart of the book centers around two long, sectioned poems. The first, "The Garden, Spring, The Hawk," functions as a sort of letter to the speaker's sister who is living in a distant Virginia. It is a poem that deals movingly with the poet's relationship with place and the irremovable link to "home": "the country of one's origin / is always *she*, the ground beneath the plow, / and the deep south a clearer paradigm / than where you live beside the Northern Gate." Voigt treats home as an irremovable part of a person's life. Her richly textured descriptions of the people, animals, and landscapes that embody home almost become descriptions of

the sinews and curves of a person's body, of a person's humanity. In the second sectioned poem, "The Art of Distance," Voigt grapples with a father's responsibility to his family. The speaker describes her father's toil as a farmer to keep his family above the poverty line. The father's economic struggle is related to that of an animal trying to survive in the wild: "My father was an earth-sign and a stoic, / an eldest child, a steward, who took dominion / over the given world—at least, it seemed, / his hundred acres of it, pets we ate, / rabbits minced in the combine, inchling moths torched in the crotch of the tree to save the peaches / Scorned excess and complaint. Importuned, said / *no, not, can't, never will*." With this poem, Voigt furthers the idea that the family is embedded in nature; it exists as a murder of crows, a pride of lions trying to survive in the wild. A person separated from these essential bonds to family and nature almost becomes an animal in a zoo longing to rediscover the life they once had for good, or for bad.

These poems come together with Voigt's fierce determination "to bring the outdoors inside, / the natural and wild, picked by my hand," but what she is really trying to accomplish is a creation of order. Her poems seek to illuminate a struggle to unveil everything's place in nature, planting life and death, family and home directly into the soil to prove to everyone that the world is not quite as inextricable as it seems. It's a task that may be too large for one person to undertake, but it is certainly enjoyable to watch Voigt try.

—*Matt Pennock*

A Short History of the Shadow
By Charles Wright,
Farrar Straus Giroux, 2002

When many older poets are publishing volume after volume of *New and Selected Poems*, it is refreshing and intriguing to get an entire book of new poetry centered on the experiences and challenges an aging writer endures. Charles Wright's *A Short History of the Shadow* is dedicated to reflection on the past, acknowledging the present field of vision, and invoking the new millennium. All the poems, each meditative to its own degree and in its own way, are focused through the exhaustion, the calm, and the nostalgia of the older poet.

At times, it seems as if Wright can sit back in his chair and see the whole world from his porch. At the heart of this book, the line "To look hard at something, to look through it, is to transform it, / Convert it into something beyond itself, to give it grace" rings truest for all the poems. Wright finds Italy in his backyard, a purpose in rain, and transforms the natural world into a text that is authoritative yet soothingly unsure at the same time. "Always it comes when we least expect it, like a wave, / or like the shadow of several waves," he writes speaking of memory, which peers out from the pages at many points in this book.

The language of remembering is key to Wright's work. In "Nostalgia II" he writes, "January, moth month, / crisp frost-flank and fluttering, / Verona, / Piazza Bra in the cut-light, / late afternoon, mid-winter, / 1959, / Roman in close-up arena tonsured and monk robed / After the snowfall." The intimacy and venue-specific language of these

poems are what gives him his authority in the realm of recollection. Wright, ever the stoic poet, writes with a sureness that draws you into believing what he puts on the page. Even his self-criticisms come across as accolades. In "Why It's Pretty as a Picture" Wright begins, "A shallow speaker, I'm tuned / to the music of things." Yet, by page fifty of this book we are inclined to believe otherwise, to pause over this appraisal and consider it in light of the artful and exquisitely colloquial insights presented throughout.

Wright is the caretaker of the metaphysical, not in the gauche sense in which poetry in often considered to be. "I'll put on the pilgrim slippers some of these days / There, where all things are forgot. / Till then, I'll see that the grass gets mowed. / Till then, I'll check out the cloud's drift, and the season's drift, / And how the days move, one at a time, / always at night, and always in my direction." The now, the hereafter, the links between the two: Wright shepherds the reader through the frontiers of the mind and the natural world. In many ways, these poems read as topographical maps of the mind's preoccupations. One can run their fingers over lines like "Transcendence is a young man's retreat, / and resides in a place / Beyond place, vastly, boundless. / It hums, unlike the beauty of the world, without pause, without mercy." Such lines, often found in Wright's work, help readers keep their balance as they progress through this book.

Wright has little left to prove as a writer, but there are an infinite number of challenges left to undertake. *A Short History of the Shadow*, the fruit of such labor, is an enriching book for those new and those accustomed to Wright's work. Wright once said, "Poetry is the shadow of the dog—the dog is out there, ever on the move." In Charles Wright's latest book, we see that he once again come very close to capturing this dog whose shadow he has made a career out of chasing.

—Kyle Dargen

The Eyre Affair
By Jasper Fforde
Viking, 2002

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* has dominated the *Jane Eyre* spin-off market since its publication in 1966—until recently. The past five years have seen a clutch of new competitors vying for Charlotte Brontë market share. There are two *different* novels bearing the title *Mrs. Rochester* (1997 and 2000), both purporting to be "the" sequel to *Jane Eyre*. They must contend with *Jane Rochester* (2000); with the self-published *Jane Eyre's Daughter* (1999); with the sub-literary SM retelling, *Disciplining Jane* (2001); with Emma Tennant's forthcoming *Adele: Jane Eyre's Hidden Story*; and with D. M. Thomas's *Charlotte*. But for sheer ingenuity and charm, my money's on Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair*. With the same knack for whimsical literary referentiality that fed the early scenes of *Shakespeare in Love*, Fforde is clearly poised to capture the hearts of his English-majors-on-holiday readers.

The Eyre Affair is a biblio-mystery set in a complex parallel universe where literary detective Thursday Next chases after mad genius Acheron Hades ("number three on the planet's most-wanted list") as he wreaks

havoc on the classics of English literature. Next's adventures are reminiscent of the literary encounters of Connie Willis's time-travelers in her brilliant *To Say Nothing of the Dog* (Bantam, 1998). Fforde takes the mood of that novel—whimsical, mysterious, bordering on the fantastic—adds a dash of Douglas Adams, and imbues it with the tongue-in-cheek tone of the hard-boiled detective story. Even the form bears similarities: just as Willis adapts the epigraphic chapter summaries from Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, so Fforde uses transparently fictional quotations (from such works as Acheron Hades's *Degeneracy for Pleasure and Profit*) at the heading of each chapter: the facetious epigraph emerges as a clear genre indicator. Because both novelists incorporate impossible technology—time travel among them—they risk being unfairly marginalized as science fiction. Neither writer deserves to be so easily dismissed. This may be science fiction, but it ain't Star Trek, and as with all good comedy, there is plenty below the surface.

The vivid sense of wonder with which Fforde describes his fantastic parallel universe is one of his great gifts. Just when one begins to suspect that he's more enamored of his genetically reengineered dodos, his independent People's Republic of Wales, and his endless Crimean War (still going strong in 1985) than of the plot itself, such details become surprise vehicles for furthering the plot. Similarly, it's not until relatively late in the novel that Fforde reveals that he's been setting us up all along by inflating the value of literary trivia into matters of everyday importance: hundreds of Milton scholars sign in at a conference under the name of their favorite poet, a performance of *Richard III* takes audience participation to a level *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* can only dream of, and "Marlovians" vandalize "Will-Speak" street-corner vending machines so that the soliloquies they dispense come from *Tamburlaine* rather than *Hamlet*.

The lines between fiction and reality blur even further when Hades uses his diabolical powers to enter the manuscript of *Martin Chuzzlewit* and dispatch a minor character. Next's discovery that all copies of the Dickens novel have been irretrievably altered is a scholarly editor's worst nightmare: "He went for the original manuscript," she muses, "for the maximum disruption. All copies anywhere on the planet, in whatever form, originate from that first act of creation. When the original changes, all the others have to change too." Fforde patiently sets up the climax of his near-satirical meta-fiction: a race to solve the mystery of the end of *Jane Eyre*, and an out-and-out battle to save its heroine—along with the very text of Brontë's novel. In the end, Fforde's sparkling, engaging, and very, very funny novel leaves one pondering yet again the true authorship of Shakespeare's plays—and eagerly anticipating Thursday's next appearance, which promises to be *Lost in a Good Book* (U.S. edition forthcoming, February 2003). Given the cinematic character of Fforde's writing, that may not be the only medium she gets lost in.

—John Buchtel

Gold Indigoes
By George Elliot Clarke
Carolina Wren Press, 2000

These sensually driven poems offer the reader emotionally charged, exotic snapshots of life, which at their best create a sense of breathless candor, of unsettling yet cathartic revealing. Writing about Paris, Miles Davis, adulterous love, cold Canadian winters (the poet hails from Nova Scotia), and sexual ecstasy, Clarke has written one of the best collections of lyric poetry in recent times—surprisingly contained within a modest chapbook published by a small North Carolina press.

At first read, the poems could be critiqued as heavily dramatic. For example, the highly personal poem dealing with Clarke's adultery, "April 19-A Sonnet," barely escapes from bombastic violins swelling. Yet the reader cannot resist Clarke's gorgeous, obviously toiled-over language that somehow seems to lift from the page as effortlessly as the fragrance of wildflowers. In a time when the voices of contemporary poets are becoming considerably less riveting, it is with great pleasure that the reader encounters a voice of such large, romantic spirit and boundless energy as Clarke's.

The first poem, "Secret History," is a lucid, fluid mélange of all of Clarke's favorite themes—transatlantic wanderings, jazz music, and obsessive sexual desire. In beginning his collection in this dramatically stunning manner, Clarke is letting the reader know immediately what kind of poet lives within these pages—one of extreme emotional sensitivity, sensual clarity, and fascinated delight in the details and figures of this world. In "Secret History," he weaves together disparate elements—music, cities, nostalgia, and human pain—with a loose dexterity that could only be achieved by a naturally gifted writer:

> Think of Chet Baker, his lyrical
> trumpet, très triste et tragique,
> that orchestrated lush ballad moods
> from eyes busted, decayed flutes,
>
> the sense of the Pacific corrupted,
> of the Mediterranean dying,
> and then of skin stripping N.Y. skin,
> his cool vocals refusing to mourn,
>
> circa West Coast Fifties or circa
> Roma Sixties, his apocalyptic
> plummet—
> white boy Lucifer—from a balcony
> in fin de siècle Amsterdam.

The proper nouns of this poem are employed by Clarke for dramatic punch and emotional significance rather than esoteric filler, and his wild images—"decayed flutes," "white boy Lucifer"—are indelibly imprinted on the reader's mind.

Another poem returns to Clarke's fixation on jazz music: "Miles Davis: An Autobiography." The poem's language generates a perverse heat and raw energy that reflects the primal, often violent brilliance of Davis's own music: "I crave / A sound like poison because genius is / Greedy. I'm hooked on a rhythm like horse, / Sickening kick of heroin that mimics / What happens when two sick melodies fuck, / Meld together like genital'd colours, / Animals, snarling, ruttish, sadistic, / Roaring like a whore whose left eye was / Ripped, who took three skull fractures, a cracked / Jawbone,

whose cussed clit was severed, and who / Was hit on the head with a lead hammer / Eleven times—because of evil love." These images, grotesque and raw, disturbingly yet aptly reflect Davis's own transcendent, violent musical sensibilities as well as the murky confluence of addictions in his life—to the possibilities of music, to hard drugs. Writing about famous musicians has been done before, yet Clarke manages to create a piece about Davis that seems startlingly fresh and completely his own. He's able to work his way into Davis's creative psyche in both a wildly romantic and painfully human way.

Indeed, this conjunction of romanticism and humanity is what makes Clarke such an accessible yet immensely enjoyable poet to read. This collection invites the reader to return to it again and again despite the often-raw material because of its linguistic pleasures and the energy and heart that Clarke puts into each of his poems. Perhaps Clarke is one of the first poets of the century to offer up such a gripping, cohesive, and delightful collection, and yet very little of the world has actually read him. While this small chapbook might not reach a universal readership, let us hope that Clarke will find a wider audience in years to come.

—Jenny Gillespie