Jesse Graves & William Wright. Specter Mountain

Author: James Owens
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In his poem, "How to be a Poet" Wendell Berry advises, "Stay away from anything / that obscures the place it is in" This is essential wisdom, certainly for a poet, but equally for any person or any group of people, no matter how large or seemingly powerful. A nation or a civilization is a lesser thing than the earth where it has sprung into being, and these make barely a flicker against the background of deep, geological time, though lives lived firmly in place also share something of the eternal. *Specter Mountain,* by Jesse Graves and William Wright, speaks eloquently from inside this truth.

Graves and Wright should be well-known to readers, and to readers of poetry in Appalachia, in particular. Both have already produced rich, necessary work as poets and editors, and now their collaboration is an occasion for gratitude. *Specter Mountain* offers many types of beauty and pleasure, including fine instances of what some of the more thoughtful recent writing on poetics means by "eco-poetry."

The work of any writer associated with a particular place--whether Appalachia or the wider South or any other locale--has taken on a special urgency in recent times, when many places and the ways of life that people have invented to fit them feel the threat of change or extinction. Where resistance to these threats fail, eco-poetry must assume the unhappy work of acknowledgement and grief and warning.

Many people in twenty-first century America live in the midst of things and attitudes and economic structures that, as Berry writes, "obscure" the places they are in, from the largest cities to rural areas left in pain by the disappearance of traditional ways of life with little to replace them except poverty or migration. Specter Mountain chooses not to dwell long on the already familiar consequences of living in these "desecrated places"--Berry's phrase--but when it does offer a portrait of contemporary anomie, the effect is chilling and indelible. In Specter Mountain, this can perhaps be best seen in "The Estranged," which shows us

the truck-bed boys of a silent town, where violence buds in their hearts like pulsing nettles, brown calculi of hard drugs knitted between their teeth. They smile with a blade's exactness. Nights they piss in the gardens of strangers and light cats on fire, laugh at the pain and yowls.

"This is not a fiction" the poem goes on to insist, "this is hidden / fact, the petrified senses of those / who look away for good"--that is, those who look away from the local facts of life on the mountain, in search of some illusion of "good" in a culture disconnected from the ancient and provident earth. "The Estranged" gives a reader a glimpse into a life, if we want to call it life, that is thankfully not universal in contemporary Appalachia or in other battered parts of the country, but is common enough to be recognizable for anyone who has spent much time in communities ravaged by drugs and unemployment and aimlessness. Specter Mountain is not to be found on a map, but it is still located solidly in the real world.

Though *Specter Mountain* gathers an imposing variety of poetic forms and approaches-elegy and hymn and dream vision, ballad and confessional--its particular virtue as a book, rather than as an accumulation of individually satisfying poems, is in its understanding of scale, the meaning of the particular detail's relationship to its background. Here the experience of any poem's immediate speaker is nested inside a living, contemporary community, which is nested inside the historical process of immigration and ancestral experience of the land--and inside geological processes of formation and destruction, orogeny and the shifting of tectonic plates. The book's first poem, "Prologue," opens with a Genesis-like description of the separation of the Earth and the Moon, and no poem that follows will forget its positioning on the world thus made: "And it was said unto gravity, // *heave a stone / at the barren Earth that a moon will form from it--* // and the worlds survived, fractured into existence."

The physical process of rock heaved up and worn down over millennia, its valleys and subterranean passages, is a constant store of

image and metaphor for these poems, a literal grounding for history on the mountain, as it emerges out of time. "Chthonic" is paradigmatic in its understanding of interacting cycles of time, beginning with a dream of the geologic past that seems to unite scientific and mythic accounts of the deep, living underground in gorgeously felt language:

I sometimes fall into visions where the Earth opens, and far underground, beneath the shallow dead and the waterline, beneath any trace of life, the world is undone, aortal and blistering, glowing and darkening, the Hadean palpitant center.

For all its importance, this vision of the center of the Earth and of everything's origins is momentary, quickly replaced as "valleys / and rivers lean again into their time-worn complexities," and the poem's speaker is confronted with questions of how to live in time on the human scale, where generations come and go and leave but little or ambiguous traces. The sin-obsessed religion of a deceased grandparent, which might have been an inheritance in earlier days, no longer seems to offer much consolation. "What then is a simple solace?" the speaker asks.

The stand of light between the trees? Perhaps I love the oaks no matter where I am--on this mountain, behind the cabin window, or near the stream because I cannot endure the vision of the buried body of my grandfather--a man I could not love for his constant mantras about the sinful *and* the end. *His home was nearly pitch black even on sunny days, any light a leaking toxin. The only comfort he found was walking fields in the pre-dawn halflight, always looking down, down for arrowheads and bannerstones, quartz drills, old pipes and bottles, some evidence that he moved and lived, that others had gone, cast off their mundane legacies.*

Memories or other traces of the preceding generations of human lives passed on the mountain are present throughout the book, from Native Americans, such as Sequoyah, who transposed "earth verse" into the Cherokee syllabary, "a traveling tongue, talking leaves / that could carry a message farther than the wind" ("The Residual Site"), to settlers from Ireland and Germany, who brought with them both European myths and agricultural knowledge to be adapted to the steep forests of Appalachia. Those earlier generations lived their lives wisely, if sparely, on the mountain's terms, adapting themselves to the rhythmic cycles of the natural world, imagined in such poems as "Field Tender's Hymnal," whose German-immigrant speaker foresees continuity for the family he has established on the mountain, planning to pass his land on to his children: "This ground we tend will belong to them, / so I teach what they are ready to learn, / how to furrow the fields without run-off, / to watch the moon for signs to plant."

But the poems are aware that such cultural wisdom faces attrition in more recent times. Though these lines from "The Residual Site" are thinking most directly about the fading of the Cherokee language, we might read them in the wider context of other loses that happen as the young move away, or simply lose interest and connection with the land:

Ground water can sing its cold song forever, but human codes go quiet after fading out, after losing pitch to the ears of the young, leaving a whole turn of mind, way of being, with no voice in the world, no way to reveal its secret truth.

And though the poem ends by reminding us that "The mountain speaks for itself," both preceding and surviving human language and custom, it may be that few people are listening, anymore, and too many of those who live within range of the mountain's voice find themselves isolated and wounded.

There remains beauty and goodness to be found on Specter Mountain, though the title of "Overburden"--meaning the life-bearing layers of soil and stone that are blasted and bulldozed away during mountaintop removal mining operations--suggests that threat is never far distant. Still, "for now, the mountain is whole. For now / the galax and foamflower bloom beyond / themselves." The phrase "for now," repeated throughout the poem, serves as a reminder of the precariousness of ecological health that could be overturned by a single industrial decision, but with each iteration it also builds incantatory force, becoming a spell, praying that life here continue as it is.

These hills burn within the cosmos, their deep land and the flesh it contains filled with dimming lamps of stars. For now, the valley's creel washes up in aster. Wild dogs sulk under shards of dusk the limbs reshape nightly. Mountain lions satisfy their bloody motions. For now the mountain is whole.

Graves and Wright are poets of serious accomplishment, and these poems sing and play and work as deeply into a reader as rain shaping its passages into the granite heart of the mountain. In doing so, they also shape our attention to matters of importance and our affections to the ways that human life has been lived in our places on earth and the ways that it might, if we try with the right devotion, continue.

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