

BOOKS IN BRIEF: Good Poems

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B. H. Fairchild, *The Blue Buick: New and Selected Poems*

(New York: W. W. Norton, 2014, 346 pp, \$29.95 hardbound)

Kirun Kapur, *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist* (Denver, CO:

Elixir Press, 2015, 117 pp, \$17 paper)

More than a decade ago, Garrison Keillor published an anthology of work featured on his "Writer's Almanac": *Good Poems*. I liked its conceptual simplicity, implicit self-confidence, commitment to history. I liked the contrast to tomes (tombs?) often encountered in the academic world: *Flying Blind: Ornithological Imagery and Growth of the Imagination in Early Works by Chester B. Jaythwacker*. No, not that. Just "good poems."

In his introduction, Keillor outlines criteria for selection: "[s]tickiness" or "memorability," "narrative line," "clear pictures of the familiar," "love of language" (which equals "love of truth"), no "stuff that is too airy," work that is "of use," "beautiful," "entertaining and easy to understand," that manifests "a conspiracy of friendliness."

While I don't necessarily share his aesthetic or always appreciate the poems Keillor chooses, I cherish his effort to articulate poetic values, for that remains the most important task of editing a poetry magazine, identifying what we as an editorial board desire to acknowledge, to honor, and to print: "good poems."

This review had its origin in my own sense of two good poems, one I wish the *BPJ* had published and one we did: B. H. Fairchild's "Beauty" and Kirun Kapur's "At the Tiki Lounge." This initial enthusiasm led me to two new volumes, Fairchild's massive retrospective encompassing his career as a male poet rooted in the Midwest and Kapur's significant first volume exploring her world as a young woman raised in Hawai'i, currently a resident of New England, and yet an inheritor of the complex history of the Indian subcontinent.



I don't think I knew of B. H. Fairchild before I encountered his third book, *The Art of the Lathe*, published in 1998 here in Farmington, Maine, by our neighbors, Alice James Books. Once I had read and appreciated this slim volume, and especially its opening poem, "Beauty," I enjoyed watching the expanding string

of awards affixed to the cover of subsequent printings. And I valued greatly his public reading at the University of Maine at Farmington just after the turn of the century. He's a big man with a rich voice, well suited for the oral presentation of extended narrative poems that are his most substantial fare.

The Art of the Lathe has at its heart manual laborers and a machine shop run in Kansas in the early 1960s by Fairchild's father. Such a workplace and workers appear from the very beginning of the poet's publications. At first they seem retrospective experiences he wishes to escape, "pushing everything . . . behind" him, awaiting, as the title of his first book announces, *The Arrival of the Future*. That book begins, in a poem not reprinted in this new collection, in a shop filled with "junk. / Hunks of iron." The boy who observes them sleeps and "dreams," imagining, as the poet will later articulate, that "life / is somewhere else." To be sure, "[t]he afternoon sun" pours in and "the shop becomes a world of light," but the men cast "long shadows" and for now at least they leave the shop behind.

By his second book, *Local Knowledge* (1991), Fairchild pays more explicit tribute to the world of physical labor. In "Toban's Precision Machine Shop" he describes "lathes leaning against / their leather straps, grinding wheels motionless / above mounds of iron filings." In "Work" machine parts are massive, animate, and treated with respect: "tools rest like bodies dull / with sleep." Negative images, however, still predominate: "The lathe shudders and / starts its dark groan. . . . [T]he gin poles / screech in their sockets like grief-stricken women." Yet the "blaze of a sun" occasionally appears, and the sunlight

seems to lift lathes
and floor at once, and something announces itself,
not beauty, but rather its possibility

Garrison Keillor would recognize why I fell in love with "Beauty." Its point is simple, easy to understand: the absence of any explicit articulation of beauty in the culture of the poet's youth. A clear narrative travels back to this childhood culture from a moment years later as Fairchild stands with his wife looking at Donatello's "David" at the Bargello Museum in Florence. The poem contrasts and then links the glory of that Italian moment with what the poet comes to see as complex beauties of his

youth: the mass and muscle of the machine shop; his father's quiet compassionate treatment of two exhibitionists who show up looking for jobs; a machinist so afraid of the misplaced loveliness of the exhibitionists' bodies that he would attack them if he could with an iron file; the poet's sad but witty recognition that in this environment one could only use the word "beauty" to refer "to a new pickup or dead deer." In retrospect, however, we arrive even here at enlightenment. Fairchild ends by linking the sun-blazed "great dome" of Florence with "the way / the metal roof of the machine shop . . . would break into flame late on an autumn day."

Although the role of the machine shop diminishes as *The Blue Buick* traces the poet's later writings, description of the physical world, especially of the Midwest, maintains its importance, even if in elegy:

The clapboard stores, slats long ago sand-blasted in dust storms, bleached or ochre now, gray, the faint green and yellow of a Lipton Tea ad on red brick. . . . Not even decline, but the dawn of absence. Architecture of the dead. The lives they housed are dust, the wind never stops.

Beauty and the search for it dominate Fairchild's poetry. Given the hardscrabble life of his early environment, it is hard to imagine even the search for beauty, let alone the possibility of discovering it. In his second volume, he at least recognizes that possibility; in his third, in "Beauty" and elsewhere, he acknowledges the presence of the beautiful, both past and current. In "The Blue Buick," the long retrospective poem that provides the title for this new volume, and earlier centered his fourth book, *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest* (2003), the poet confesses his early discomfort concerning "beautiful, a word I wasn't easy with back then." By the end of that fourth volume, however, he is "astonished. . . . the beauty . . . is overwhelming."

In his first three volumes Fairchild demonstrates a mastery of sophisticated prosody masked by casual narrative language. In a brief comment [BPJ, Winter 2010/2011] on a poem by him included in *The Best American Poetry 2010*, I described in detail and praised his ability to create formal music in deceptively informal lines. I could do so again here but wish to place

elsewhere my emphasis on technique. In his fourth volume, in *Usher*, his fifth, and in the new poems included at the end of *The Blue Buick*, he at times moves toward formal experiments—prose poems, stanzas, rhyme, even a sestina. His greatest musical strength, however, emerges from within his informal narratives. For me the best writing among the new work occurs in “History: Four Poems,” which begins with the rich music and vivid description that has carried his writing through the past three decades:

First, the fluttering of screeching birds,
 their sudden plunge and climb through manic,
 spiral flights, chickens squawking in the backyard,
 and then doors slamming and the air grieved
 by gusts of prairie dirt as I look back
 to see the sky turn sick with darkness

When crafting the second poem of this series, “Shakespeare in the Park, 9/11/2011,” the poet sometimes shifts to blank verse that feels less vigorous than his informal prosody:

Above Lear’s absent crown the moon had paled
 to little more than real estate where men
 have walked. A poplar waved the stars away.
 An army of cicadas sang the old mad song.

Yet overall, this set of four further commentaries on the past viewed from the present provides ample evidence that Fairchild continues to create strong poems, especially the third, “Economics,” in its terse tribute to the Occupy Movement in the context of Woody Guthrie and the survivor of a 1930s Oklahoma bank robbery:

His voice hardened into something thin and brittle
 for *suddenly*, he said, *suddenly* back then, he knew,
 in that flat Baptist land of bad deeds and worse money
 where preachers raged against all forms of sin
except the greed of the sleeping kings of poverty,
 that the scabby hand of vengeance was alive
 and real and moving slowly through the fields
 and burning streets of little towns like this one because
 the third thief placed the barrel of his Remington
 beneath the bank president’s chin and said,
*This, sir, is what happens when banks are built
 on the broken backs of the people*

I assume B. H. Fairchild, or “Pete” as he calls himself, has a private life that corresponds to the life in his poems but does not duplicate it. For us as audience he creates a public life by writing poems about that life. By imagining, by envisioning in retrospect the beauty of the past, the poet creates present and future beauties as reflections and extensions of that past, though at the time it was merely the chrysalis of what would become, for him, beautiful.



Kirun Kapur also appears to be creating her life by writing it. I certainly did not know her poetry when in 2008 I opened an envelope containing what I remember as the first work she sent us. Our editorial board chose three poems from that manuscript. Two years later, we accepted two more from another set. Of the five, the one that stays with me most powerfully is “At the Tiki Lounge.”

In it Kapur subtly describes the interaction between a woman and an army veteran who has apparently “lost his . . . leg.” She begins with his pick-up line, “*You’ve got a pretty face,*” but he soon moves to a compelling description of an event in Basra, Iraq, where he and his mates joined a local meal and were served “*Hot stringy meat, some gritty // Sauce. Worse even than our Army shit. . . . It might be camel balls or some real toxic shit,*” perhaps even, one soldier later suggests, “*Parts of kidnapped journalists.*” As the narrated scene becomes more complex, more threatening, the woman, though free to leave, stays and listens, until his fingers grasp her arm, holding her and yet pushing her away. Her tolerance of his hand allows us also to experience the intensity of the soldier’s past and current life. I know no other poem that conveys for me so effectively a sense of post-traumatic stress disorder in a commonplace social situation.

“At the Tiki Lounge” appears in the fourth section of Kapur’s book, near its conclusion, in a cluster of work that expands the Indian/American geographical and cultural vision she has earlier created. As the epigraph from Amitav Ghosh asserts, “It happened everywhere.” Other poems than the one that captured my attention remain more central to the poet’s work as a whole; their comprehensive complexity makes this collection remarkable. What Fairchild continues to accomplish over a

lifetime of publishing, Kirun Kapur has compressed into a single volume.

Like many a first collection, *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist* begins conventionally: An "Anthem." Then "Family Portrait, USA" for her mother. A poem of similar length for her father. A second poem for her father balanced by another for her mother. One that begins with both her father and her uncle. Kapur, however, knows where she's going, and it *ain't* conventional. She creates a family narrative, but one so unusual, so unpredictable, that conventional structure seems almost necessary. We need to know the characters, and the poet, if we are to understand what follows. Keillor's desire for "clear pictures of the familiar" dissolves in Kapur's worlds, in complex situations involving the unfamiliar.

We first encounter the poet's mother when the young woman lived in New Mexico as a Benedictine novitiate. We meet her father as he "played look-out" while his brother swiped mangoes from a Punjabi neighbor and "stopped passers-by // with made-up Shakespeare, breaking news / of Gandhi-ji, until the coast was clear." By the time we reach the fifth family poem, focused on her uncle and father, we're not on conventional family turf. The title begins with "History," which might lead us to suspect the narrative will continue, but the full title is "History (with a Melon Cleaver)." And the cleaver is about to descend. We're no longer in "Family Portrait, USA" but in Lahore, in 1947, just before the monsoon season, when the storm is not (as Kushwant Singh's epigraph tells us) meteorological but political: the creation of "the new state of Pakistan" and the subsequent flight of ten million people, with "almost a million" soon to be dead.

They stood in line to buy a slice of melon—
My father and my uncle, in cantaloupe season.
When the boy in front reached out to pay,
The melon seller waved his cleaver.

Formally, the poem is a pantoum, and as the lines repeat themselves with subtle changes, the situation also changes, for the hand holding the cleaver is not the dangerous one: "*With the other hand, he stabbed the boy with a dagger.*" Nothing has prepared them for the future, for what happens next. When he tells the story, "My uncle's voice was full of wonder. . . . As if a comet had passed overhead."

As this unexpected comet passes overhead, as the Indian subcontinent roils in its division and subdivision, the biographical poems prepare us for the meeting of the poet's mother and father, the ex-novitiate who "knew / exactly what to do" and the Hindu who "quotes Frost as easily as Ghalib." Soon we move beyond the personal, into the mythic, with "First Families: Cain and Abel." Just as father and mother follow the snake of temptation, the pursuit of the forbidden, the linking of east and west, of Christian and Hindu, the poet and her brother follow their "instinct . . . to love each other / viciously." And the daughter, disobeying her father as Cain must his parents, holds up the "cut snake" of her "braid" for her father to see, even though she is unable to articulate verbally what she has demonstrated visually.

The family, yes, remains a literal family, following on a mythic level some actions of the biblical first family, yet in verse so fresh that what might be cliché is more like revelation. As the book's epigraph from Willa Cather reminds us, "two or three human stories . . . go on repeating themselves." The language and the sentences stay simple:

It was a beautiful spring in Rawalpindi
When a Muslim dhobi warned his hostel full of Hindu boys.
While his eye flashed like a camera on the city,
My father escaped before the mob arrived.

This simplicity masks the complexity of both individual and collective lives: Kapur's grandfather leaving for what will become India while his brother remains; her father surviving with his Hindu classmates when a Muslim laundryman warns them to leave Rawalpindi; herself encountering Indira Gandhi's palmist or the intensity of an army veteran experiencing PTSD.

To understand the author's circumstance, the mythic leap from actual family to Adam and Eve will not suffice. If biblical mythology contributes to her mother's vision, her father's decisions depend on stories from the east, from the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Two-thirds of the way through the book, in "First Families," the longest poem of the collection, we travel with Arjuna, Prince of the Pandavas, as he confronts the need for action knowing that any action he takes will have fatal consequences. We travel, however, not only with him but also with the poet's father as he transgresses against the Hindu sanctity of beef cattle,

her mother as she passes “the US ambassador’s house . . .
completely free / of anyone’s control,” the veteran as he recalls
a night in Basra. Finally we feel an urge for “liberation,” to reject
“philosophy” and choose, with Arjuna, “the fruit of action,”
though recognizing we later could hear

a note that might resolve
into a laugh

of ghostly princes

or of sight-seers
who would come after us . . .

and wonder. . . .

*Who’s been here? . . .
what have they thought or done?*

As Keillor might wish, Kapur’s work presents a strong narrative, this time not one easily followed on first read, but as we grow into the poem, and the book, a compelling one. Her experience remains one individual story among many powerful tales, as she becomes the chosen one, whether she wishes it or not, to visit “Indira Gandhi’s Palmist,” designated to connect the entire history. Her aunt hisses, “[I]t’s *your honor to look for all of us*,” but Kapur asserts, “I wanted to look away. Wanted to cry. . . . *I am afraid I’ll spend my life under a hand that I can’t stop or hold.*”

Arjuna, whether he wishes it or not, must confront the decision either to kill or to allow his cousins to die. Despite the palmist’s bromides that Kapur will make “a fine wife, a fine mother of fine sons,” the poet decides to recognize the power of that hand, the hand of the veteran, the hand of history. In response she opens her own hands, commits to action of her own. The world may be Maya, illusion, but confronting that illusion provides a mechanism for moving ahead. As the volume’s final poem, “For the Survivors,” concludes: “Begin. Ring your self.” Like the poem that led me to love Kapur’s work, the entire book presents a complex world, one full of grief, yet well worth living. Life is not, as the young Fairchild once imagined, “*somewhere else.*” It is here.

BOOKS IN BRIEF

When falling in love with a moment, a gesture, a poem, I always wonder whether the love will extend beyond that first impression. Picking up *The Blue Buick* and *Visiting Indira Gandhi's Palmist* I felt some apprehension. Laying them down I feel great satisfaction. B. H. Fairchild has extended his search for and discovery of beauty; Kirun Kapur has traced a memorable individual and collective story to her present situation. Both of them write, as my colleague Lee Sharkey would say, "poems that matter": Good Poems.