

BOOKS IN BRIEF: The Still-Living Past

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Amanda Auchter, *The Wishing Tomb* (Florence, MA: Perugia Press, 2012, 85 pp, \$16 paper)

Jake Adam York, *Abide* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2014, 82 pp, \$15.95 paper)

Elise Boulding, lifelong peace worker and futurist, insisted that we all have a responsibility to address damages from the past and to repair them in the present and future. To drive home this obligation, she coined the term “200-year present,” a concept that envisions each lifetime as at least the life span before and after it. Within that time frame, we are charged with responding to injustices and needs—both human and environmental.

Amanda Auchter and Jake Adam York take up this charge in poetry collections that grapple back for comprehension as they reach forward for change. *The Wishing Tomb* and *Abide* confront, wrestle with, and mourn damage and suffering in poems that urge us to understand and heal. York writes, “Time is moving forward / in memory, memory’s // moving back,” and Auchter joins in, “This world is in me: // let us build ourselves again.”



Our modern memory of New Orleans is perhaps dominated by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, the governmental neglect of human need in trauma. Boulding’s vision warns us off such a narrow focus, however, and encourages a broader memory. Auchter’s *The Wishing Tomb*, her second book, offers a deep view of the city’s history and its people. Spanning from the late seventeenth century to 2010, the collection takes as its project the city’s complicated, gorgeous, and ugly identity.

Much of the authenticity of this work arises from that juxtaposition of beauty and horror. The book begins with “Early Pastoral,” a prose poem that describes an ocean journey to New Orleans in 1718 through “a nauseous lullaby” of “rain and its humid talk.” Upon landfall, the immigrating speaker encounters her first view of the city and is pleased by the lush landscape of “marshweed and sycamore,” but at the same time is appalled:

We never imagined so much water, the stench of bodies led away in chains. The mosquito-darkened sky. We watch the town open and open. The first glint of light, smoke. Soon we are standing on the shore and the heat stuns us. We

watch a man lead away another man by his shackled neck
until we cannot see him. So many bodies.

The Wishing Tomb continually employs such disjunctions in its lyrical imagery, layering opulent descriptions of flowers, food, and music with scenes of struggle and brutality.

In this way, Auchter authenticates New Orleans: there are no euphemisms or simplistic portrayals of Mardi Gras or hurricane outreach here. Rather, she presents the city as multifaceted, its traditions both comforting and catastrophic. Disaster is spliced with natural beauty, as in this description from “American Plague” of how malaria decimates certain wards, where Auchter describes loveliness amid tragedy:

a mosquito dabs the water, glances rim,
table, wooden spoon, pale scalp.

For a while, the children taste rain, wild-
flower, sugared bread. For a while,

there is no fever

These poems swarm with obsessive repetitions: mosquitoes, smoke, sweat, magnolias, cornpone, chicory, beads, and water—always *water* swamping, advancing, retreating, wrecking—providing both life and disaster to the land and populace. The collection begins with the line “The question is water,” and does not let up probing what that life force and destroyer means for New Orleans. Auchter keeps the dichotomy always present. She writes in the voice of slaves patrolling the levee: “We are of the water, its moon- // shards, the desperate way it breaks through / whatever contains it.” In “The Good Friday Flood, 1927” she comments.

The sky tongues its way into houses,

into hot water cornbread rising
out of the pan. Someone sings *trouble*

the water, adds flour to roux, parboils
rice. Rosary-fisted, someone kneels

to the floor, says, *swallow me back*,

Oh Lord.

Expressions of faith abound in *The Wishing Tomb* as Ursuline nuns offer blessings and herbal remedies, and Marie Laveau, a renowned voodoo priestess, performs love spells and ceremonies to stave off danger. Yet spells and prayers never ward off the rising water; both the faithful and the superstitious despair. When Hurricane Katrina nears the city, some residents look to old charms, tossing holy bread into the wind even as they are filled with bitter doubt, even as the cathedral's statue of Jesus is broken by a storm-spun brick. Post Katrina, the faithful continue to pray but are deeply shaken. "Prayer at Saint Rock Cemetery" is delivered in a flat, perfunctory voice, giving tasks to a deity who is addressed with no name:

Dear _____,

clear the rain that covers the broken
paths and graves. . . .

At dusk,

we will light small candles, offer what we have:
MREs, crucifixes, photographs

Throughout its history, despite vigilance, prayer, hard work, voodoo spells, and repeated rebuilding, New Orleans has *withstood* rather than *prevailed*. While *The Wishing Tomb* describes how New Orleans has survived chronic floods, fires, disease, and ferocious violence, it makes clear that survival has come at the cost of suffering for its least powerful residents. A slave caught eavesdropping has her ear sliced off. Prison inmates protest brutality by cutting their own Achilles tendons. When the city's black and Creole populations are hardest hit by (and blamed for) the fever epidemic in 1853, a mother implores, "What language / must we speak to keep safe? / Every prayer a tongue of fire, every psalm // a child's cry deep into the night."

Elise Boulding's work urges us to "sample the invisible," to give historical importance to the experience of those outside an entrenched power structure. That quest often fails, given the power structure, given the dearth of extant material. Auchter's book tells its wrenching truths in the voices of disenfranchised persons or sympathetic witnesses, focusing on the "invisible" and their often-hidden perspectives. In *The Wishing Tomb*,

women's and children's stories dominate, and African American experiences are central.

The trauma of the slave trade and the devastating repercussions of racial injustice in New Orleans remain ever present in these poems. Those who were never asked to report finally weigh in, as slaves speak in "Report on Levee Breach, 1816": "a white man whips mules / with a chicory whip. And our backs: // sweat-shined, marked." Auchter imagines the warning given before "Homer Plessy, who was 1/8th Black, was arrested for entering a whites-only railcar":

They will want to take you into the field, fill you
with bullets. They have been known

to make a man disappear. They will call you
coon and *boy*. They will yell *pull him off*

while showing you their revolvers, their lips
spit-slick, white. No one will look up

Auchter does "look up" to comprehend and carry forward otherwise neglected experiences, including the pushed-aside stories of residents devastated by Katrina and its aftermath in late summer 2005. The poet joins Patricia Smith (*Blood Dazzler*, 2008) in leveling invectives against the criminally negligent response to the disaster. Auchter's book, perhaps gentler in tone but no less strenuous in its stance, speaks in its final section to the suffering caused by this neglect. These last poems are awash in debris, sewage, shotgun fire, and mold—they do not adopt false optimism or tease out the beauty that was present in earlier poems, earlier times. As Christmas arrives, New Orleans remains grim and devastated:

an alligator wearing a Santa suit

waves and waves through the dome's
clear glass. Inside the Dome,

all the lights are out. Every window

black, empty. Inside the glass,
the dome has gone dry.

Auchter's rich, troubling poems do as Boulding encouraged: they insist that history include the testimony of the fragile and marginalized. They remind us to return and make right:

What brings you back is the sugared air. . . .

What calls you: the music

of a gate opening onto Tchoupitoulas Street,
chicory-heat, the roof tiles

in the black sky. The water. The rising.



If we are to undertake, as Auchter does, the charge of crafting a present and future mindful of experiences of those historically overlooked, we should heed the last poems of Jake Adam York. In his first two books, *Murder Ballads* and *A Murmuration of Starlings* (see *BPJ*, Vol. 63, No. 1, Books in Brief), York undertook a “work of a life, both countless and one” to elegize the martyrs of the civil rights movement. This project was cut short by his unexpected death in December 2012 at age forty. *Abide*, published posthumously, remains true to the project. In verses that echo Boulding's concept of an extended present, York writes that memory “reaches back, like the future, / which is just another kind / of history, a shape / for whatever's missing.”

Time flexes frequently in York's poems, straddling history and the future. Memory is made malleable by associations, and by the poet's meditations as a son, grandson, and great-grandson of Alabama's rural culture. He writes that family recollections emerge “Like my grandmother's recipes, / you'd get the idea / but not the numbers.” He acknowledges this blurriness as he attempts to come to terms with his place as a white man whose poetry elegizes “men, women, and children, murdered by men whom I resembled, demographically, by men to whom I may be related or for whom I may be mistaken.”

Placed at the end of *Abide*, York's essay “Foreword to a Subsequent Reading” describes, delicately, his approach to this work that required a “hesitation, a stutter, a silence in which the ghosts of the murderers may be sloughed from my skin, even if only for a moment.” The poems in this book are replete

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I have this purse and its coins and bits of story
that don't fit together. So

I do the one thing the farm taught me
and look away,

into the stars
and try to shape the dots
into myths.

Yet York refuses, after all, to look away. Instead, he strides purposefully from the farm to inquire about matters of justice, memory, willful forgetfulness, and responsibility. Then he writes poems that are at turns restless and meditative, demanding and comforting. In "Postscript," dedicated to Medgar Evers, York posits, "you are everywhere, / in the face of which I'd ask / how can I say anything, / in the face of which I ask / how can I say nothing at all?" In "Letter from Okemah," the speaker memorializes the 1911 lynching of Laura and Lawrence Nelson in Oklahoma, recognizing how easy it might be for him to shy away from such events, to sidestep facts and to disregard the few grainy photographs of record. "But I see them, I see them all, / and cannot look away."

In this poem, York employs a recurring metaphor for his quest to plumb memory and eulogize the dead: he places a phonograph needle on a vinyl album to bring forth music and history:

I hinge the needle into the groove
of a hundred years' sound
and finger the platen's edge

and pull it back
until the horn is gasping,
until the sound's gone out of everything
and the wind is coming in.

He remarks that he learned as a child this is a "needle I am not / supposed to touch" and yet "I have to raise the needle // I couldn't touch, once / too delicate for my hand, / needle that had to wait // for my father's."

As in *The Wishing Tomb*, the lyrical poems of *Abide* circle and obsess on central images; York returns time and again to stars

and constellations and grooves in vinyl albums, the needles placed there, as well as to birds, coins, steel mill furnaces, juke joints, and guitars. Sometimes these images come together in near-ecstatic expressions of truth-seeking. The poems propel themselves in long, unpunctuated stanzas as York elegantly wraps language around an often-inexplicable history, as in “Cry of the Occasion,” an elegy for John Earl Reese:

so I
can say something a little more blunt
like thunder a finger through the bone
peeling back the husk of the voice
opening like a bird called into
the wild answering

In this poem, as York writes of his poetic purpose of memorializing the forgotten or ignored dead, he claims the murdered are “calling my name louder than I’ve ever / heard.”

In another poem dedicated to Reese, placed near the end of the collection, York makes a subtle shift to invite others to hear the call, and to respond. He tenderly addresses Reese in lines that roll musically and urgently, proposing that we go back to the café and its memories. We should return, he writes, not to relive the hard facts of trauma but rather to honor what “was lived, what is written here, / in the night, in vinyl, in the air . . . / for you, if we may, pull back the arm / and start this music once again.”



Both Amanda Auchter and Jake Adam York recount moments of faltering, or “stuttering,” to move forward with the poems they felt compelled to write. Auchter admits, “Part of me / wants to watch the bus pull into the distance of a coastline // of frail houses and scattered roof tiles, then walk away.” But they did move forward to write painfully vibrant, galvanizing work that teaches us with every stanza, every hidden event, and every brushed-aside death. They have accomplished what Elise Boulding presses for from each individual: a “personal and interpersonal promotion of peace” that reshapes understandings. These poems add critical stories to our history, enlarge our humanity, and perhaps make that peace more possible.