

Sarah Elkins

A Conversation on Space, Time, and Faith

Robert Merritt. *View from Blue-Jade Mountain*. Finishing Line Press, 2019.

Robert Merritt's *View from Blue-Jade Mountain* is simultaneously looking out and back. This trim collection bends both space and time, drawing the most disparate of places and histories into close and surprising approximation. The reader catches glimpses of Austria, China, Chicago, and so many nooks and crannies of North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. The poems weave through time with the same ease; at once it is 1585, then 1916, 1966, last night, and just a moment ago. By the end of these thirty-four pages—just seventeen poems—the close reader will be jetlagged and dizzied, wondering how so much terrain could be covered so quickly.

This traveling of time and space is most deftly accomplished in “Brickmaking, Chicago, 2016,” where the speaker’s view is sweeping, the compelling machinations of his quick mind on full display. The title situates the reader comfortably enough in modern day Chicago, but not for long. The sound of a bodhran in the first stanza whisks the reader to a prison in Ireland in early twentieth century and back. Then, again back to the Aran Islands, this time through the speaker’s personal memory:

I remember a man swinging
a scythe through his field of rye
on an Aran Island who hailed
the wandering lost me a

Gaelic salutation. Also
I evoke Martin L.
King, fifty years ago marching
toward a promised land

The enjambment and stanza break here cleverly show how personal memory bleeds into collective history, freely associated in the mind of this speaker. The line break at “Martin L.” is doing double work, seeming to invite the German Protestant reformer Martin Luther into the poem alongside Martin Luther King, who in the next stanza will be “Arm-in-arm with rabbi / and imam.” The effect is a union of faiths, both named and inferred, that continues to the poem’s end.

But, before then, we are suddenly in Chicago again, and it's 1966. The brick that struck Dr. King is the brick of Chicago's houses laid by "some displaced person's dream." From the displaced people who built Chicago the speaker jettisons to Moses, the patron saint of displaced people who "stamped bricks to build one more // civilization." At the close of the poem, the speaker invites us, along with the long history of people he has invoked, to "common desert ground" where he asks, "Will you build or break / with the bricks of fortune / you have been handed?"

Another notable characteristic of this collection is the brilliant way the poems are in conversation with each other, a feat achieved by its careful ordering. In the first poem, "Nantahalas," we are given only a "modicum of light" by which we watch "the land / curling in upon itself." This image is fresh in the mind of the reader when on the facing page, in "Peace Haven Road, 2016," a woman suffering the slow despair of dementia is "curled under / bedcovers in running shoes." Merritt's mirroring of the landscape in the bodies of the people populating his poems is repeated throughout. This is perhaps a technique borrowed from the ancient Chinese poets who inform Merritt's current work. Indeed, the third poem, "The Presence of Absence," begins with an epigraph from Shih-Shu that points more directly to the land/body metaphor quietly drawn between the book's first two poems (and later in "Penelope's Eyes"): "Beneath our skins, mountains bulge, rooks flow; / within our chests lurk cities, hidden tribes . . ."

Again, as seen in "Book Report" and "Alchemy in Hillsboro, WV," the poems engage each other in a sort of call and response. In the former poem, the speaker muses over the book *The Exile* by Pearl S. Buck, about the author's mother, Carie. He wonders:

Did the Baptist librarians
in the 1940's know that
after following her husband, Absalom,
through fetid ghettos of China
and watching three children
die in her arms,
Carie hated Saint Paul
and his legacy?

In the latter poem, a present-day celebration at the birthplace of Pearl S. Buck is punctuated by gospel music.

"Just one glimpse of Him in gloryland
Will the toils of life repay,"

Kestrel

sings the gospel quartet.
Only one way to get there,
says the silver-haired mother—
“I hope y’all out there are saved.”
Everyone looks like they are saved
as they move their chairs to avoid the drips.

Here the speaker’s tongue is firmly in cheek, and I imagine something close to, “Do these people know Pearl S. Buck said, ‘I feel no need for any other faith than my faith in human beings?’”

View from Blue-Jade Mountain deserves a careful read. In return, the reader is rewarded with a view from the poet’s mind, and there’s plenty to take in.

Rob Merritt’s poems appear in *Kestrel* 22, 24, 26, and 35.