

A NEW COLLECTION BY NCLR POETRY EDITOR

a review by Eric C. Walker

Jeffrey Franklin. *Where We Lay Down*. Kelsay Books, 2021.

ERIC C. WALKER, a North Carolina native, is a Professor Emeritus of English and University Distinguished Teaching Professor at Florida State University. He specializes in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature. His current research focuses on adoption studies for a book on Romanticism and adoption. His book, *Marriage, Writing, and Romanticism: Wordsworth and Austen After War* (Stanford University Press, 2009) was awarded the 2009 SAMLA Studies Book Award.

NCLR Poetry Editor **JEFFREY FRANKLIN** has had works published in many literary journals, including *Arts & Letters*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Hudson Review*, *Measure*, *New England Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and the *North Carolina Literary Review*. He currently works as a Professor of English at the University of Colorado Denver.

In his second poetry collection, following *For the Lost Boys* in 2006, Jeffrey Franklin offers thirty-nine poems, most of which have previously appeared in journals, some as early as 1997. Collected in book form, those poems now gather in six headed sections: "Fathers and Sons," "Making Love," "Making War," "Homing," "Totem Animals," and "Full Emptiness." The shaping effect of book publication includes six epigraphs and six drawings that preface the six thematically-headed sections, adding to the organizing mix the voices of Donald Justice, Michael Donaghy, James Fenton, James Applewhite, James Dickey, and Les Murray. The six drawings are all by Franklin's father, James Rodman Franklin, whose hand also supplies a seventh color image gracing the book's cover.

Two forms of kinship – writers and families – thus organize much of the book. Additional epigraphs to individual poems draw upon Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Tony Hoagland, Jeffry Eugenides, and the Book of Psalms. Canonical writers supply the occasions for several poems: W.B. Yeats for "To a Student Who Reads 'The Second Coming' as Sexual Autobiography"; Mark Twain for "Huck Finn at Forty-One"; D. H. Lawrence for "Lawrence from New Mexico, 27 October, 1922"; and William Wordsworth for "Intimations of Mortality Brought on by Aging Family Members." This pronounced literariness is finely counterpointed throughout by

Franklin's ear for lively speech: the poem "You Talkin' to Me, Pilgrim?" opens with this quatrain: "You Bin Ladin? We been loadin'!" / still boasts the poster in the window / of the *Hammer & Saw Hardware & Paint* / in Fairplay, Colorado." The poem "Commerce & Gender in the New South" launches with two public notices worthy of more double-takes, now from North Carolina: "'Gentleman's Club and Exotic Car Wash' / (freeway billboard, Greensboro NC)" and "'Barbara's Beauty Shop and Chainsaw Repair' / (store-front sign, Greenville NC)." Bending to his work both his bookshelves and languages on the street, Franklin's primary voice throughout the book is his own, in a rich set of tones and registers, but four poems are voiced by separate personae: Huck Finn in "Huck Finn at Forty-One," D.H. Lawrence in "Lawrence from New Mexico, 27 October 1922," an unnamed *National Geographic* photographer in "Among the Surma of the Kormu Valley," and a sailor in a Great Lakes icebreaker headed for a collision in "The *Mackinaw* Heads South."

The book's opening section, "Fathers and Sons," collects family texts such as "Sons and Fathers" and "Personal Effects," in which "[e]ach drawer and closet" tells tales of the speaker's "Granddaddy." In a later section, the poem "The Persistence of Place" reports that "My children are living happily in another city / with me, but I miss them, orphaned as they



now are / from a place of the childhood they don't yet know / was theirs." "Intimations of Mortality Brought on by Aging Family Members" collects "Grandma," "Father and Mother," "Brothers and Sisters." The poem "Julian Bream" includes a fine tribute to "my stepfather, bald and stooped now too." Two poems open the book to the intimacies of the spousal: the beautifully-crafted erotic of "The Otter and the Shark" and the finely comic turns of "The Disappointment of Sleeping with One's Fantasy." "Kosciusko, Mississippi" brings to the fore his wife's aging grandparents: "Draped in her wheelchair, Miss Ginny rocks a little / out of habit."

The title of Franklin's book, *Where We Lay Down*, pulls readers to the poem of the same title, which is the most personal of these family poems and opens the final section, "Full Emptiness." In five stanzas, the poem weaves a grieving tale about three siblings, a summer storm, temporality, and death. Addressed to a sibling who in their youth shared the experience of a sudden summer storm while they spoke casually of their younger sister Charlotte, the poem shifts sharply in the middle stanza to "Years later," when the hard knowledge that "Charlotte is dead" returns the speaker in shared memory to the night of the storm and the moment of the "hush . . . before it began." The speaker now asks his sibling to "[r]ecall for me then what / I always meant to say," which is reported in the

poem's enigmatic final line, ending affirmatively: "if this storm will take me, I will give it my arms and rise up."

In an extensive set of "Notes and Dedications" appended to the full body of poems, readers learn that Charlotte Llewellyn Franklin died in 1976, at age eighteen. Of the thirty-nine poems in the volume, twenty-seven include such extra-textual information in this back-matter, some of which adds to the literary mix, as in the note to "The City That Chooses You": "This poem owes a debt to 'Here' by Philip Larkin, to whose poetry I owe much more than that." The note to the final poem in the book, "Autumnal Equinox," supplies this annotation: "In particular, the one that occurred at 9:44 a.m. Mountain Time, 22 September 2008," a data point that may signify more to the writer than the reader. My larger point is that readers should understand that this collection of poems is extensively curated.

As noted, the core of thirty-nine poems divides into six themed, epigraphed, and illustrated sections, and this body of highly organized work is also prefaced by "Acknowledgements" and volume dedications and followed by abundant notes and more dedications. For better or for worse, the heritage model for building such a collection of poems stems from William Wordsworth, who as his career advanced added engraved plates from his artist friend Sir George Beaumont, began organizing his shorter poems into themed sec-

ABOVE Jeffrey Franklin reading from his new collection at Scuppernon Books as part of his North Carolina poetry tour, Greensboro, NC, 28 Apr. 2022

tions ("Poems on the Naming of Places," "Poems of the Imagination," "Poems of Sentiment and Reflection," etc.), and in 1843 dictated abundant notes to his poems to a family friend, Isabella Fenwick, extra-textual matter that immediately attached itself to the works, sometimes helpfully, sometimes less so. The one Wordsworthian curatorial habit that Franklin does not adopt is any dating of the poems, either by composition or publication, which means that there is no ready way to measure earlier or later work across the thirty-nine poems.

The title of the book's final section, "Full Emptiness," points readers toward key Buddhist themes throughout the volume; the "Notes" specify that "[t]his section title is an unavoidably inadequate translation of the Buddhist concept of *sunyata*." Franklin is an accomplished scholar of religion and nineteenth-century British literature, with two important critical books on the subject: *The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and the British Empire* (2008) and *Spirit Masters: Occult Beliefs, Alternative Religions, and the Crisis of Faith in Victorian Britain* (2018), both from Cornell University Press. In the poem "My Self My Other," in the section headed "Making Love," the speaker registers the elusive ideal of Buddhist quiet:

All I've ever wanted was to sit
in the center of a wide quietness,
but whenever I draw near it,
I'm called from this world's loveliness
Back to the self's intricate dramas.

In the penultimate poem in the book, "Anatman," the title of which the "Notes" explains "refers to the Buddhist doctrine according to which the concept of an essential autonomous

self is an illusion that is a primary cause of human suffering," the speaker seeks but cannot remain in the state of "guiding quiet," the source of that "wide quietness" which also governs the "hush" before the storm in "Where We Lay Down":

Who wants, who? The mind hungers,
recoils
in a lightless room, groping for knob
or switch,
voices redoubling
from the walls a riot of
me, me, me to drown out the
guiding quiet.

Separate from the "Notes," the power of such moments in the poems is their freedom from the risk of proselytizing effect. In "Living Right," a poem which is a comic takedown of lifestyle extremes, Buddhism is but one option on a spectrum; the poem concludes with amused praise for the speaker's compromising "love of work that's good / midway between the Buddhist Middle Way / and middle-class protesting conformity." The book's investment in large religious and philosophical topics shades elsewhere from eastern religion toward a more western-inflected romanticism, which posits the existential homelessness of the human subject, a theme most prominent in this book in the section titled "Homing." In the poem "The City that Chooses You," the speaker observes, "It dawns that life has been one long commute // from almost home to not yet home." In the last poem in the section, "The Persistence of Place," the speaker dwells on the empty rooms and houses of past lives, ending with these lines: "Like all ghosts, I go on hungering to settle / with myself, but I'm not home. Yet. Again."

The question of home plays out in the book within a remarkable geographical range; poems take place in or recall multiple locations in Australia and Ireland and a cross-section of the US: Colorado, Mississippi, Tennessee, Florida, and, in several poems, North Carolina, where Franklin studied as an undergraduate at UNC Chapel Hill and later lived during his early professional career in the English department at East Carolina University. Animating these travels, an entire section of the book is devoted to "Totem Animals," including porcupines, mice, squirrels, and manatees. Geography and the animal world come together in a four-part poem, "Apologia to the Opossums." The first section, "Tennessee," (where Franklin grew up), reports the "hijinks" of boys intent on prey "ugly as day-old dishwater." In the second section, "Australia," a *Quantas* pilot with "possums in his attic" makes a cameo appearance. The third section, "Florida," laments the "rat-tailed slouchers" who are "so hard to love." The last section, "North Carolina," shifts gears, surprisingly, to admiration, addressing "you, little ghost," who becomes "You, Old Mother," with this closing invocation: "come to me now, lead me out past / the canting sheds, across the fields, // and into the recesses of the healing wood." Like A.R. Ammons addressing his famous coon, the unlikely figure of a possum as muse reminds us that it was Ezra Pound who tagged T. S. Eliot as "Old Possum." Long a resident of Colorado, but like all romantics uncertain of home, Jeffrey Franklin still finds his figures of poet and homely muse in the fields and healing woods of North Carolina. ■

2022 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE SEMIFINALIST

BY MARK SMITH-SOTO

Blackboard 1958

Dense, rich, the light in the chalk, guiding letters into their places like kids set behind their desks, sun through the dust-soft windows dawning on the curve of our faces, the teacher about to turn but not yet. Not yet. Silver hair, silver watch, the chalk glows in her long hand, something important is about to happen, the letters go on and on, little squeals punctuate the air, something important is going to happen. Time is generous in the small room. It is the room, it is the teacher and the children, it is the words before the words.



Convergence, 2017 (digital photograph) by Gina Esquivel

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Costa Rican-American poet **MARK SMITH-SOTO** has been with the *International Poetry Review* at UNC Greensboro for almost thirty years. Along with three prize-winning chapbooks, he has authored three full-length poetry collections, *Our Lives Are Rivers* (University Press of Florida, 2003), *Any Second Now* (Main Street Rag, 2006), and *Time Pieces* (Main Street Rag, 2015; reviewed in *NCLR Online 2016*). He won the James Applewhite Poetry Prize in 2012, and his winning entry and another finalist were published in the 2013 *NCLR* issues. *NCLR Online 2013* also featured him in an essay on North Carolina's Latinx writers, and his poetry has also appeared in *NCLR 2001*, 2012, and in *NCLR Online 2020* and *Winter 2022*. Smith-Soto's work has been nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize and was recognized in 2006 with an NEA Fellowship in Creative Writing. His *Fever Season: Selected Poetry of Ana Istarú* (2010) and his lyrical memoir *Berkeley Prelude* (2013) were both published by Unicorn Press.

Costa Rica native **GINA ESQUIVEL** is a principal consultant with Civic Campus in Charlotte. She earned a bachelor's in Education and Counseling from National University of Costa Rica and a master's in Change Management and Leadership from Pfeiffer University. She also studied at the New York Institute of Photography. Her twenty-five years of experience in the social services field includes work for non-profits, as well as involvement in and volunteering to improve the quality of life of marginalized communities. She serves on the Board of Directors of American Leadership Forum, Charlotte region, as well as the North Carolina Arts Council. She travels widely and is currently working on the series *Hardworking People of the World*.