

MOVING BODIES, HEALING PLACES

a review by J.S. Absher

Joseph Bathanti. *Light at the Seam*. Louisiana State University Press, 2022.

Joseph Mills. *Bodies in Motion*. Press 53, 2022.

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Light at the Seam and *Bodies in Motion* participate in our long-term conversation on how to live fully while conscious of how technology and history endanger our well-being. In *Light at the Seam*, Joseph Bathanti offers a vision of nature that can heal and revive us, if we can learn not to destroy it. In *Bodies in Motion*, Joseph Mills provides the vision of how life may be wisely lived, disciplined, and yet spontaneous. Both volumes urge an ethic of responsibility in beautifully wrought verse.

Light at the Seam by Joseph Bathanti is a poetry of place; people are present, but often as names or figures in the landscape. The geography includes coal country, its boundaries described in the first poem ("Removing the Mountain from the Coal"): "eastern Kentucky, Tennessee, / all of West Virginia, into western / Virginia"; the New River Valley from its headwaters in Western North Carolina ("Headwaters of the New"), including several tributaries, like Glade Creek ("Glade Creek Falls") and Wolf Creek ("Near Fayette Station"); the area around Linville Creek in Watauga County; and more, including Buncombe County ("A Map from Clyde Hollifield"). Bathanti often guides us through a place, as in "Near Fayette Station" and "A Map from Clyde Hollifield." These poems move quickly over and through the

landscape, as if one were driving – some include directions and landmarks for a driver – or flying. But others, like "Headwaters of the New," are intimate; the poet is slowly walking with us, pausing to contemplate places too intimate and sacred to be mapped: "Someone who believes / in a single drop of water / must guide you."

The poems guide the reader in other ways. Often successive poems offer different perspectives on similar experiences. In "Fall Webworms," the webs are depicted as "veiled widows in white bridals, / cradling their stillborn." The language is beautiful and disturbing, capturing exactly the emotions that the webs evoke in me; they become a dark omen, for "they tell the jilted future of this plat" under environmental assault. But Bathanti is not done with webworms, for in the next poem, "The Assumption," they "sleeve the locust in smoke," another stunning image. Two back-to-back poems deal with flooding caused by coal mining. In "The Windows of Heaven," "water leaks from invisible understories"; in a "sizzling rain," a creek escaping its banks is "airborne, creek no more"; and "folks huddle on the rise / beyond Rainey's swamped trailer." In "Runoff," one of the folks, "the Horton girl – not but three –" catalogues the homely and precious items swept away by the flood, including, memorably

"Fate Biddix's cabbage field . . . / heads bobbing – a tale of epic slaughter." The next poem returns to "Rainey's Trailer" after its ruin, already being reclaimed by nature: "tiger swallowtails – // fanning black and gold bellows, / ascending through the pierced roof."

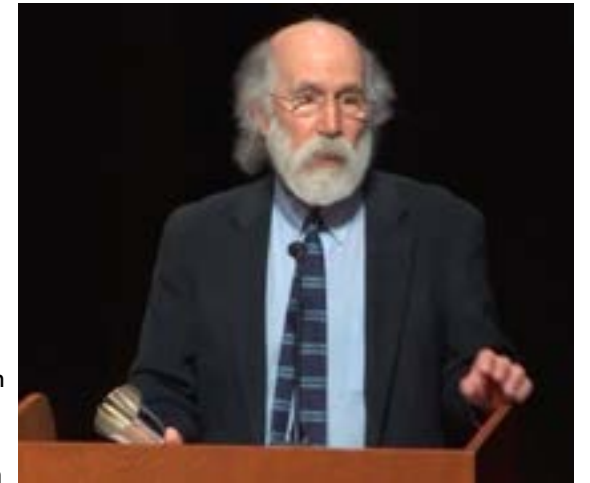
The attentive reader traversing the landscapes of *Light at the Seam* begins to notice the recurrence of places – like Linville Creek, Agnes Ridge – and of people, including those probably no longer living who have lent their names to the land – for example, the meadow (in "April Snow" and "The Coal Miner's Wife: A Letter") and the maple (in "The Assumption") that bear the Billings name. The reader comes to feel an intimacy with these places where people live, work the mines and hayfields, and die (we visit several cemeteries), all vulnerable to coal mining – the drag lines, the haul trucks, the explosions that crack the foundations of houses (in "Floyd County, Kentucky") and with fragments of black shale that "pocks the earth, / like bullets," even "straf[ing] the very names / hewn in [graves'] ledger stone" (in "Flyrock").

Many words also recur in the poems; a small sample includes *swale*, *thurible*, *truss*, and *augur*, often in different contexts. These repetitions add another level of intimacy and recognition, another set of directional markers for the reader. The lan-

guage throughout is taut and vivid; the diction encompasses a wide range of the natural and human condition, from the demotic in "nary," to the pastoral and industrial, to the liturgical, as when we hear "Saint John // the Evangelist coughing in the shaft house" in "Oracle."

Light at the Seam strikes me as the reworking of a minor genre, the topographic poem, from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In this genre, a landscape, viewed from on high or at ground level, is defined by nature, the human inhabitants (usually unnamed), and the historical context, usually with a political burden. A subgenre is the aristocratic country house poem; Bathanti gives us several country homes of farmers and miners, including Rainey's trailer, all abandoned and ruined by mining. The wide-ranging diction accommodates this broad vision.

In a topographic poem, the landscape mediates a sacramental relationship with the divine. In Pope's "Windsor Forest," gods and goddesses, like Artemis, invest the landscape. In "Daylily," this flower bathes on the bank of Linville Creek, "like Artemis, / for just a day." Pope's divinities



are decorative; Bathanti's sacramental vision is essential, based on the poet's spiritual practice and habits of mind. The title poem for the book's first section, "The Assumption," is drawn from the Feast of the Assumption, a day marking "the taking up of the Blessed Mother, / body and soul, into Heaven." "Near Fayette Station" has us "make the sign of the cross" as "you pass . . . / the Church of Saints Peter and Paul."

One of my favorite poems is "Agnus Dei" about an old ewe sheared on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter. The poem is set in a place we have come to know, near Agnes Ridge and Linville Creek. The unnamed shearer is memorable: "shaven head, golden beard, / ear hoops." The old ewe, "teeth like field corn," has provided "the woolens / of each baby born heir to this plat." She settles down to be sheared "prim as a

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ABOVE Joseph Bathanti accepting the Roanoke-Chowan Award at the 2022 North Carolina Literary and Historical Association award ceremony, Raleigh, NC, 2 Dec. 2022

sheep at tea." The sheared wool "scrolls from her" in "bound volumes" that provide the archives for the place: "a bard owl's ossified heart, / wedding band, possum skull, / Cherokee potsherds, // the 31st chapter of Deuteronomy." Nearby, at the Horton place, a woman can be heard singing an old ballad. It is a sacred place, representative of the nature and humanity that can save us – if we do not destroy them first. As the shearer works, the nearby creek is bracing for an imminent, possibly ruinous flood.

Bodies in Motion by Joseph Mills portrays dancing across geography and time. The poems include the scandalous Renaissance dance, the *volta* ("La Volta, or 'Queen Elizabeth Dancing with Robert Dudley'"), and Bill Robinson's tapping stair dance ("The Rise and Fall of Bill Robinson"). They include a broad swath of Americana, from Billy the Kid's mastery of Mexican "gaits" ("Reasons I'm Nervous When My Daughter Goes Dancing") to dancing around the Maypole in Plymouth Plantation; from Black Elk's ghost dance before the Wounded Knee massacre to the minuet and its African American parody, the cakewalk ("Found Across America" and "George Washington, Entwined").

Despite this breadth, *Bodies in Motion* is grounded in the poet's life. The most intimate moments

are perhaps the impromptu dances in the kitchen, as in "Three Minutes": "They twirl and spin almost soundlessly, / navigating the cramped space with ease, / locked into one another like those times / they try not to wake the children at night." In Mills's graceful poems, dance mediates relationships throughout life – whether the poet is the son of an aging mother ("Rita Moreno, Say"), a teacher of poetry ("At the Arts Conservatory"), a man self-conscious about aging (the poems in Act V), or a citizen engaged with social media ("In Jane Austen"), tragic events ("After the Pulse Massacre"), and changing mores:

Ignore the imperative,
the possessive "your,"
the complicated questions
of trust, and simply ask,
how you can both
"follow your partner's lead."
("When the Dance Instructor Says
'Follow Your Partner's Lead'")

"[T]he complicated questions / of trust" include American's painful past and present in racial relationships, from problematic imagery in the beloved songs of childhood in "America Singing" to the poet's experience as the white father of a black son in "White Father, Black Son."

Dance serves as a metaphor – for growing up as a responsible, savvy adult; parenting and growing old; ruling the self and ruling a state; making life decisions; controlling the self and

representing the self through controlled performance that can break loose when the time is right – but the metaphors do not obscure the sweating, painful, joyful movement of dancing bodies. The poems draw energy from several aspects of dance. First, dance is an observed performance – sometimes on stage or film or in the studio, where the teacher observes and comments, "you're not on top / of what you're doing / you are / what you're doing," in "contemporary dance class." The audience – sometimes a single observer, like the dancer alone seeing her reflection in the studio's mirrors in "Gaze" – is inescapable. In an intimate performance between partners, each observes the other and responds to the other's movements. Even when the dancer is alone in the kitchen, the poet and his audience are observing. The young are observed by their parents, like the two-year-old at the "Nutcracker" in "The Exit of the Bear"; adults on the dance floor in "Threads" are watched by adolescents looking for clues on how to grow up, "thinking it meant wearing certain clothes, / holding one another at arm's length."

Second, dance is a form of conduct, performance viewed from an ethical perspective. Moments in *Bodies in Motion* remind me of a conduct book, a text "intended for an inexperienced young adult or other

youthful reader, that defines an ethical . . . code of behavior, and that normally includes gender role definitions."¹ Mills, however, turns traditional definitions on their head. The young men in these poems learn from observing young women. In one of my favorite passages, a young woman helps clean up a drunken young man and the floor, both covered in vomit. In "Ever After," what the narrator remembers best from prom night is "this woman who knew what work was / and who did it because she knew it needed to be done."

Third, like living well, dance is demanding. In "The Recruiting Brochures Feature Grand Jetés," after every class a young dancer "cries / silently, matter-of-factly," partly because "she aches / in so many places and ways," partly because she is encountering her limits as a dancer and as a human, recognizing she was "unremarkable / in the beginning," and may remain so "even at the story's end":

what remains is simply
work so unremarkable
it's painful; it is bracing
against a gray stone wall
for a moment, then standing,
moving on, and returning
the next day and the next.

Bodies in Motion is a modern version of wisdom literature, an ancient genre that "rais[ed] questions of value and moral behavior, of the meaning of

human life, and especially of the right conduct of life"² but was not tied to a specific nationality or religion: it was above all pragmatic. *Bodies in Motion* is remarkably wise in its understanding of how to live well in our difficult, unbalanced times, of how to submit to the disciplines of living while remaining able to find release and joy in spontaneity.

The poet offers Fred Astaire as an exemplary figure in understanding dance as performance and as conduct. Astaire created, with Ginger Rogers, "moments of beauty and / equality, dancing in a way that reveals / who we are and who we can be together" ("Isn't This a Lovely Day"); he and Ginger were devoted to their craft: "they did takes until she bled" ("Set Pieces"); his dress and behavior demonstrated that "elegant insouciance" that the poet wants in a hat (and character) – "something / that shows I'm both in control and not / afraid to toss it away" ("Matchmaking"). Finally, in contrast to the unnamed dancer in "Framework," Astaire demonstrated responsibility: if a dancer wants his partner, "to be like Ginger, / then he needs to be like Fred and start / taking responsibility for his steps and / recognizing what those require of her" ("Framework"). Near the middle



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of *Bodies in Motion*, in "A Brief History of Time," the poet muses: "I wonder if there is anything / that can't be explained by dance." Not much, I would say; not much at all.

Reading these two books has reminded me how much enjoyment can be found in poems that engage the reader in conversation about the good life. *Light at the Seam* reveals a sacramental vision of life and nature, a hope in regenerative possibilities balanced against a fear of industrial exploitation and climate change. *Bodies in Motion* shows through dance how to live responsibly and joyfully through all the roles and stages of our life, from youth to old age. ■

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¹ Sarah E. Newton, *Learning to Behave: A Guide to American Conduct Books Before 1900* (Greenwood Press, 1994) 4.

² Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (Norton, 2010) xiv.

ABOVE Joseph Mills at his launch reading at Bookmarks Bookstore in Winston-Salem, 14 Apr. 2022