

THE I AND THE EYE: POETIC WAYS OF SEEING AND SHOWING

a review by David E. Poston

Terri Kirby Erickson. *Night Talks: New & Selected Poems*. Press 53, 2023.

Irene Blair Honeycutt. *Mountains of the Moon*. Charlotte Lit Press, 2024.

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Two new collections from significant North Carolina poets invite us to take a long view of their poetic careers. A volume of new and selected poems such as Terri Kirby Erickson's *Night Talks* invites reflection on her entire body of poetry, and Erickson's decision to scatter new poems among older ones facilitates reflection on how she has evolved poetically. When Irene Blair Honeycutt – recognized for leadership, service, and vision in the Charlotte literary community and far beyond – releases a new collection with herself as commanding presence, it is both impossible and unnecessary to separate speaker from poet from teacher and guide.

Throughout **Irene Blair Honeycutt's *Mountains of the Moon***, readers will feel her authorial presence – her self-conscious. These poems have deep connections to literary tradition and the literary community, current and past, near and far, poets and writers whom she brought to Central Piedmont Community College or with whom she studied at Breadloaf or abroad. She mentions, speaks to, or draws from poets ranging from Basho and Wang Wei to poets of the English tradition to contemporary American and international poets such as Pastan, Glück, Hass, Holub, and Miłosz, as well as nature writers, playwrights, and composers.

In the first poem of Section One, "During the Time of No Moon," she calls us to "follow the dog outside," to "listen to the birds practicing / melodies for the day." She speaks to herself: "Remember the time of kite-building / on the living room floor, // times you ran to

the vacant lot next door / and sent messages up kite strings to the moon." Memory is central, as is Honeycutt's eye for nature. In "It Can Happen Anywhere," she employs a line from Edward O. Wilson to identify her focus on "Little things that run the world." For Honeycutt, the ant, the shelf mushroom, and the mantis teach us volumes; Honeycutt teaches us to consider our kinship with cicadas or the heron with his nose to earth and "a dark half-moon / waxing on his shoulder." Whomever she addresses, whatever she observes, she establishes intimacy with subject and reader, whether over tea with a friend or wine with Wang Wei. Her matriarchal nature, informed by her vivid recollection of childhood experiences, forms the emotional underpinning of these poems. She explores the world with various children, talking with two boys who have seen an albino skunk, offering "what might be a prayer" with her twelve-year-old niece at the end of "Song for the Sea Lion, Steep Ravine CA." Her "Song for the Hours" begins: "O railroad spike – rusting in the field next to the splintered / tracks I walked one summer alone into my father's past – I / held you hot from the sun, heavy in my hand."

A succession of remarkable images follows: a "train whistle of woe," possum babies tugged loose from their dead mother and wrapped in an officer's handkerchief, invocations of John Donne, Abraham, and Typhoid Mary, prisoners on an exercise yard, a bumble bee suckling a blossom. Then she returns to childhood and to the holiness of the present moment:

I was once a child sitting on the city bus next to my mother, holding a windmill out the window. Joy coursed through my being, mingled with fumes from the streets.

Sweetness of bird song returns.

O wind chimes of my hours.

I am here.

These powerful images are conveyed through varied forms: a haibun, the non-linear grid of "Footsteps," the intricate pattern of repeated lines that lead into and out of "I Felt a Forest Growing in My Skin," prose poems, and concrete poetry such as the whimsical ending to "A Way into the Trees," where the letters of the poem's last two words swirl down the page. In her formal play and her more conventionally arranged poems, Honeycutt shows her versatility with craft, both when the form is on display and when it unobtrusively supports content.

Near the end of Section Five, two childhood confessional poems illustrate the empathetic tenor of this collection. In "One Peppermint Ball," a daughter describes an unforgettable encounter. "This is the first time Mama has trusted me / to walk alone to the grocery . . . The old woman knitting in the rocker / in the dark store hunches toward the window / to catch the sunlight. Her hair is knotted / into a tight wad that looks like a grenade." She provides a background of menacing sounds – rocking chair, clicking knitting needles – as the speaker eyes the bounty of the candy counter. When the child cannot resist the temptation to swipe a candy and then is called out by the woman's spine-chilling voice, her cheeks burn in a way most of us have felt.

"When the Challenge Came in Fifth Grade" describes another moment of spine-chilling fear and vulnerability, as the girl waits for a bully to appear for an after-school showdown, feeling

IRENE BLAIR HONEYCUTT has published four previous poetry collections, including *It Comes as a Dark Surprise* (Sandstone, 1992), winner of the New South Poetry Book Series; *Before the Light Changes* (Main Street Rag, 2008), finalist for the Brockman-Campbell Book Award; and *Beneath the Bamboo Sky* (Main Street Rag, 2017; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2018). At Central Piedmont Community College, she founded the Spring Literary Festival, later known as Sensoria, which brought a number of acclaimed poets and writers to Charlotte. Upon her retirement, she was recognized by the establishment of the Irene Blair Honeycutt Distinguished Lectureship. She continues to be a vital leader of the Charlotte literary community, teaching at Charlotte Lit and other venues, and mentoring individual writers.



COURTESY OF IRENE BLAIR HONEYCUTT

"like a piñata hit so hard by a peppermint / candy cane that all the confetti laughed its way down the / sidewalk, exposing every secret I'd carried my entire life." The girl waits with her friend, "stir-

ring the gravel / with the toes of our black & white Oxfords," but the bully never shows. Though relieved, the speaker will not fully understand the experience until much later. The poem concludes, "the myth of the piñata filled with hosts / of fears remained with me well into adulthood. / Decades would pass before I'd learn: / *There is no illusion greater than fear.*"

The sixth section dives deeper into nostalgia and processing grief. At its center is a series of poems about her late brothers, to whom she dedicated her 2017 collection *Beneath the Bamboo Sky*. Memories of her brothers and parents are interwoven with present imaginings, dreams, and snatches of conversation. Her prose poem "The House within a Mansion" recounts a dream in which a disembodied Voice guides her family through their childhood home, here strangely grafted into a much grander structure. Although the entire family is present, the mother plays no role, the father merely smiles, and it is the brothers who converse with the speaker.

When the brothers appear in other dreams, they are often busy performing routine chores, and when they appear in the speaker's memory, it is often when she is performing some household

ABOVE Irene Blair Honeycutt's mother, Laura Pierce Blair, circa 1947

task. In "The Dead Don't Miss Us," a poem which argues powerfully against that title statement, the speaker glimpses her brother walking behind her as she pours detergent into her washer. That sighting prompts her to recall how they scrubbed their dirty socks as children and spread them to dry on an oil heater. The poem's poignant ending: "Maybe it's times like that – the mundane – / you miss most."

Most of Honeycutt's last section is taken up by a dramatic poem introduced as "structurally inspired by ancient Greek techniques" and by the choruses in T.S. Eliot's pageant play *The Rock*. Titled "We came to a Place that was Grieving and Gathered to Listen," its central character is a mother haunted by loneliness, desire, and the sins, real and falsely attributed, which sprang from them. She describes herself variously as Lady Arsonist, Madame Fury, Lady Wino, and "the ghost who never died." The story she tells in the chorus names various characters who are complicit in her fate, but the dramatic crux of the poem involves a daughter and mother seeking understanding. The daughter's final words recall images found throughout the collection: wind chimes, frog choruses, lilies, spoonbills, whispering trees. Here, those images are used to describe the daughter's attempt to grasp and define her mother's nature. The mother's final words employ the image of the moon, a central image throughout the collection, to provide consolation. She begins, "When you thought you were lost/ I guided you. / When you thought you were alone / I brought you home." She concludes, "Wherever you go I am there. / You carry me – a waxing moon / at your back."

Honeycutt dedicates this collection to her teachers, specifically to "the best of them." It is clear that Honeycutt is one of our best teachers. Her epigraph from C.D. Wright, about the indissoluble connection between "[t]he once the now the then and again," aptly describes how these poems interweave memory, dream, and allusion. And these words from "During the Time of No Moon" might best describe the spirit of the poet herself:

Lean into the wind, nimble as bamboo.
Hope has not abandoned you.

It nests among notes
you have written all your life.

Tucked in crevices,
ancient and gentle.

In *Night Talks: New & Selected Poems*, Terri Kirby Erickson is a different sort of poetic presence, a keen and always empathetic observer, but unobtrusive, more often eye than *I*. Poems from six previous books are mixed here with fifty-four new poems in sections named for various stars of different brightness, distance, and mythological significance. Throughout, the poems display a novel-like detail in setting and characterization and an easy, nostalgic warmth that is ubiquitous enough to make the occasional darker poems all the more striking. Erickson's command of poetic craft, especially her choices of stanza forms and her line breaks, is well-considered, subtle, and skillful. Throughout this collection Erickson uses a variety of stanza lengths, with enjambed lines that move swiftly through even the denser, single-stanza poems.

A trademark of these poems is how they are energized by similes that almost take on a life of their own, adding textures that sometimes distract but ultimately enhance the cumulative effect of the poem. In "Empathy," two women stand in a grocery parking lot: "sharing sadness like a loaf of warm bread – / eyes luminous as pearls formed by her friends' // suffering. Perhaps the stars will wish on them / tonight." In "Betty's Roadside Diner," the diner's rusty sign beckons "[l]ike a blazing // campfire to a cluster of tired cowpokes." Inside, the fluorescent lighting of the diner is "so bright, you can see your own / soul through the back of your hands," yet the "babies, // curled in corner booths like cocktail shrimps" dream peacefully. The poem's ending illustrates the warmth that pervades Erickson's work:

... There's a sense
of isolation surrounding everyone,

as if they're actors in separate plays –
yet it comforts you to see them. In fact,

it seems like all that's warm and safe
in the whole world lies amid the fake-leather seats
and unfamiliar faces of folks who wound
up here tonight, in the same place as you.

A similar setting is described in a new poem, "Stan's Place," though the place is sketchier, the diction grittier, and the tone starker. Stan and Irma have forged a trust based on unspoken understandings of each other's past troubles: "What some people carry, Stan often thought, / shaking his head as Irma keyed in another / six-

pack, a lit cigarette dangling from her lips / like a marker buoy bobbing above a wreck." Erickson invites us to see what they carry emotionally before we dismiss or disregard them. We sense what Erickson herself carries in poems such as "To My Brother Who Died a Virgin" and "Stairway to Heaven." The latter poem begins by describing siblings riding a sofa down a flight of stairs but ends on this somber note:

We might have
broken our necks,
of course, but never
did. You waited
a few years to die,
not many – while
I live on and on,
breaking in ways
we never imagined.

Erickson's gentle empathy fills poems such as "The Ophthalmology Specialists' Secondary Waiting Room," with its vivid description of whispered conversations among patients who "share stories like cowboys / gathered around a circle of slowly dying / embers" while others dab their eyes with tissues or sit stoically. Yet when they observe a daughter patiently shushing her restless, elderly mother, "most can't help but smile, / faces illuminated like priceless paintings by / the faintest, yet unbearably beautiful, light."

In poem after poem, Erickson gives us similarly compassionate portraits of people she has



COURTESY OF TERRI KIRBY ERICKSON

encountered. When she does turn her attention to herself, she is never solipsistic. "Poem by a Woman with Glaucoma" has a coyly self-announcing title, but the poem is infused with a joyful appreciation of light everywhere reflecting from dewdrops and car grilles and lawn rakes. When Erickson proclaims that "Loving You Burns Like Shingles," the wry description of passion is focused on the *you* being addressed.

These poems come largely from a familiar North Carolina milieu, one of tomato sandwiches and Granny's biscuits, lightning bugs, prize-winning poultry, orange juice and Lorna Doone cookies at Sunday school. They present a varied cast of characters – greengrocers and mailmen, sawmillers and sunbathers – always with that same eidetic vividness of detail. But the most engaging poems are about her par-

ents, her deceased brother, her daughter, and other family members. In "The Sam White Special," her great-grandfather is portrayed as not just a barber, but a confessor, whose customers realize "how telling Papa their sins and / secrets felt like being baptized in a river – / where every dusty soul is washed clean." What elevates these poems beyond the stereotypical or nostalgic is not just Erickson's keen eye for detail, but her way of seeing into the emotional core of characters and situations.

From the title poem, which opens the collection, to the final one – a new poem titled "Geminids" – Erickson shares her deepest and most intimate perceptions of her parents, their relationship, and their abiding influence. "Night Talks" begins with a childhood recollection of overhearing her parents talking

ABOVE Terry Kirby (Erickson) with her brother, Tommy, circa 1964

Winston-Salem native **TERRI KIRBY ERICKSON** is the author of seven previous collections of poetry. Her work has appeared in *American Life in Poetry*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Latin American Literary Review*, *Poet's Market*, *The Christian Century*, *The Sun*, *The Writer's Almanac*, *Verse Daily*, and numerous other publications. Her honors include the Joy Harjo Poetry Prize, Atlanta Review International Publication Prize, the International Book Award for Poetry, the Board of Regents Annals of Internal Medicine Poetry Prize, and the Key West Art and Historical Society's Tennessee Williams Poetry Prize.

in their beds. "Washing Dishes" describes her parents side by side at their kitchen sink, inviting the reader to see them through the open window and to hear "their sweet dishwashing song," what Erickson calls "the music of my childhood." It is the song described in "Night Talks" as "their beloved / familiar voices echoing among the stars." And in "Geminids," the concluding poem, seeing meteors and wild geese streaking across the sky provokes this closing prayer: "May departing souls, traveling through // space like comets, remember how it felt to be alive – / how even birds, flying in the dark, cry out with joy."

The nuanced details of these poems often provide trenchant commentary. In "Slave Cemetery," the speaker is accustomed to white graveyards, where gravestones are decorated with "jaunty bouquets dyed to match the season," looking "like place cards on a fancy / dinner table." Instead, what children find in the slave cemetery are "thorns and trees with roots / so fat and twisted, they looked like anacondas / sleeping in the underbrush." A similarly telling contrast appears in "County Fair," where a Ferris wheel rises "jaunty / as an Easter bonnet" in stark contrast with the West Vir-

ginia coal country below, where "[r]ows of ramshackle / houses kneel by the river like washer women / with their knees in river muck."

When one encounters a poem from 2006's *Thread Count* beside a new poem, "Sabine LeBlanc," one can see how the generic imagery of "Autumnal Equinox" contrasts with the vivid characterization of the later poem. The former presents images of flowers drooping, of nights turning chill, of memories of sundresses and home runs and mosquitoes falling like leaves from the mind. All beautifully and skillfully rendered, yes; but in "Sabine LeBlanc" one encounters "a hard rain let loose from the sky / like fenced in bulls." The neighbors smoke their King Edwards and holler "*Bonjou,*" and a lover plays smooth saxophone jazz on a Monday morning while Sabine makes herself up for work, "her lips, still swollen / from kisses, as red as a cayenne pepper." This is poetic craft of a higher order, worth noting not as a criticism of earlier poems, but as a benchmark of how Erickson's vision has sharpened over her career.

Though Erickson is largely unobtrusive throughout this collection, she is never unengaged

or unengaging. While her observations may be more trenchant in her newer poems, her tone is not jaded. Most significant, for this reader, is that these poems provide the familiar warmth one associates with Erickson and yet bring fresh insights and images that continue to be pleasing, evocative, and surprising.

The final poems in both these collections illustrate their respective ways of seeing and showing. Honeycutt watches a solar eclipse and, upon removing her protective glasses, marvels at a bumblebee hovering before her face. She cannot say

How long
she had been there
beside me
silent
as the birds

during the eclipse, but she guides us to ponder with her the contrast of heavenly and earthly images. And before that concluding prayer in Erickson's "Geminids," she gives us images of meteors appearing and vanishing silently, contrasting their silence with the sound of a cello playing in an empty room. Honeycutt is our teacher and guide. Erickson shows us what moves her heart. Reading either is richly rewarding. ■

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