

## SPACE AND TIME IN THE APPALACHIANS

a review by John Charles Ryan

Loss Pequeño Glazier. *Transparent Mountain: Ecopoetry from the Great Smokies*. Night Horn Books, 2022.

**JOHN CHARLES RYAN** is a writer of poetry and nonfiction. His publications include the poetry collection *Seeing Trees: A Poetic Arboretum* (Pinyon Publishing, 2020) with Glen Phillips, and co-editing the anthology *The Mind of Plants: Narratives of Vegetal Intelligence* (Synergetic Press, 2021). In 2023, his botanical poems were included in the exhibition *The Power of Plants* at Being Art Museum in Shanghai, China. He is Adjunct Associate Professor at Southern Cross University in Australia.

**LOSS PEQUEÑO GLAZIER** is Professor Emeritus of Media Study at SUNY Buffalo, NY, and director at the Electronic Poetry Center. His work focuses on meetings between language and technology. His books include *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries* (University of Alabama Press, 2002), *Anatman, Pumpkin Seed, Algorithm* (Salt, 2003), and *Luna Lunera: Poems al-Andalus* (Night Horn Books, 2020). He has authored digital works released by Electronic Poetry Center, including *White-Faced Bromeliads on 20 Hectares* (1999), *Io Sono at Swoons* (2002), and *Territorio Libre* (2003), as well as poems, essays, films, and projects for dance, music, installation, and performance. He now works and writes in the mountains of North Carolina. Read a poem by him in *NCLR Online Winter 2024* and, forthcoming in 2025, his Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize Honorable Mention essay.

Loss Pequeño Glazier's latest poetry collection, *Transparent Mountain*, traces the exuberance of nature as the poet-observer becomes an embodied participant in the vibrant Earth-community of the Great Smoky Mountains. The book's rich linguistic terrains bring the region's distinctive biota to life with more-than-human consciousness, intention, and communication. Deeply bio-regional in outlook, Glazier's writing attends perceptively to the animals, plants, fungi, rocks, water, and weather of the Smokies, foregrounding historical and contemporary nature-culture intersections in the mountainous Southeastern United States. Anchored in the ecological materiality of the Smokies yet cognizant of global environmental currents, *Transparent Mountain* remains faithful to the transcendent possibilities of encountering more-than-human life with an ethos of sympathetic-mindedness. As Glazier writes in "Knob," "We are all a single intertwined thought."

Fleeing environmental upheaval during the Last Glacial Period roughly twenty thousand years ago, animals and plants found refuge in the Smokies, resulting in the prominent biodiversity still extant. *Transparent Mountain* reminds us that the area in focus is a *refugium*, a place harboring populations of formerly widespread species. Of its dense forested land, one-quarter is mature and undisturbed, constituting the largest old-growth forests east

of the Mississippi River. Despite its predominantly arboreal character, the region features grassy and heath balds, mountain summits and crests cloaked in native grasses and shrubs, and hazy blue fog from volatile organic compounds, especially during the summer. Southern Appalachia as "place" is the biological, ecological, and geological grounding of *Transparent Mountain*. In the tradition of Robinson Jeffers and other place-immersed writer-ecologists, the bioregion delineates the parameters of the poet's lexical explorations.

Glazier's collection comprises nine elemental sections: Knob, River, Light, Rock, Island, Cove, Ocean, Ridge, and Stars. Throughout the work, intertextual allusions disclose a vast poetic intellectual pedigree, from eighth-century Chinese poet Li Bai and thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist priest and poet Eihei Dōgen to William Wordsworth, John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Nan Shepherd, and other alpine writers. The collection tracks balletically between lineated and prose poetry. A distinguishing element of the work is its organic mise-en-page, generating a textual ecology optically evoking the ancient species and deep-time habitats of the Smokies. Consider, for instance, how the use of spatial caesura intergrades with the actual speciation unfolding within and around the fissures of Appalachian geological forms in the poem "Rock":

The slopes are a living gallery where paintings continuously change hues from  
luminously lysergic Stonewall Jackson indigenous azalea to lucid perch flesh.

André Michaux frolics among seeds and flowery Appalachian alpine leaf.  
Michaux's sumac, *Rhus michauxii* a rare species of flowering plant, a cashew.

Caesuric pause punctuates the nearly impenetrable forest cover, enabling solar energy to nourish the undergrowth. For highly shade-intolerant Michaux's sumac (*Rhus michauxii*), these breaking points in the text are especially poignant. Endemic to the Southeast, the species is imperiled by habitat degradation, fire suppression, and limited genetic variability. Inhabiting granite soils in wooded areas, Michaux's sumac requires gaps – caesura – in the overstory in order to harvest sunlight and to photosynthesize. The oscillation between ecological diction and organic mise-en-page encourages polyscalar engagement with the text evocative of immersive interaction with a habitat – from the proximal reading of diminutive flora (seeds, flowers, leaves) to the distal observation of geological phenomena (slopes, cliffs, prospects). In *Transparent Mountain*, textual gradients and fissures generate corporeal response in readers, giving real-time insight into the poet's negotiations of space and time in the Appalachians.

Threading through the collection's nine movements is the transparent mountain. This koan-like figure signifies the harmonization of contradictory forces in the dialectical tradition of Daoism – fullness within emptiness, multiplicity within singularity, corporeality within immateriality, the noumenal within the phenomenal, all interweaving within the delimitations of the bioregion. The intellectual essence of the transparent mountain is the interdependent nature of existence in which the binaristic categories of everyday thought dissolve, as occurs in "Ridge": "Soundless echoes sing of transparent mountain." Meditative absorption in the cordillera engenders intermountain consciousness,



PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANCIS OLIVA

transporting the reader across time and space to the globe's other sacred peaks, both tangible, like Tiantai Mountain, and cosmological, like Mount Meru. As the poet discovers in "Knob," "That transparent emptiness is solid. It is 'not-thought', breath-space, mind itself." The entwining of ecology, poetry and breath mediates the enigmatic absent-presence of transparent mountain:

... Accordingly, breath

is visible here. Leaves effervesce goldenrod, orange jewelweed flower, sorrel, butterfly-weed, *Lobelia cardinalis*, that turns forests translucent. That is why you

see *through* ridges. They are transparent mountains, living epidermis. As if your skin were a pane through which organs visibly hum and whirl inside you. Delicate

precision of internal processes, interdependent, in inner awe. The solitary "I" is now displaced. Thus:

I think, therefore I "is" multiple.

ABOVE Loss Pequeño Glazier (left) with Brent Martin at the book's release celebration held at the Cowee School Arts & Heritage Center in Franklin, NC, 2 Sept. 2022

With eco-poetic elan, these lines of “Knob” call attention to the symbiotic pulse of breath between poet and botanical kin. Goldenrod, jewelweed, sorrel, and butterfly weed are the metabolic inspirators of place. In a rhapsodic Whitmanesque celebration of interrelationality – lines spreading freely like mycelium across white space – the inner body (singular) becomes outer bodies (plural), the “I ‘is’ multiple”; as later declaimed in “Stars,” “Thus, the transparent mountain: the multiple made visible.”

A compelling feature of *Transparent Mountain* is its movement through heterogeneous timescapes and temporal scales. Emerging between two and three hundred million years ago, the Appalachians rank as one of the world’s oldest ranges. The bioregion’s deep temporality registers on a visceral basis in “low inhalations lasting 10,000 years each.” Granitic forms archive events transpiring over millions of years, confounding a comparatively limited view of time based on centuries or millennia: “The material archive of what passed here, / not books, not microfilm, not data storage / but the geological register – slabs of rock –.” The textual engendering of deep time pivots on the mythologized figure of the Niobraran Sea, an immense inland water body bifurcating the North American continent into two landmasses, Laramidia to the west and Appalachia to the east. Between the Late Cretaceous (100 Mya) and the Paleocene (66 Mya), the primordial sea connected the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean. In *Transparent Mountain*, the Niobraran is an elusive presence – a palpable absence – driving the poetry’s temporal orientation, as described in “Ocean”: “No longer a // thalassic body, the ocean has now turned transparent, its ghost-dreamy surface / turned to air.” From this contemplation of deep time afforded by the sea, the poetry turns to embrace the immanence of the present, vivified by bioluminescent fungi and the photosynthetic denizens of the Smokies.

However, this ancient provenance of the Smokies – in large part giving rise to its biodiversity

– contrasts sharply to recent human impacts at local, regional, and global scales. In the new materialist sense of transcorporeality theorized by Stacy Alaimo,\* human and more-than-human bodies mutually express the consequences of ecological contamination, as referenced in “River”: “Our own bodies bear scars of violence to the planet, tumor-fish awash in debris, particulates, / waste, toxins. Wildfires, floods, cyclones, UV carcinomas.” In the Appalachians, a particularly pernicious environmental scarring results from mountaintop removal, surface coal mining at the crest or summit of a mountain. Short-term economic imperatives defile the deep-temporal order, as shown in “Light”: “But we, blasting crowns off billion-year-old-peaks, turn native ecotones to coal- / fired capital.” As the collection progresses, the critique of environmental degradation intensifies, exposing the colonial underpinnings of ecological and cultural disequilibrium. More precisely, fear of native forests, or arborphobia, is one factor among many underlying the despoliation of sacred mountainscapes, as in “Island”:

Colonists feared trees. For them, forests harbored perils,  
hindered roadways. Forests were the haunt of “savages.”

They clear-cut the woods, depleted the soil, in Faith  
such bounty was theirs for pillaging.

They felled the twelve-story, 14-foot diameter American  
Chestnut, Cherokee “Grandfather of the Forest.”

In this highly nuanced, temporally-plural way, the collection balances the material concerns of the conservationist and the emancipatory spirit of the “ecoflâneur,” Glazier’s term (following Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin) for one who wanders the woods, an acute observer of arboreal life.

Traversing timescapes, rooted in ecology, and illuminating the complexities of place, Loss Pequeño Glazier’s *Transparent Mountain* contributes uniquely to the North American eco-poetic tradition. As he writes in “Stars,” “Here, you enter the heart-spirit landscape.” ■

A similar version of this review previously appeared in *Plumwood Mountain Journal* in Nov. 2023.

\* Stacy Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (U of Minnesota P, 2016) 111–42.