

SCRIPTURE OF EXILE AND RETURN

a review by Robert M. West

Jeffery Beam. *Verdant*.
Kin Press, 2022.

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JEFFERY BEAM is the author of numerous poetry collections, including *The Broken Flower* (Skysill Press, 2012; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2014). He is a retired UNC Chapel Hill botanical librarian. A native of Kannapolis, NC, he currently lives in Hillsborough, NC. Read his poetry in *NCLR* 1995, 1996, and 1997.

In a review of Jeffery Beam's 1995 book *Visions of Dame Kind*, future state poet laureate Shelby Stephenson declared that Beam was "North Carolina's lead singer."* More than one reader surely took this as a pronouncement that Beam was the state's best poet. Given the strength of the field, that would be a remarkable ranking: even without several fine poets who'd grown up in the state but moved away, North Carolina was still home (by birth or adoption) to many gifted and distinguished voices. As editor of the invaluable *Pembroke Magazine*, Stephenson knew the state poetry scene well; his judgment mattered, as it still does. Yet anyone who saw that remark as an unnuanced coronation may well have raised an eyebrow.

Such a reader, though, wouldn't have registered the specific terms of Stephenson's praise. The fact is that by that point, most of the best-known poets in the state had made their reputations as storytellers, portraitists, and ruminative thinkers. In general, the verse of Fred Chappell, James Applewhite, Betty Adcock, Gerald Barrax, James Seay, and other prominent voices recalled the longstanding concepts of the poet as a *maker* or as a *sayer*. But you were unlikely to hear them pouring out their "full heart / In profuse strains of unpremeditated art," filling the world with "harmonious madness," as Shelley described his aspiration in "To a Skylark"; they were unlikely to seem all "flashing eyes" and "floating hair,"

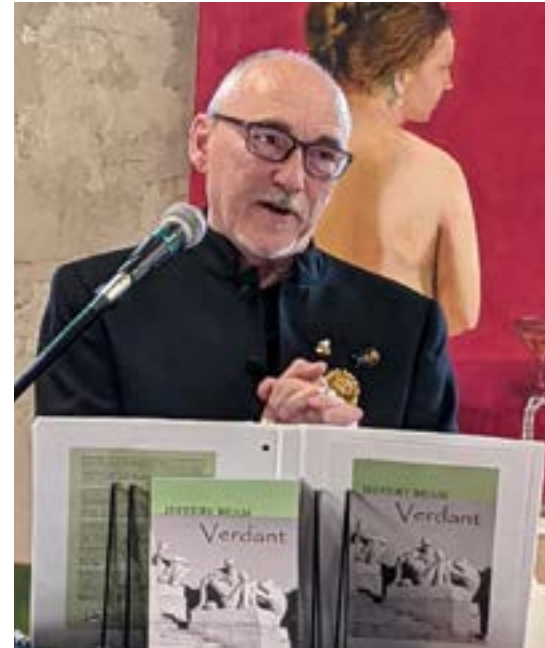
fueled by "honey-dew" and "the milk of Paradise," as Coleridge evoked his own ideal in "Kubla Khan." If you were looking for *that* kind of poet – the poet as inspired singer, as ecstatic – you needed to look elsewhere. And if you did, there was Beam.

Thirty years later, Beam is happily still that kind of poet, and *Verdant* finds him singing in top form. At the heart of the book is a sequence of twenty-six untitled poems based on the poet's struggle with the end of an affair. The affair and the agony that followed took place in the mid-'90s (around the same time that Stephenson made his declaration). In the substantial essay with which he ends the book, Beam explains how that experience led to these poems. His reading was a major catalyst: he tells us that Akhmatova, Millay, Lessing (Doris), Whitman, Rilke, Rumi, Gibran and others – the list is long – helped him think and feel his way through that difficult time. All that input led to output:

I began to burn to make a scripture
of my exile and return, and thus to
evoke personal healing through a
sequence of poems rich with the knit
of all these poetic expressions and
traditions, with all their bitteresses
and sweetesses . . .

As I regained my sanity, as I "came
through" as Lawrence would say, I
surrendered peaceably to my preoc-
cupation with longing and grief as
perennial themes. *Verdant* is one
semi-fictionalized result.

As often turns out to be the case with poetry that suggests great spontaneity, this sequence didn't come into being quickly



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL JONES

at all. Beam tells us he composed it over the span of thirteen years. It's not only a testament to a great deal of inner work: it's also the product of much writerly care and craft.

The speaker's lover is the one who ended the affair, as the sequence's first line makes clear: "He leaves in a whirlwind." A few lines later, abandoned, the speaker tells us he's left with "[e]nduring burning: a kind / of perplexing bleak ecstasy"; the second poem describes him experiencing "silence sweet and deafening" that's "[p]erfect for remembering . . . and forgetting" (ellipsis in the poem). Both passages capture an emotional paradox that's central to the book: the loss brings pain, but he learns to savor the accompanying feeling of longing, which he eventually recognizes as a fundamental aspect of his soul, one that transcends this particular relationship. (I'm referring to "the speaker" not to be overly academic, but in recognition of the poet's description of his "scripture" as "semi-fictionalized.")

Let me quote three of these poems, to give a better sense of the artfulness here and to suggest more concretely the sequence's direction. Here is the fourth, which suggests the emotional complexity of the affair's conclusion. The former lover seems to have been both possessive and manipu-

lative, while the speaker nevertheless persisted in his adoration till reaching the current nadir:

You told me your heart was a sieve
as if to force me into condemnations
Instead I praised your wisdom –
your brown eyes dancing –
your blue-black hair smoking up our nights

Summer welcomes me again
I walk out
Skin crying

Neighbors watching my restless solitude

You thought you owned me
but I know now
suffering alone possesses me

All is grief: even his summer sweating feels like
"[s]kin crying."

By the eleventh poem, the pain of "suffering" has become an awakening into "longing." And longing, the speaker tells us he's learned, is the secret teaching at love's heart:

Longing:
Love's treasured Kabbalah

Every day I learn something new
Remembered kisses scripting my skin

Letters unsent
I've written your name backwards to un-spell it

A kind of witchcraft

A kind of kindness: The least the
most you deserve

Kabbalah is a mystical tradition of interpretation, Jewish in origin, and the speaker's memories compose a text he is learning to interpret. At the same time he says he's learning from his longing, he tells us he's pulling free of the bond itself – not only restraining himself from sending letters (written presumably to the lover), but also reversing the lover's name as a form of defensive magic. The last two lines offer a delicious pivot from a hint of residual affection into a surprising and marvelous snarl.

* Shelby Stephenson, "Poet's Vision is Lyrical 'Yet Exacting' and Spare," rev. of *Visions of Dame Kind*, *The Pilot* 15 Apr. 1996: 3B.

ABOVE: Jeffery Beam reading from *Verdant* at the Thomas Stevens Gallery, Hillsborough, NC, 19 Mar. 2022

The twenty-fourth poem conveys the peace finally attained. The trauma of loss has evolved into self-affirmation and a spiritually restorative bond with nonhuman nature:

I have a great secret

Living close to the storm
the forest the drought and the hail
I am a beauty

The grasses kneel with me

And with my kin the moss and willow
my kin the beasts and birds

He's grown through this painful experience and is now flourishing, become newly (if you like) verdant.

That declaration "I am a beauty" is one of several announcements of self-admiration in the sequence's second half, announcements that clarify his emergence from suffering. This isn't some insidious narcissism: it's acceptance of the self as holy and worthy of respect. Jesus's command to "love your neighbor as yourself" only functions as a moral imperative if one *does* love oneself, and "I celebrate myself and sing myself" is the first line of what turns out to be Whitman's most inclusive poem. Beam's "secret" holder isn't hypnotized by his own reflection and so cut off from the world: rather, he feels an exul-

tant new sense of belonging to the family of all living beings.

I said above that the sequence of twenty-six poems is "at the heart of the book" because there's considerably more to the book than that sequence. Each poem occupies one page, and yet the book is about sixty pages long. That's because there's a large amount of what scholars call *paratext*: additional material included to shape a reader's response to the main text. The sequence itself follows three sets of dedications and three epigraphs, the third of which is the complete thirteenth poem from Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*), and then the concluding explanatory essay (which itself begins with four epigraphs), titled "Don't Forget Love: Sacred Longing's Dark Project," adds nine pages. Following that comes the complete ninety-sixth poem from *Gitanjali*, and then there are three pages of notes on the essay. Some readers may find this wealth of extra material a bit much; one may or may not end up feeling that knowing traditions about Khidr or the Green Man or John the Baptist is as important for understanding the sequence as the essay and notes would suggest. (Though *Verdant* is hardly the same kind of puzzle-poem, in some ways it resembles *The Waste Land*; for example, Eliot too appends notes explaining his poem in terms of

ancient myth and folklore. Both works also associate verdancy with psychological and sexual health.) My own view is that all the paratext gives Beam's book a fascinating kaleidoscopic quality, and the details of the sequence's origin both illuminate its literary genealogy and underscore the achievement of deep anguish's transformation into art.

Today Beam's reputation is well established indeed among those familiar with North Carolina's rich community of poets. Stephenson's early admiration has been validated by later books like *Gospel Earth*, *The New Beautiful Tendons: Collected Queer Poems 1969–2012*, *The Broken Flower*, and *Spectral Pegasus: Dark Movements*, and *Verdant* further strengthens the case. It's worth noting that not only does Beam exemplify the idea of the poet as a singer, but also that a variety of composers (among them Lee Hoiby, Steven Séropa, and Tony Solitro) have set his poems to music – a fact recently highlighted by a handsome collection titled *Troubadour: Collaborations and Inventions in Music, 1971–2023*, published by Beam's own Green Finch Press in collaboration with Horse & Buggy Press. Beam may be in his seventies now, but he's clearly still young at heart and (to quote Shelley again) "singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest." ■

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