

Poem Bitten By a Man, by **Brian Teare** (Nightboat, 2023)

Reviewed by Karen Garthe

Like a migraine I wait until biography's the right size for writing.

Poem Bitten by a Man is antidote to Virginia Wolff's pronouncement, "Strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love & battle & jealousy among the prime themes of literature." Orchestrating how "the materiality of language meets the materiality of my body," Teare, through the rough lens of chronic illness and his "outsider" status as a gay man, has composed a viable, compelling literature of illness through a personal narration of his life and art. He staggers through a medical industrial complex, which is bewildering enough for the haves but withering for the have nots. His super-fluid, moving prose is staked with Flags, his territory interrupted with meditations on Jasper Johns's signature pennants, flags "for focusing desire or aggression," flags representing "a fantasy of love & destruction/emblem of everything." He recalls being a boy scout learning how to handle a flag, and remembers "the white fathers who teach us who take more care with that fabric than they do with a sissy." Teare's essential project is *to be known* but also "In meditation in analysis, in book after book – I seek the right way to suffer." His raw exposures reveal what primal wounds ("After my father's vasectomy fails, I'm an accident, object of antagonism from the start") have meant for him, having made an especially vulnerable experiment of life and love as if blindfolded from the beginning. He puzzles how to move through the world, how to read the clues. Feeling safer with art than people, he develops a refined aesthetic that in *Poem Bitten by a Man* both merges and argues with the artists whose works have helped teach him how to be. He contemplates then quibbles with Jasper Johns's concrete flags and with Agnes Martin's transcendent grids, observing finally that neither one – neither Johns, that maker of sign and symbol (the flag "its affect flat as a slap . . . emblem of everything"), nor Martin, the shamanistic painter of shimmering grids – neither is a friend to embodied life. Because in his book, Teare's *raison* and essential enterprise is to uphold the body, to honor our mortal coil here and now in the material world.

In the heartbeat of paper, he interrogates the possibilities of language, how to make it "more, a dimension that holds and meets multiple demands: love, work, death, art & gut trouble, joint pain, headaches that last for days. . . ." With a fortune of intelligence and sensitivity that might together qualify as grace, Teare filters his sensibility and

gifts for abstraction through very down-to-earth utility and practicality, the smarts that enable a self-described fat Queer from Alabama to negotiate a dignified life. Debt, his constant companion, "settles into my body next to illness" and as an uninsured poet ("to live a creative life / money makes it hard from the start") Teare is decidedly one of the have nots. The expenses incurred in treating his illness loom and harass without cease like demons at the foot of the bed. "Pain [is] the exact sound of beads on an abacus measuring" his obligation to debt as real as his critique of the medical industrial complex that's keeping him alive. "Doctor says I've run out of available tests, offers psychiatric meds as if it's all in my head."

For a time, a beloved known only as R. R alternates, weaves under and over, Jasper Johns's R, Robert Rauschenberg. Who is who, which is which and when depends on very close reading and even so is often intriguingly, deliberately confused. Teare says: "Into loving R I bring all the places I've never been safe" and confesses "I haven't loved anyone so helplessly since I was an infant." But his beloved can't accommodate his writing, make room for the pen umbilical to Teare's psyche. R "can't bear it and makes writing his rival. To ease his enmity, I stop writing..." In time, R "says he thinks of me now not as ill but as disabled. He says his desire's blocked, cut off from its connections. He uses against me my own body ... violently others me." The breakup is a crushing liberation and Teare's breakup with R fugues with the breakup of Johns and Rauschenberg. Trauma, loss, and hauntedness conjoin these pairs in a curious literary foursome.

Teare's hard-bite narrative is both scatological and elegant. In a previous book (*The Empty Form Goes All the Way to Heaven*, Ahsahta, 2015), he wrote "Let's put this minute between the need to vomit and the history of metaphysics." He yearns for calm abiding. Artists with a capital A are his angels; Eva Hesse's ruthlessly buoyant tangles, Sam Gilliam, whose color field curtains stir no breeze. Some of Teare's most beautiful writing is on Gilliam, a black Mississippian abstractionist from the same generation as Johns. While Gilliam's father struggled, doing whatever job he could to keep a roof over his family's head, Johns came from wealthy Deep South gentry, former slave owners. Teare is critical of Johns's lifetime embargo on publicly discussing his privileged background, his homosexuality, critical of his now very impolitic elite privacy. Barbara Loden's film *Wanda*, about a beautiful

woman without any bootstraps to pull up at all, the story of a person born to lose, brings him to tears. He identifies with her God-forsaken picking through a Southern wasteland and admires “Loden’s uncompromising negation of American uplift.” He also admires Ruth Asawa, who spent much of her childhood interred in a Japanese prisoner of war camp cocooned in barbed wire. Remarkably, Asawa became a student of Joseph Albers at Black Mountain College, eventually creating signature works by weaving wire into ethereal, sculptural forms.

Teare is bewitched by Agnes Martin most of all. Her singular life, her gridded terrain, her austere transcendent paintings “are the sweet weave of what remains of me each time I fall into loss. It’s why I need the grid, its tension.” Martin was raised in West Saskatchewan where it was so flat she could see the earth curve. Her paintings marshal their grids but terminate the canvas with frayed edges. Teare has made a study of Martin, her paintings and notebooks . . . the extraordinary recollection of herself at birth as a tiny figure wielding a sword. Yet when Martin writes “But helplessness when fear & dread have run their course as all passions do . . . is the most rewarding state of all,” he stabs with his pen “What bullshit.” For true helplessness is not sublime nirvana but primal terror and fear. Pain may be kingly (“in a dark room the nest of worked nerves that crowns my head stings”) and maybe “a wound is a mood” so ruinous one could withdraw to an exquisitely curated redoubt. Yet regardless of how abject and alone Teare feels, he always makes the effort toward connectedness, absorbing “World-sorrow” through his pores like a monk whose job is to grieve “negotiating the privilege of being here, suffering the mortal together.” There’s raw bravery here, figuring which way to turn, how to fly with one wing tied behind your back. Brian Teare has collaged his notebooks into an affecting, often beautiful narrative that totally succeeds in making the material of language meet the material of the body: “I open the notebook then the laptop years later, write then type, fold seconds into each syllable, minutes into each sentence, the selves of each moment cool & creased.”