

Everything
Must be turned into words
Or there is nothing.
 – “Vestige”¹

TROPIC OF DREAMS
 By D.S. Black

G. Sutton Breiding is the dark romantic’s poet laureate. This new collection, *White Maps*, gives the discerning poetaster the first major new selection of Breiding’s work since *Journal of an Astronaut* (1992) a decade ago.

Measured against previous collections, *White Maps* is an atlas-sized topography tracing the dream contours of an implosive imagination. It follows the post-Odyssey return of the astronaut to the planet which begat him.

This continuity of character is not directly stated though it may be inferred from the cursed earth-rootedness of the poet, who will always be haunted by Martian love and “faces from cities/ of the unimaginable future.”

Although earthbound in the corporeal realm, the poet consorts with Martian amours and pre-Raphaelite nymphs: “I dream of still moments filled with dragonflies./ Pools of light, moist skin, kisses from another world.”

With “all space in a state of continuous orgasm,” it is little wonder these shuddering osculations bypass the pull of gravity. Under moonlit haze “wonder if I am an apparition/ standing there or if the window has opened to another dimension.”

“A ghostblue sky” at lunchtime beckons “the railroad to Arcturus” throwing open the “tiny doors” of Morgantown. Breiding writes to redeem the silence of separation and displacement, conditions of love and of loss. An outsider any and everywhere, even or perhaps especially in his hometown, it is the “Prologue” near book’s end that makes explicit his intent: “I will not speak to my times,” implicating the reader in an argument with his declared Appalachian withdrawal. *White Maps* is strewn with images of loss and refusal, the shifting loyalties of time and place.

¹ All quotes are from GSB. In earlier iterations of this essay, I sought to contextualize his work in relation to peers and influences. All that remains of that effort is a fragmentary list, in no particular order, of his ghostmodern comrades-in-camera: Poe, Baudelaire, Lovecraft, Munch, Arthur Machen, Trakl, Cioran, Jabes, Wallace Stevens, George Sterling, Clark Ashton Smith, Bukowski, Hi-Lo, Max Ernst, Dorothea Tanning, Bruno Schulz, W.G. Sebald, Cormac McCarthy....

Comprised of several sequences, or folios of poems dating from 1986 through 2000, they are solidly grounded in the period following Breiding's California (1966-1986) residence. Most were composed in Morgantown, West Virginia, which Breiding affectionately calls "this rotting little town by the river." (Youngstown, Ohio might also be gleaned in brief backdrop as the nadir of hope, a city of cracked hearts where disappeared his love Jenny.)

Regardless of *where* one happens to be in objective, globally-positioned coordinates, there remains the screaming emptiness of interspace – the unbridgeable abyss between things, the many curses of being where and what we are.

Breiding's abhorrence is primal: "To have been born human is not one of the greater glories/On this earth." "To be a man was nothing. To be a wolverine, even the last one on earth, is everything. My hackles are raised forever."

With nature on the run, in an age where "bear management" is a euphemism for the extreme prejudice of extermination, the poet intones, "our dreams/ leave no tracks/ in an owl-less/ time."

Fortunately, these *White Maps* are anything but blank.

*I inhabit a realm of immediate nostalgia, longing for
each moment as it occurs; long before it reaches the
past, I have carved its epitaph in amber clouds;
Witnessing the death of castles, throats of birds, entire
galaxies...
Beauty haunts with her crystal breath
that falls in texts across my face in sleep.*

The ineluctable chasm between subject and object, I and Thou, the loss of the poet's expansive, romantic "we" is never forgotten: "Never/ Knowing to whom I address my worlds, my words;/ an image once I had and held."

*When you are gone
The planet will be lost to savagery
And the world will not end
The way it is supposed to.*

Decayed romance is so turn-of-the-century. And yet it never goes away; we are always spinning the chambers on Russian roulette loves, like fragile cardiac timepieces with staccato sense of occasion.

No mistaking the moods of this collection: apocalyptic, angry, exalted in the musk of sleep, questioning the fundamental givens of life and love, while defiantly embracing worlds beyond human kindness. If the poet has resigned himself to the condemnation of survival in an age of insult, we can at least take comfort that "Earth is the lamp/ I cry for" and the poet's tears belie "a willingness/ to be the words/ fading from the page."