

the first time around – technical aspects to be sure, as with most good poets, but also sometimes complexities of attitude. The last poem, “Reading ‘The Death of Woman Wang’” is a good example of this. Its five lines meditate tersely on disaster:

Quake, storm,  
flood –  
  
through the night  
the coffin maker  
hammers.

What can we take from this? The easiest thing is to breeze through the poem, reading it simply as a carefully hewn assertion of death’s relentlessness, of the natural world’s indifference or even hostility toward mankind. But there is a dimension to this poem that makes it much more interesting than that – an acknowledgment that there’s always profit to be made from bad times.

These poems invite us to dwell on them, to refuse the specious equation of a poem’s length with the amount of attention it deserves.

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*Wherever*.  
Kevin Bezner.  
Cincinnati Writers’ Project, 1999.  
49 pages. \$12.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Miles Efron

At the end of Book V of the *Aeneid*, just before he visits the underworld, Aeneas loses a close friend. While steering the fleet, the Trojan helmsman, Palinurus, is lulled to sleep by the god, Somnus. As Palinurus dozes, Somnus throws him into the ocean. The loss rouses Aeneas from his own dreaming:

Here the commander felt a loss of way  
As his ship’s head swung off, lacking a helmsman,  
And he himself took over, holding course  
In the night waves. Hard hit by his friend’s fate  
And sighing bitterly, he said:  
“For counting  
Overmuch on a calm world, Palinurus,  
You must lie naked on some unknown shore.” \*

Losing Palinurus reminds Aeneas of his own isolation, his status as a perennial wanderer. And Palinurus is only one in a series of friends lost to Aeneas, a character nearly incapable of sustaining human relationships.

Like Aeneas, the narrator of Kevin Bezner’s *Wherever*

is haunted by an inability to keep his friends. For one thing, he is too peripatetic for closeness: “I have lived many / places. Not one / I call home.” (“Wherever”). Other loved ones have left him (“Reading the Birds”):

Another death. Another crow.  
  
This one hides  
behind the full leafed trees, black  
movement,  
  
a painter’s brushstrokes  
in green.

And off I go  
to wander with eyes around the path below,

Closed by a strong end rhyme these lines accentuate the most overwhelming fact of Bezner’s world: whether by dying or wandering, we manage always to sabotage our intimacies.

But the affinity between Aeneas and Bezner’s voice runs deeper than rootlessness. Both men are troubled by ghosts and have trouble sleeping because of it. “Doors,” one of several prose poems in *Wherever*, records a dream:

I am at my mother’s house . . . I expect to see something  
bad, so I shiver,  
but a baby appears. I reach out to it. It floats up to me, but  
in midair it  
becomes a gargoyle and leaps to my throat. I put up my  
hands in defense.  
And, suspecting I will die, I wake up.

In “After My Father’s Death” Bezner again straddles dreaming and waking:

And while I remain in dream  
I am startled awake.  
  
I want to say, “You died in May.  
I saw you in the mirror  
in June.”

In “Reading Jotei” the insomnia motif becomes literal:

Up late, sleepless  
again, the old worry  
that I’ve lived too many places  
and so have missed my life – .

As in *Aeneid* V, a speaker’s insomnia evokes loneliness; it prompts him to speak about the loneliness that attends the business of roaming. In *Wherever* we see this dynamic writ large.

Yet for all the thematic similarities, Bezner remains

poetically distant from Virgil. While the *Aeneid* treats the matter of loss in a sustained narrative, Bezner's style is lyric, achieving a compression that is reminiscent of Asian rather than Roman poetics. Bezner's short lines scatter his thoughts. He leaves fine, empty space on his page. The book's final lines read ("Wherever"):

Always with me.  
No burden.

This koan-like paradox pares down to its most basic the pervading mood of *Wherever*. Bezner's most consistent burden is his lack of burden.

Bezner's poetics operates not by narration, but by repetition. The book returns again and again to a few images: bare trees, snow-covered landscapes, solitary mornings. These images form, in an emphatically lyric mode, a strong sense of literary character in the narrator's voice. Bezner's next work, *Particularities*, is forthcoming this year. *Particularities* is to be a book-length poem. Will the objectivist strain in his poetics translate across forms? The transition seems like a leap. But *Wherever* demonstrates that Bezner is in good command of his craft.

\* Virgil. *Aeneid*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. Vintage, 1985.

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*Silent Treatment*.  
Lisa Lewis.  
Penguin, 1998.  
79 pages. \$14.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Robert West

*Silent Treatment* is published as part of the prestigious National Poetry Series, and, like most poetry collections from reputable publishers, it boasts enviable jacket praise from a handful of eminences. One looks for poetry to surprise, but this book's surprise – alas – lies in how bad it is. In the vast majority of these poems there is simply nothing interesting happening. Most present a kind of low-calorie psychodrama, without any redeeming sense of linguistic play. Dull poems could at least have the courtesy to be brief, but these are interminable: the very shortest is 32 long lines long, and many go on for several pages. Fifteen out of the 24 poems sprawl over three pages or more, with lines as tedious as these:

Not one man in my whole life has said I'm  
Pretty. It's because they have discerning tastes.  
My friend says her 300-pound boyfriend  
Called her homely. He told her he'd repair  
My problem with men. One night with him,

He said, and I'd be over it. She tells another  
Story. I have to admit I'm curious.  
I guess he thinks I've never been fucked.  
I guess that's what he gets for not knowing me

All my life, when I had something to prove.

Or these:

*There's*  
*A hummingbird trapped in the indoor arena*, I said,  
My voice catching so I felt embarrassed. She looked  
At me strangely: *Can it get out?* I asked. *Oh, sure.*  
She said. The next day I found out. I rode my filly  
Slowly beneath the hummingbird's skylight;  
And there was its body. It had worn itself out.  
Goddamnit, I don't know why that makes me so mad.  
Maybe because I didn't try to help.

Really – do you think? I suppose the poet thinks this will be interesting to someone, but it's hard to imagine a literate person being riveted by such stuff. There are a few good poems (The anaphoric "I Knew If I Looked" stands out), and a few weirdly fascinating ones (such as "Sexology"), but on the whole *Silent Treatment* is frustratingly bland.

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*The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*.  
Rachel Blau DuPlessis & Peter Quartermain, editors.  
University of Alabama Press, 1999.  
379 pages. \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Jeffery Beam

Editors DuPlessis and Quartermain have done a valuable service in collecting these essays which confirm and extend the importance of Objectivist poetics in American poetry. This movement began formally with Louis Zukofsky's "Objectivist" issue of *Poetry* (February 1931) and *An Objectivist Anthology* in 1932. The Objectivist poets, branded by an editorial demand for a common rubric by Harriet Monroe of *Poetry*, became associated with a capricious aesthetic practice and philosophy. The major poets connected with the term, George Oppen, Lorine Niedecker, Carl Rakosi, Basil Bunting, Charles Reznikoff, and Zukofsky, are the subjects of this book. The editors and essayists see clear origins in the work of Pound, Stein, Moore, and W.C. Williams; and important descendants in Cid Corman, Kathleen Fraser, Lyn Hejinian, Rosmarie Waldrop, and the Language poets.

Debated, refused, embraced, contradicted, defined and redefined by its "members," Objectivism's central tenets has remained relatively stable – the poem as object, as a formal music formed from the intense and sincere gaze and intelligence of the poet. Over time, however, these principles have enlarged into a neces-