

David Lau introducing

## Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

It was August, 2020. Used to pandemic sleeplessness, I lay awake at night looking out a window at the stars above Santa Cruz. Keeping extra quiet, I could almost hear the constellations kicking sparks against a nymph—then there was sudden low sound like wind picking up. A rare fasting-moving arcus roll cloud cut across the window and what followed was a dry lightning storm’s thousand strikes across the Santa Cruz Mountains with almost no precipitation. The lightning that trailed the roll cloud lasted until ten the following morning. The fires crept toward the University for a few days. We evacuated our neighborhood, driving to LA to find clear air. We returned to the intensest orange skies and smoke as fires erupted across the state. It was six weeks before I saw the stars again from a window. Unperturbed, they had that “glowing resonance beyond all meaning” (Jameson) of which Mallarmé’s ptyx sonnet provides a glimpse. This is time: this anecdote of vision—flight—return—vision; a collage of disconnected instances, death fears, loved and memorable features; cosmic, historical, surging in every instant.

The intense focus of Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s new book, *A Treatise on Stars* (New Directions), offers this sort of refined temporal collage with intergalactic vistas in her late style. Whereas once she wrote cataract stanzas of sentence-line coordination and heart-skipping invention (see the reprint of *Empathy* coinciding with this new book), she has settled on a one-liner of considerable length, a thought-glance that observes then installs a poetic change: “a sensible energy thought into substance by experiencing it,” she writes in “The Loom,” with some neo-Kantian edgework hammering the verbal enameling down. A churning standpoint for experiential perception is her emblematic material, original and unmistakable. Ānanda-like in relation to this voided cosmos’s Buddhist lesson of impermanence, the book is Berssenbrugge’s sutra on the stars and their dust we are. It reads into the crackling records of starlight’s distant dharma, a reserve of poetic energy.

Quotidian instances govern the poems here: glance aside and take a constellation in like a diaristic Mallarmé handling Language poetry’s “new sentence”; or dust up the canyon on a walk and find more matter from stars: “I’ve been below all this time, and now I see stars.” Anecdotes of perception and autobiographical instances telescope out like big-data visualizations of galactic clusters; inner-outer, asubjective yet also personal psychic galaxies are here observable beyond the observable universe: “The 4D projection of this song generates a star.” Dancing to a rhythm of song, like the recently discovered wall of galaxies beyond the Milky Way, the depth of these poems is a gravity well. Susan Barba writes of “the horizontality of long lines” in Berssenbrugge, which are the containers for her “conceptual collages,” while her often equivalent lines become mini-essays in a deliberative, steadily arriving particle-wave affixed to a voice more personal than her early manner, but a style every bit as heady and challenging.

Investigation of the conceptual trail left by theoretical physics and astronomy is the salient aspect of *Treatise*, with “Darkness” a pertinent example, yet reflections on nature, perception, and cosmic connectedness owe much to her life-long study of indigenous cosmology. Reading *Treatise*, I thought of the recent films by Patricio Guzman *Nostalgia for Light* and *The Pearl Button*, which treat as subjects both the telescope array in Chile’s Atacama Desert as well as the last members of the indigenous Kaweskar and Yaghan communities in the Patagonia region of Chile, whose cultural works were body paint and rock art mimesis of the stars, in transformative tribute to the universe. Like Guzman, Berssenbrugge is a time-traveler among the telescopes and the indigenous. She nears nature, that most complex word, approaching phenomena experimentally. Our condition *depends* on all this cosmic history, and what *sweep* this book has against the backdrop of a technologically mediated society like ours.

“All time exists in the present,” writes Berssenbrugge in her interview printed below with Angela Hume. She brings it here to the immutable *now*—about which we can never quite speak except in a poem. Effectively she amplifies her gatherings, her science of lines in numbered sections, with the probative operation of her poems an earthy bluntness, an uncanny directness. In “Chaco and Olivia” she begins in charming fashion a brilliant *ars poetica*, one that is strikingly forthright for a poet who enchants her poems with textual borrowings: “Channeling, part of daily experience, is an underrated technique in literature.” The vein in the cosmic

rock, the human layer, mediates between heaven and earth here in the channels. Berssenbrugge's work is a tribute to this *mythic imagination*. Part materialist like Lucretius, part poet as indigenous scientist, Berssenbrugge turns poetry back toward knowledge as perception of nature, a category effaced in today's weak "eco-everything" or "Anthropocene" conceptions. Her aims are impersonal, universal, beautiful. The question of the nature of thought—of the mind's understanding embedded in nature, with poetry as a major vehicle for thought's sensuous human activity—develops in his new work in the act of taking in the time-traveling light of the stars.