Virginia Reviews


Ambiguity, imprecision, and the potential for simple misunderstanding are always present in language, in spite of our best efforts to define words precisely and structure sentences logically. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is one reason the arguments of philosophers are so unavoidably disconnected from life as we understand it. Poets, at least those who allow the language they generate to do what language does best, are much more apt than philosophers to keep our attention when they address the most haunting questions of existence.

*Greenbrier Forest*, Dabney Stuart’s sixteenth book of poetry, addresses those questions with a quiet elegance that may at first appear to be unadorned simplicity. As advertised on the back cover, it is a “series of meditations deriving primarily from the sights and sounds” of the Greenbrier Forest State Park in West Virginia. Perhaps the first hint of the book’s depth is found in the two verses from the *Tao Te Ching* (from the translation of Stephen Addis and Stanley Lombardo) that serve as the epigraph: “Tao called Tao is not Tao” and “Is and isn’t produce each other.” It is no exaggeration to say that the whole book is written in the spirit of these enigmatic lines and as a response to the questions they evoke. Consistency of theme is one element of the work’s unity, another is the consistency of the setting.

Since this setting is so important in *Greenbrier Forest*, it may be fair to compare reading it to the experience of walking along a small mountain stream. The water, rock, and trees seem easy enough to understand until the walker begins to look at and listen closely to the surroundings, finding a rich and complex ecosystem full of small wonders and wonderful as a complete entity. Similarly, the relation of the parts to the whole is one of the most interesting aspects of *Greenbrier Forest*, because the individual lyrics, all limited to one page, both stand alone as complete poems and fill a very specific role in creating a book that may well be read as one long poem. The absence of individual titles, though some first lines could serve as titles, emphasizes the connections from poem to poem, the unity of the whole piece. This focus is also enhanced by the strict limitation of the setting of the poems and by the careful repetition of words and images that build meaning and weight as the book progresses. For instance, Stuart introduces the hemlock trees as an image in the very short poem on page seven, and throughout the book repeatedly uses hemlocks in passages such as this one from page twelve:

Shades of green, deepening.
Dark plum in the recesses
an end to light.

Since the poet has created an expectation about the symbolic value of the hemlocks in the book’s landscape, every additional mention carries a weight and set of qualities that would not necessarily be associated with the species of tree in another context.

The value of this planned repetition of a few key images is probably most apparent in Stuart’s use of air, breath, wind, and the human voice as dependent on air. By the time the reader reaches this passage on page 31, the very mention of air suggests a complex set of emotional responses around what it means to exist and what it means to create.

To forget the air,
the duplicity of air
I have composed of nothing else.

Here the reader also finds a good example of the restraint Stuart exercises on the language of the book as opposed to his almost unrestrained willingness to write about his vulnerability as a writer and a person, as in:

I miss the mornings
when words were their own wings.

This passage and others such as “Dismay, the little chisel” on page 45 carry the concern about losing the strength of the poet’s voice evident in the first section of the book (represented best, perhaps, by the poem on page 17) into part two, but the poems in the second part communicate a resolve to live...
and to speak in whatever voice the speaker can muster.

The hemlock’s interior deepens away. I would fall into it, but that doesn’t come with life. And later:

My impossible inclination is to merge the selves I have spoken.

One of the dangers of writing about Stuart’s themes and technique is representing Greenbrier Forest as an arcane exercise in poetic craftsmanship while ignoring the spirit of delight in the playfulness of language and the self-deprecating humor that is found throughout the book. Examples of lighter elements include the punning references to “way” in the sense of Taoism, the whimsical but just-right-for-the-occasion combined words such as “neverair” or “day-birth,” and the reappearance of characters from his earlier books, like the monk on page 52. Then there is the brilliantly original diction in a passage such as this:

Words are the spirit’s rove and nestle, its till. Waking into them rolls and tosses, the solace of rift and abrasion, spark, our letting go.

Greenbrier Forest is an unusual and very successful book that rewards readers on a number of levels. There is elegant language that is never stuffy, a significant theme that grapples with the reality of living, masterful control of the pace of the poems individually and as a whole, and a careful description of a beautiful place and the relationship between that place and a person’s life. In the twentieth century a poet of Stuart’s stature could expect to have the opportunity to publish a volume of collected works at this stage of his career, but the publishing industry has changed dramatically in the past decade. Most likely, we will have to discover writers like him one book at a time, and Greenbrier Forest is a good place to begin that kind of discovery.

—Cy Dillon, Hampden-Sydney College


Amy Waters Yarsinske, Hampton Roads native, architectural scholar, and former president of the Norfolk Historical Society, provides a panoramic view of the centuries-long history of the Commonwealth’s largest resort town in Lost Virginia Beach. In establishing the history of Virginia Beach, Yarsinske begins with the Spanish expeditions of the Virginia Capes in the 16th century, rather than the city’s merging with Princess Anne County in 1963. She argues that Virginia Beach has evolved in ways—environmentally, architecturally and culturally—that “bury the character and history” of the city, and she uses diary accounts, cartographic analysis, and newspaper coverage to support her claims.

Yarsinske’s analysis of the growth and change to Virginia Beach over four centuries unfolds throughout five chapters that uniquely address specific geographical and temporal characteristics of the region and successfully convey to the reader that Virginia Beach is much more than just a resort destination. Yarsinske begins the region’s history by presenting the English account of the shore at Cape Henry in 1607 and then swiftly moves on to describe the more rural aspects of then-Princess Anne County. She includes a detailed treatment of the Lynnhaven and Kempsville regions, which should be extremely familiar to present-day Virginia Beach residents. (Indeed, Yarsinske’s skill at overlaying present geography over the past is a boon to the text and will be very interesting to those who are familiar with the city.) The remaining chapters of Lost Virginia Beach continue in a similar fashion, with an entertaining sketch of Virginia Beach’s first mayor, an architectural analysis (with appropriate homage paid to Virginia Beach landmarks such as the Cavalier Hotel), and a demographic analysis focusing on the population explosion in Virginia Beach following World War II. Importantly, Yarsinske notes, the population of Princess Anne County saw a 96 percent increase between 1950 and 1956, and by the 1970s Virginia Beach’s population continued to grow by a thousand people per month—a demographic shift with significant consequences for the region.

At its core, Yarsinske’s work is an argument for planned historic preservation and for thoughtful, planned growth. The difficulty with Lost Virginia Beach, though, lies with the misplaced (if not unintentional) blame directed at new residents. Yarsinske risks offending newcomers who seek to enjoy the region—in the same way that her own family did—with claims such as “suddenly, the close-knit Princess-Anne family tree was becoming an amalgam of people from all over the United States” and “locals were becoming scarce by the end of the 1970s.” (Ultimately, Yarsinske takes the right group to task—the Virginia Beach City Council—for its failure to provide meaningful leadership on the topics of historic preservation and land use.) Despite the author’s occasional insensitivity toward new arrivals to the region, however, this book is an impeccably researched and wonderfully illustrated history. Yarsinske’s work belongs on the bookshelves of Virginia Beach enthusiasts, urban planners, and architectural historians.

—Ivey Glendon, Metadata Librarian, University of Virginia Library