

Stumbling into the Sublime: Claire Bateman's "Another Poem on Blue"

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Claire Bateman's work is an exciting representative of what, for now, let's agree to call "new poetry." Her poems infuse received ideas with fantasy, and they walk a line between romantic mystery and humanist anxiety. From *Clumsy* (2003), "Another Poem on Blue" is one such instance of how Bateman's work *sounds* like the 21st century as it turns mundane experience—the memory of a seventh-grade crush—into an exploration of the seam between the physical world and the sublime.

"Another Poem on Blue" investigates the strange beauty of language in this new millennium, but the poem's ostensible subject is a first unrequited love: an infatuation that sets, for the speaker, an intense emotional precedent and begins with an announcement of anxiety that makes the writing of the poem seem like a compulsive revisiting of that first experience: "Can I help it that I keep writing / The same poem over & over again?"

Like so many poems of the past twenty years, Bateman's chews on the problem of saying something new, and the poem seems even more relevant in the age of replication which has emerged since it was written, an age wherein experience—especially, say, the experience of a crush—is digitized, posted, liked and reposted, tweeted and re-tweeted, memed and re-memed, spackled in stardust and Instagrammed ad nauseam. We're all repeating!

She repeats, though, writing that she can't help reviewing her life, just as she can't help

being

reborn into this world
a million times every instant,
a luxury so prolonged and painful
that I'm unable to adequately
prepare for it before, during, or after.

The “luxury” of re-inventing oneself daily is hard to resist. Today, we live in a digital world where value is measured by duplication, a world that encourages—in fact seems to demand—that we record every place we visit every time we go, and with whom. It’s all too much, and this luxury of watching yourself on repeat in prolonged instant replay of the present moment? Bateman’s poem speaks to that pain, but also sees something redemptive in the instinct. This is the anxiety and richness of the information age, when thought moves like constantly tangential Google searches from which no clear answers are realized—everything and nothing is new. We only reflect, but we’re rarely reflective.

So, as the speaker announces a return to a previously treated topic, she apologizes for what seems to be the compulsion to rename, re-live. *Sorry*, she says,

Not only to any reader
who’s already suffered
my previous poems on this color,
but also to Picasso’s famous Blue Period,
Lawrence’s “Bavarian Gentian,”
that “blue, forked torch of a flower,”
Dylan’s “Tangled Up in Blue” . . .

Here, Bateman seems to express some humility about returning to a concept so thoroughly examined, but part of the main idea of this poem is that we can’t help revisiting what obsesses us. Still, even as the poem crackles with that energy, Bateman uses the encyclopedic list to keep readers at an emotional distance, saying of experiences of blue that it is “impossible to list them all.”

Bateman’s minutiae align clearly with the point, though. Her poem is an extended apology to those who have already experienced “blue” in all the nuance that “virtuosos of blue” can provide. Those examples are known. What is not known is her specific attachment to blue on this day, the day of composition. And so the poem moves quickly, hyperlinking to

the author of
“Love is Blue,” a scratched-up single
I played a dozen times every night
during the first few months of seventh grade
as I wept ostensibly
over the unshakeable indifference of
my lab partner Arthur Farrell,
though what I was actually beginning to suffer
was my own newly-minted strangeness,
still moist and raw, not yet grown into its wingspan.

What makes this speaker stare down blue once again is that “newly-minted strangeness.” She’s moved from thoughts on color, to a Wikipedia-like list, to personal experience, but she eventually settles on the idea that we are all differently weird, awkward, kooky, “moist and raw.” Bateman’s sidelong approach to this thesis—start one place and quickly move to another—is one way poets get to the point in the 21st century: digressively, and through other texts beyond the text of personal experience.

This emotional intimacy in Bateman’s poems rarely occurs only through personal trivia. She always seems to mix any confession with association, so we get a description of her crush alongside an onslaught of spiritual philosophy. She departs from the familiar workshop idea of the personal-as-universal and instead posits that “being / reborn into this world / a million times every instant”—with rebirth’s constant reminder of how weird we are—is as much a universal experience as any sharing-is-caring poem.

All that said, “Another Poem on Blue” is, in places, vulnerable, but not without a sense of humor. “I’m still a little embarrassed to admit / how much I loved that song,” Bateman writes,

despite the fact that I’ve long since realized
the entire purpose of seventh grade
is to raise up a standard of shame,
self-reproach, & psychospiritual devastation
no other epoch could hope to realize.

Perhaps these lines can be read as commentary on the poetry of the early part of this century, on poems that make such a big deal out of the confessional details of life, details we recognize as they crash past us in waves of sentimentality and egotism. Don’t be stuck in that, the poem seems to say initially, even as the speaker reveals that she is, herself, stuck in an old moment.

As always, though, Bateman goes to the unexpected place, moving immediately from her thoughts on adolescent anguish back to her interest in blue. She is “compelled to glorify” the color, the feeling, and she suggests, maybe, that her awkwardness was in its own way lovely. Because overwhelming feeling, even agony, is intensely alive. What of the color blue that she’s thinking about, then?

[I]t’s not robin’s egg, navy or indigo;
It’s a shade that should be named “devastation blue,”
the excruciating, lacerative blue of today’s sky
whose incandescence suggests
that its nearest blood kin is neither
Violet nor emerald,
But gold.

This section spins out, using longer, less-controlled sentences. The images are punctuated by line breaks, and the voice seems to rise almost to a shout, then fall to a whisper. It's tempting to read this moment temporally, as if the narrative voice of the poem has moved us up from seventh-grade despair to a heady high school rant about the precious suffering of the world. But this is a Bateman poem, and it's clear she's setting up her rhetoric, moving us towards a different kind of knowing about the intensity of her own experience and her own mind:

[T]his blue must be
gold's daughter,
the flame inside the flood,
the flood inside the flame,
the wind inside the flame,
the very reason we've all been tiptoeing around
in a state of perpetual pre-emergency,
as if in hard hats, anticipating tremor
& tremor's aftermath,
the cataclysmic release from above
of everything heaven would hold back no longer,
though whether in grief or relief, no one could know.

Bateman's visionary instinct, her longing for the sublime, and her doubt, underscore so much of what makes her work different from what I wrote and read in my twenties and thirties—poems about Failed Marriage and New Love and Raising Families and Exercise-to-Prevent-Aging. That was work that tried to prove how we are all the same. Bateman's poetry will be remembered, should be remembered, because she insists there's a lot more to it than that, that we have a bigger "wingspan."

Her "lacerative blue"—the blue of a sky so bright it makes your eyes bleed—is the intensity the best writers of our time try to capture on the page. It's a blue whose nearest relative is not a recognizable color, but instead must somehow be the fire, the flood, the wind—all the physical elements mixed together. The speaker is devastated by it, pervaded by it, and it's hard to remember, at this point, that Bateman began by mentioning the ur-blue depression that came from a middle-school crush. Within a dozen lines, she's relating that specific azure to the "blue" days spent "tip-toeing around / in a state of perpetual pre-emergency." Individual anxieties—innocent heart-break, nameless dread, panic—may all be kin to each other, she suggests.

The 21st century has upped the ante on anxiety: today we have climate change added to renewed fears of nuclear war, plus many other media-driven reasons to bite our nails. Bateman says it's no wonder we seem to be anticipating an apoca-

lypse, “the cataclysmic release from above / of everything heaven would hold back no longer.” But is this blue poem attempting to define the mood of a snubbed child or the horror that precedes Armageddon? Both, I think, and Bateman suggests that, in order to endure the onrush, we need to slow down and pay more attention:

[I]f only we'd bothered to glance around us,
if only we'd observed all those cumulonimbi heaping up
in even the shallowest of parking lot puddles,
if we'd noticed the ever-expanding population
of the broken-winged, both avian and human . . .

We didn't ignore all this on purpose. Like seventh graders, we forgot to pay attention, and Bateman even goes so far as to suggest that if we had paid attention, “Maybe we would have deduced earlier / that never has the sky not been falling.”

In this poem the environmental disaster that is global climate change certainly resonates with divine indictment. But then again, is Bateman pulling a bait-and-switch? Is this oblique meditation on memory tempting us into a discussion of environmental disaster and political nightmare when what she's really talking about is the process of how poems get made? Or even how experience gets made?

She writes that we might have known before

that never has the sky not been falling
from every direction, from every dimension,
above, beneath, between, within,
as if all along, even from the very beginning
there's been some kind of unspeakable rending
at the heart of things . . .

Her attention to the timelessness of suffering is meant to show us that even a seventh-grade crush can lead to the real pain of *difference*, which is the nature of human alienation. Arthur Farrell's rejection of the speaker, then, can stand for the entire piercing blue expanse of sorrow, and the power here is that Bateman convinces us this might just be true, convinces us that poems, like memories, are often about the way we associate.

Unlike other great female writers of anxiety—Plath for instance, Dickinson perhaps, Joni Mitchell certainly—Bateman also makes blueness a cause for joy, and for devotion. Even though “there's been some kind of unspeakable rending / at the heart of things,” the result of this “tear, [this] irreversible / breaking open” is that “Every living thirst is drinking!” If we look for evidence of how rejection might lead to alertness, the poem suggests, we'll find it “Half-hidden between

porch bricks” along with “the striped gecko [that] flicks its forked tongue / at the freshness, then drinks.” Bateman even sees joy in the natural world’s constant longing, and she imagines “wild birds with their hooked & / curved & serrated beaks” who “drink from leafcurl, from river, / and from the air, in flight.”

In Bateman’s universe, “even the stones drink, taking in the sweetness.”

I believe she’s right when she tells me the only way to heal my fractured heart is to be astonished by my own thirst, like the stones that break apart in this poem “as they begin to drink / from the inside out, guzzling / supercharged, supersaturated blue / straight from their split heartcores.” In fact, what most draws me to Bateman’s work is how clearly she describes what it’s like to long for connection even when we feel ruled by illusion.

While pursuit of this melancholic fullness can be tiresome, especially when even rocks can represent our desires(!), Bateman insists that we need to be open to that new way of seeing. She writes that we need to listen for “all the other exhalations / seeping bluely through the world’s every / chink, crack, fracture, perforation,” and she argues that “any place where the edges / don’t come together anymore” is a place we need to enter.

To enter “such a wound” is to dive into the particular, to “unfurl / your baby or grownup wings, / your fastidious or blundering wings, / your blushing, drowned, or glissando wings, / your blistered, bandaged, of lightly iced-over wings.” To inhabit the world this way is to grow into your own glorious oddness.

Reading Bateman’s work, especially “Another Poem on Blue,” I start to think maybe avoidance is the wrong approach to 21st century anxiety. Bateman seems to argue that we need to accept the trouble: “Once you’ve located / such a wound, you’ll want to enter, / no matter how swiftly / it flickers in & out of sight.” Inside that wound there’s room to “fly until your lungs are drinking.”

I admit, I do have trouble with this metaphor. Or rather, I find it vexing, as it tells me I will *want* to enter suffering, want to be part of the lacerating, lacerated blue I’ve made just by existing. But Bateman’s vision of how creativity emerges from suffering—that we can make “any shapes [our] particular wings might invent”—offers relief. It’s a relief that comes when we stop holding our breath, when we let ourselves hear a sentimental song, or remember an apathetic Arthur without trying to throw on the old familiar armor.

This is why I am more than open to Claire Bateman’s work. She may start by writing the same poem, but by the end she is our poet of transformation, of the spiritual change that can come from staring at the bright sky and simply accepting the “unstaunchable / hemorrhage of blue.”