

Deep Landscape Turning Poems by Ann Hutt Browning
Ibbetson Street Press
TO ORDER GO TO: <http://tinyurl.com/yfwxkrp>

Review by Fred Marchant

It is a haunting title, this *Deep Landscape Turning*, and as we read this book of poems, it is a title that encourages us to meditate on each of those three words.

Let us begin then with the middle term. There are many literal landscapes in this book. There are poems set in the Dordogne and Macedonia, in Prague, London, and Chicago, and one 67 Knollwood Avenue, an address that sounds so quintessentially American, one can easily imagine it as the poet's home. And as these poems ground themselves in place, there is also a wonderful sense of the peripatetic poet. Many of these poems present us with speakers walking across and sometimes deep into these landscapes. "A Day in the Dordogne, France" — the opening poem in the collection — sets the tone overall:

Dodging the shade we stay in the light air;
Then we plunge into the cavernous cave.
Damp with living walls, exuding mysteries
Of a people gone, but our brothers still,
Who breathed startling beast detail with sure strokes,
Startling sufficiency, quiet observers.

In a way, the aesthetic principle Browning ascribes to the ancient cave-painters also applies to her own work. She too writes with quick sure strokes, breathing startling life in each detail that she observes as she walks, strolls, plunges, slips, gets up again.

But this cave passage from the Dordogne also brings me to another word from the title of the book, *deep*. There are of course some literal caves in these poems, but the deep landscape is also the landscape of memory, and of our earlier selves, our souls in their idiosyncratic evolution. Browning's poems invariably head toward that inner life, sometimes wryly, sometimes sadly, but always with a sure-footed sense that what resides there holds the key or keys as to what makes us human. Here is "My Younger Brother," one of these memory poems, short enough to be quoted in full:

He held our mother's hand,
His thumb rubbing back and forth
Across her knuckles.
He and our mother strolled in the garden,
Small chatter about food to eat growing well.
He filled her skirt with ripe tomatoes,
Laughing as he dropped each one
Into the billowing cloth,
His opened fist a fat starfish.
My mother walked, her loaded skirt swaying,
Back to the house, my brother following.
Her skirt was stained with red juice,

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

Her eyes like stars.

The precision of image in that child's thumb moving across the adult's knuckles, and in that skirt stained and swaying, these are typical of Browning's art, but also typical is the cumulative effect of such images. One feels in this memory a joy and sense of abundance, so much so that we believe fully that the mother's eyes were like stars in the sky to these children.

But of the three words in the title of this book, none is more important than "turning." In one sense it points to the turning of seasons, perhaps especially to autumn and leaves turning colors and then falling. But it is the deep landscape within us that is turning also. It is our mortal participation in that larger turning of the seasons that is at the center of this book, grounding it, and at the same time inspiring language and imagination to intense feeling. There are arrivals and departures scattered throughout, and each time they remind us of the "turning," the way nothing stands still, not the self, not memory, not others, not the world around us. In these poems, there are, for example, several hints of mortal threat posed by illness. One poem has a speaker who has says that death "has walked through our bedroom/ Touching his ashes to the lips of my wife." There are also separations and yearnings and the rueful recognition that our ways of bridging the distances between us—even between loving partners—are in the long run as fragile as can be. The poem that gives the book its title is "Macedonian Autumn: Deep Landscape Turning," the final poem in the book. It seems to be about a time of physical separation between the poet and her beloved. She has withdrawn from talk and "lived close to my secret-turned space." She has written a letter, one that has been unanswered for a month. Then when the reply comes she is "split in two by joy." But all this falling and rising emotion seems to suggest other and more permanent separations, where all that can remain between the most profound of lovers is but the "paper self" of words, poems, books, the signals we make to one another over great chasms.

In sum, Deep Landscape Turning has the feeling of elegy, but not despair. It has the feel of someone turning to face difficult, unyielding truths, and even if they are painful, there is the satisfaction of finding the words that will say those truths, and let us hold them, maybe even share them, as long as we can. In these poems, therefore, there is a great and lasting affirmation of our capacity to know and love. Such is the beautiful signal that emanates from this book in the end.

---Fred Marchant is the director of the Poetry Center at Suffolk University in Boston.