

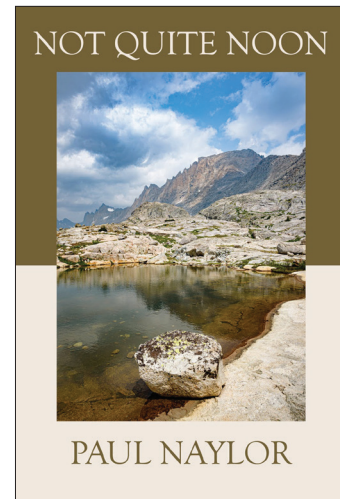
Paul Naylor's Not Quite Noon
Dos Madres Press

reviewed by Gregory J. Wolos

PAUL NAYLOR'S NEW WORK, *Not Quite Noon*, has literally taken a lifetime of experience and reflection to compose. The book is comprised of two long poems recounting two trips twenty years apart over one route through the Wind River Wilderness Area in Wyoming. An even earlier exploration along the trail taken when the poet was a teen is referenced, expanding the physical and spiritual exploration Naylor undertakes to a seemingly lifelong endeavor. But it is the two later trips that the author has chosen to memorialize in poems, linking his older self to his younger, while at the same time juxtaposing the experiences in a way that depicts the evolution of his spiritual self.

The first poem, "A Form Before Us," is introduced by the Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu's epigram: "The way that can be named is not the way." I have always found it paradoxical that attempts are made to render expressions of Taoist or Zen philosophies through language; is it possible to experience the concepts they intend to extol through the physically linear and time bound process of reading? We progress through the reading of a sentence, we accumulate information, comparing it to our past experience, and ultimately synthesizing all parts to actuate enlightenment. But, of course, this dependence on language is exactly what must be sloughed off if we are to truly inhabit the intended experience. Naylor's poetic record of his first journey through the Wilderness Area represents his efforts to reevaluate his relationship to time, space, memory, and language. Naylor begins his journey by invoking the mythic Native American voice of the Coyote who gave shape to the Earth: "Listen close/ as Coyote calls/ the rendezvous to order./ Words . . ./ are elements of life lived among earth,/ air fire and others/ we find as they are,/ not as we will/ . . . No thought but listening." The Coyote invites him to "Begin this time with a part of/ rather an apart from." Traditional reason must be defeated: "Let Descartes' dictum/ that we must render ourselves/ masters and possessors of nature/ set up camp on the other side." Naylor's goal is to "hike with Lao Tzu," so that he can achieve what the Taoists call "tzu-jan--/ the self-so."

As the journey of "A Form Before Us" begins, Naylor recalls his first trip, taken when he was sixteen: "a photo shows a skinny kid, . . ./ years from needing a shave." In this poem, Naylor weaves three narrative modes of exploring experience in order to achieve the "self-so." First, there is the scientific definitiveness of geologic time, beginning with "the big bang/ fifteen billion/ years ago" and continued throughout the poem by reference to particular geologic eras and historical events which marked the land: "Rocks below among the oldest on earth,/ Precambrian core of schist and gneiss/ cooled and crystallized as granite/ two and a half billion years ago/ . . . Read them as angle,/ texture and weight/ of a



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world we share,/ . . . the pasts look back/ on itself as a line/ leading to and from." Also part of this physical history is the history of humans: the imposition of trade and traders on the Native Americans, "where trappers get paid whiskey for pelts." Naylor imbeds these events within the aforementioned earth-origin myths overseen by Coyote, who "sings white water rumbles/ like a river in Orion/ without thought of origin or end,/ which we need to know/ to find our way without/ force or forethought." Finally, there is the immediate present and the experience of the hike itself: "Black clouds build/ in the southwest./ Flickers of light/ between aspen leaves/ give way to gray./ Pick a place in a tight stand of trees,/ pull out my poncho and get ready for rain./ First scent, then sight, then sound,/ or all at once/ the taste and touch/ of rain on rock/ runs over time/ and back to the sea/ out of which we came."

Naylor's experience along the trail in "A Form Before Us" teaches him that though there are transitions in form, there is no loss: "What's lost when ice/ becomes water/ and water air/ the eye can't see?/ For and substance for certain,/ but not memory of the mix--/ of the self-so/ ingrained in each cell, unassigned but imagined/ by the form we take./ . . . No map made it,/ No way knows it all,/ Not quite noon, the sun says." Continuity in form can be imagined in innumerable ways: "A lake is the earth eye/ Thoreau says--/ or a hole/ I say./ Or shattered by wind,/ a shiver of light/ Along its surface/ the same appears/ more varied than thought." And what are the lessons of Naylor's journey? "Writing now/ about sitting then, /Not the imagined event of being/ here or there now,/ but one event/ with so many/ ways to say it./ . . . Breathe as if/ there's no beginning,/ as if turning the light up as/ well as around./ Reflect on reflection/ reflecting/ On being/ being over." As he strives to experience "self-so" on his journey, Naylor learns that "things go on,/ not as they were/ but as they are--/ as new forms unknown,/ like the sound silence contains."

Near the conclusion of "A Form Before Us," Naylor reflects that he "[h]eard the same sounds/ at seventeen when/ I sat here then/ . . . not an essence/ but a repetition/ not of the same/ but of the new." The second poem of Not Quite Noon, "Crooked Wood," sets us back on the Wind River Wilderness Trail after an interval of twenty years, and Naylor's rendering of this later experience is indeed "a repetition/ not of the same/ but of the new." Naylor informs us that he didn't "draw on any photos from the trip that led to 'A Form Before Us.'" And the depiction of this second journey suggests that, while Naylor might be the same individual who wrote the first poem, his "form" has definitely changed, both in terms of his own physical "essence" and the style in which he renders the poem. Structurally, this poem shapes the journey along the trail as a series of photos connected by wandering strings of verse: "In lieu/ of writing/ the picture/ one writes/ of memory/ retrieved/ in sentence/ or line in lieu of form/ image other/ than any/ photo shows." Much of what Naylor sees and experiences transcends the bounds of these photos, but the older Naylor can't escape his physicality: "Pretty sure I couldn't haul my sixty-one year old bag of bones up this steep trail . . . carrying a sixty-pound backpack . . . I want more oxygen than there is."

Naylor "reads" the trail differently as he accepts the form time and experience have settled upon him. His new perch yields fresh insights—it's as if he's rereading the same book after twenty years have

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passed. There is a wry humor in “Crooked Wood.” The mythic “Coyote” of the first poem has been replaced by the llama that shares the burden of Naylor’s excursion, “who lets me think I’m in charge . . . He’s much more sure-footed than me. But who’s carrying whose stuff?” Less esoterically than in the first poem, but still philosophically, Naylor speculates, “Is it possible/ not to project/ a world of what/ we imagine a llama/ might imagine while/ riding a jet-boat/ or carrying/ stuff for us?” With age comes a certain wisdom that includes practicality: “Coyotes and ears keep their distance from llamas.” The llamas themselves teach a lesson, as one of Naylor’s “photographs” illustrates: “I loved watching the llamas. In this shot . . . they’re settled on their haunches, munching grass and flowers while we eat lunch—summer sausage and manchego cheese, pita bread and plums. My camera meant nothing to them. No pose. No need to please.”

The elder Naylor stays alert to the elements of the physical world that stimulate spiritual contemplation and the search for Truth: “Nature’s beauty—/ fraught topic/ seen in each/ digitized image/ unearthed/ as wonder recalled . . . Which wily/ Zen master/said looking/ for truth outside/ wonder is like looking for fish in trees? . . . But what about wonder outside truth? Did my ear remember plums because that word half rhymes with summer, which made them part of the poem remembered as?” But concerns about his own humanness remain, as he contrasts his present self from his younger: “Ceding to the breach among species, we each carried a can of bear spray. Easy to forget it when a midnight whiz beckons. . . . Wondering now what I wondered then, is there a sentence to place me back where I wasn’t sure I wanted to be—cold, feeling old, not up to.”

Naylor of the second journey quotes the Wilderness Act of 1964, which establishes the wilderness as an “untrammelled” area where “man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” He is disturbed by changes of form that suggest a violation of trust on the part of humans who have intruded on the wilderness: the “crooked tree” of the latter poem’s title refers to the white bark pine, a tree that suffers from a beetle infestation caused by an artificially warmed environment. He questions, “Does the reach of human need exceed nature’s grasp?” Instead of the specific geologic changes he cited in the poem based on his first journey, Naylor in his second poem “photographs” a trade-marked compilation of the “needs” he’s brought with him this time, such as “Columbia Silver Ridge Cargo Shorts” and “Under Armour Threadborne V-Neck T-Shirt.” He laments, “I’m inside a sentence that reveres wilderness, but lacks the stones to live there.”

In spite of physical frailty and eventual injury, Naylor continues his pursuit of enlightenment: “fifteen miles from/ the trail head/. . . / no choice but/ to limp my way out./ . . ./Pain and beauty shared/ each step to the end.” Though “these mountains have gotten steeper since I last laid a boot on them,” Naylor concludes, “The frame/ of pain--/ not enough/ to stop me,/ enough not/ to ignore--/ hones time/ in ways/ no photo/ can show.”

Still, the journeys juxtaposed in Not Quite Noon beg further questions. As Naylor in “Crooked Tree” looks for a connection to his former journey,

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he wonders, "Was Coyote in any of the dreams I can't recall?" If "philosophy . . . / begins in/ wonder, "What does it end in?/ And what/ about the poem?" Regarding the wilderness, Naylor wonders with the practical wisdom of age "have we broken what we've been given?" The destruction of the white bark pine is only one story of many: "Or many of one question we neglect to ask."