

Owen Lewis's *Field Light* (Dos Madres Press, 2020)

*reviewed by Gregory J. Wolos*

OWEN LEWIS'S *FIELD LIGHT* is more than a collection of thematically connected poems. Using not only verse, but also photographs, historical notes, and dramatic dialogue, Lewis, a doctor of psychiatric medicine, escorts his readers through swirling gyres of time, place, and memory as he explores issues of individual identity. Throughout the volume Lewis examines his personal thirty-year connection to a summer home he rents, then owns, in the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts. This home, which over time has become known as the Dormouse (a diminutive of "dormered house"), inspires Lewis's contemplation of the area's history. Historical figures abound: writers like Herman Melville and Stanley Kunitz, artists like Daniel Chester French (sculptor of Abraham Lincoln's memorial statue) and Normal Rockwell, even heroes of social and racial justice like W.E.B. Dubois established roots in the region, and Lewis reflects upon their lives in juxtaposition to his own.



The collection opens with a poem describing the author waiting in his car at a rail crossing at what we are to take as the present. Yet even in the moment's intimacy, Lewis portrays himself from a distant third person: "A lone driver stopped in his auto./ . . ./ Stalled, the flashing arm/ before him, he's held up by the train/ and held in place, this place, how long/ he doesn't know." The volume's next poem moves to first person, as the poet, still waiting for the train to pass, considers his New England surroundings, "White churches and pointed/ steeples of thudding bells" as his "darker light/ drops into the Berkshire air." Ever more introspective, the poem concludes with a parenthetical, "(And I still think about her), which the reader comes to understand as a reference to Lewis's ex-wife, whose presence—or absence—haunts the volume.

Central to *Field Light* is a photograph on the porch of the Dormouse, dated 1922, introduced in prose by the lonely poet: "Dog days of August, the back porch lulls, hours nap-drifting. Dr. Lewis spends the month alone, a sort of sabbatical. He should be used to this un-familied state by now, but he's not. Not visitors. Not one. His only companions, an old photograph." Throughout the volume Lewis returns again and again to this photograph, listing the figures within it, searching out their histories, bringing them to life with anecdotes both archival and imagined. Still, the photograph resists him as much as it invites: "He studies the photo, a moment century-old, in the very place he now sits. A town full of history, and he's not part of it. Not even part of his own history. He tries to squeeze into that summer of '22."

Lewis recollects his and his young family's first trip up to the house during a summer thirty years past: of his three children "strapped in" to car seats, listening to *Beauty and the Beast* ad nauseam; of exiting to Route 23; of contemplating landmarks dating from 1761. Later he recalls narrat-

ing Native American creations myths to his vacationing children as bedtime stories. In "(photo as Rorschach)" Lewis contrasts his own identity as a Jew with the Anglicans pictured in the 1922 photograph, concluding that he "would have been barred from colleges of medicine in Boston or New York," before reimagining a meeting between Freud and Jung in Worcester, where Freud is heard by Jung to whisper, "Wherever I go, a poet's been before." As for the figures in his porch photograph, "This group might have envisioned their history conjured in poetry but not by a Jewish physician; this group who saw themselves as history: Greeks, Romans, countrymen, and their crowd. To admire their history, to deny his own?"

Even as Lewis considers the history of the area through figures like W.E.B Dubois, Patty Hearst, and Arlo Guthrie, he returns to thoughts of his own losses, particularly of the dissolution of his marriage, even as he listens to Tanglewood concerts featuring orchestrations based on the poetry of Whitman: "Oh past! Oh happy life! Oh songs of joy!/ In the air—in the woods over the fields,/ Loved! . . . / But my mate no more, no more with me./ We two together no more." Later, as his ex makes her way into a "dream fragment," "I dare/ her memory./ It won't be dared." The trauma Lewis experiences as a result of his divorce is evident in "(August, 2011)", which records the courtroom scene of his marriage's dissolution: "why is she smiling? Lawyers marshal me out of view, advise/ to avert eye-contact five-year flashback: Dr. Lewis's self-diagnosis:/ Courtroom PTSD , in public, a pilloried sinner . . . (I flee to the house/ in Massachusetts, a great tradition of marital bliss there—/ . . . / She'll get the city apartment. Am I getting gypped with left-overs,/ a run-down Dormouse?" Though he has nestled himself in a location steeped in history, Lewis cannot escape the fracturing of his personal life—nor can he disconnect himself from his identity as a writer, capturing his divorce in literary terms: "In New York, 'no fault' divorce. I do, I do, now and forever/ absolve her not. Vows and ows. A manic raven. Nevermore."

Lewis depicts his search for self in dramatic dialogues in which he relocates himself in history, imagining himself to be a consulting doctor for those connected to the 1922 photo on the Dormouse porch. But in the process of self-analysis, Lewis comes to realize that his "calling" comes as both a doctor and a poet as he summons the voices of America's poets through the last centuries: "Call me Whitman/ calling Lincoln all across the country/ . . . / Call MacLeish, lawyer/poet/ public servant/ . . . / A poet should not be mean, but be!/ . . . / Calling Frost calling Kunitz calling Ginsberg/ doctors calling poets calling doctors calling poets/ Call me Williams Call me Gilbert Call me/ doctor-poet/ calling across the field/ call me crazed in this need to write/ call me/ and I beg the word."

What awaits the poet-doctor Lewis, he who finds himself bound to duel callings? Perhaps there is hope in the future, he muses as he contemplates the remains of the orchard on the furthest reaches of the Dormouse acreage: "two leggy pears, barren/ except for the year after the Great Divorce. Heartache." It was then this pair of trees gave out bushels of fruit, saying/ "Sweetness for your unpaired self,/ one day, perhaps, another pair." And so Field Light ends where it began, Lewis having cycled back to the train crossing, where "The train's last echo slows, and beyond/ the field, sky, I, he/ walks on, if into the sky. / Closer to. Visions of./ Pulled up, lifted through./ Rise up and hear the bells/ . . . / Get on with you!"