2023 JAMES WELCH PRIZE WINNERS

selected by Heid Erdrich

KALEHUA KIM

Hā

When I was born I was a girl
I was a girl with a cord wrapped around my neck
I had a cord wrapped around my neck and no breath
I had no breath because until that moment, no one had hit me
No one had hit me and it took time to unravel the cord
It took time to unravel the cord but I feel its weight every day
every day there is a weight, although its source changes
the source changes because matter changes
matter changes by transforming molecules
molecules are in constant motion
the constant motion of children, whose voices echo
children’s voices echo across canyons, leap from cliffs
we leap from cliffs when we stretch to seek balance
we stretch, balancing the past behind us and the future ahead
the past of us and the future crawls across an x axis
crawling across an x axis is only one way to look at time
the only way to look at time is to refuse to see time
to refuse time is to refuse everything you ever felt wrapped around your neck
unwrap the cord around your neck
unwrap the time it takes to catch your breath
catch your breath
catch your breath
that is your voice

J. K. TSOSIE

Brown Anthropocene

part i:
i don’t know why i deny
myself tenderness. so, i lay
the lavender on my bedroom shelf
he gathered with calloused hands
i trace with my fingers
their wandering boundaries.
he is wilderness, the sacred loam
untilled new mexican landscape
big bluestem, wolf tail, & sand lovegrass
virgin earth caressed
only by soft female rain
níłtsą bi’áád.
his eyebrows thick
midnight briar
his eyes quiet
flickering summer monsoon
his mouth a desert prayer
that created the universe itself.
so, i give in
i give way
into his constellation
blue room, blue bodies,
& blue haematoxylin-stained
nucleus.

part ii:
we are slow
the weight of our bodies
pinning time in place
my skin against
yours, brown
nahaadzán
my mother’s mother
my home.
the linearization of
stone compressed
over time
i am reinvented
—auxochromic
an incantation
the absorption
& reflection
of light.
your skin against
mine, brown
like piton husk
maternal cord caressing
our histories meet.
i am reinvented
—as revelation
two lost ends
fastened together
now, whole
finally knowing itself.
yours, brown
mine, brown.
a geography of flesh
& tributaries of perseverance
fill to the brim
silver canyons
of wounds left
by conquests past
we are brown anthropocene.