

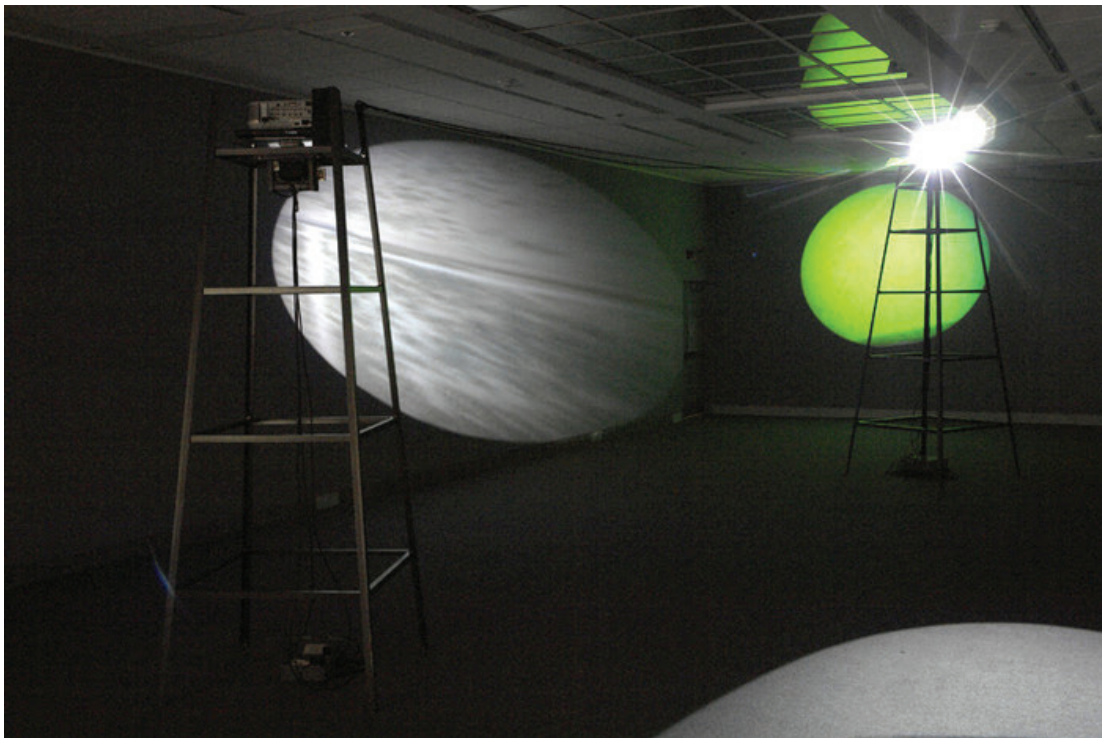
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Note on the title, Onyx Moon: a Blue Moon is the second Full Moon in a calendar month. Likewise, a “Black Moon” or “Onyx Moon” is the second New Moon in a calendar month. The title poem of this collection, “Onyx Moon,” was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2016.



t s beall: still from the video projection piece, "Here There Be Dragons."

STAR LIGHT, STAR BRIGHT

The poetry of James Beall

If there were ever an ideal candidate for the the 2018 William Meredith Award for Poetry, James Beall is close to the top of the list. First off, his new collection of poetry, *Onyx Moon* is such an exquisite work, poems from a master poet like Meredith, whose classical background and artistic talent combined with a scientist's curiosity and attention to the details of the wide world match those of his friend and colleague William Meredith. Wind, rain, volcanoes, jungles, mountains, and always stars weave their way through his poems, and like Audubon he paints his subjects with exactitude of color and precision of detail.

A working association with Meredith is not a pre-requisite for awardees, but in Jim Beall's case, their history as colleagues in the art makes an even stronger case for this award which the William Meredith Foundation is honored to present as the 2018 Award for Poetry.

In 1978, Beall approached William at a poetry reading at the Folger Library while Jim was a Congressional Science Fellow at the Office of Technology Assessment for the U.S. Congress. As the US Poet Laureate, the Library of Congress had approached Meredith about putting together a symposium on science and literature which led to an invitation by Meredith to visit him in the Poetry Office. Their collaboration led to The Science and Literature Symposium in 1981, with Beall as co-moderator. The program featured lectures by the the Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, George Wald, O.B. Hardison (then director of the Folger Library), Sir Fred Hoyle, Gerry Pournelle, and Gene Roddenberry of Star Trek fame, among many others.

Stars shine brilliantly throughout *Onyx Moon* as one would expect from a physicist. In his poem, "The Fire on Magdalena Mountain," he recounts travel to the large array of radio telescopes near Socorro, New Mexico:

They are like flowers tracking a dark sun.
Those distant instruments listen to the sibilant
stars, stars that mimic no human speech. It is a sound
similar to the wind blowing across old ruins,
a level just beneath hearing, that conjures
beyond our capacity to understand or comprehend.

But like the camouflage worked into the coat of a stray buck
who crosses their path, "mottled with the color of pine bark and
rock," the poet intuits, "a sort of randomness, a kind of plan." One
thinks of the "bright watchers" in Meredith's poem, "Country Stars"
comforting the near-sighted child on a winter's eve, to have no fear,
or "only proper fear," as elsewhere in Beall's poem, "Pavane," the
poet lassos the stars with similar lyric beauty and ambiguity:

Then will be silence and a beauty there
upon the snow: a thousand crystals drear
and cold, refracting pale light, the sun
late in the winter slant walking

its rainbow speckles upon a frozen sea
crafted by storm and left so we may wonder
at the wasted, dormant time, where yet
the cold night comes and with it
other wastes of stars.

James Beall's work is at first an enigma. What to make of his
challenging vision, his unique voice, the round-about syntax, his
penchant for unfamiliar diction, his seemingly schizophrenic take
on the world. For here is a poet blessed with double vision, a man
who sees the world with both brain and heart, who is fully at home
in his bicameral mind, scientist and mystic at once.

The literary landscape is rife with physician poets, of course.
Poetry has long been linked to medicine; in mythology, the Greek
god Apollo was responsible for, among other things, both healing
and poetry. Poets like John Keats, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. and
William Carlos Williams were all trained as doctors. One thinks of
the late poet, Dannie Abse who wore both "white coat and purple
coat."

But fewer poets who are also physicists come to mind unless one considers Einstein whose theory of relativity reputedly came to him in a dream, or the kinship between theology and quantum physics found in the work of John Polkinghorne who is both a theoretical physicist and Anglican priest. One thinks of the Jesuit scientist Teilhard de Chardin who posits that even the very rocks have a kind of living energy or "rayon" which is accumulating into an omega point from which mankind is about to make an evolutionary leap. It is not an exaggeration to find the same sort of philosophical insight in Beall's poetry.

Here we see both the careful scientific method of observation leading to a thesis as well as the appreciation of synchronicity that informs the reality of a Reike practitioner or a shaman. The two chevrons, orange-red on a blackbird's wings at Gettysburg mirror the late sun, the way the speeches of Pericles or Lincoln help his imaginary listeners understand a cause. In "Military Intelligence," soldiers digging a foxhole "will make of his or her small space/ a home of sorts, as carefully in place/ as any nest or den the animals/ or insects in their pantomime of thought,/ would take as ease." The soldiers here imitate the creatures around them as do the creatures imitating thought.

Often in Beall's poetry, a poem traces the poet observing his own thought process like a poem by the late John Ashbury. But in Beall's case, the poem is more accessible, more, frankly, "beautiful." The poetry constantly goes beyond the surface with a kind of x-ray vision. He is as interested in the shadows a moth creates, for example, as the creature itself:

"The sun swept on. The small window of shadow opened out./ As if it knew, the moth shook and shivered, warning/ the reedy center, prepared to fly." Walking the fields of Gettysburg, the scientist "... lingers to read the gentle lines the land/ makes, caused somehow by the layers of rock/ below these peaceful fields."

In a short poem memorializing 911, "the shiny pastures of his thought" could not finally befriend nightmare. Only after he describes the explosions with extraordinary metaphor, "the lesser suns/ began to blossom and bloom, before falling into darkness"

can he afford the almost biblical summary at the poem's end: "Thus, the Angel of Mercy, made Fury again."

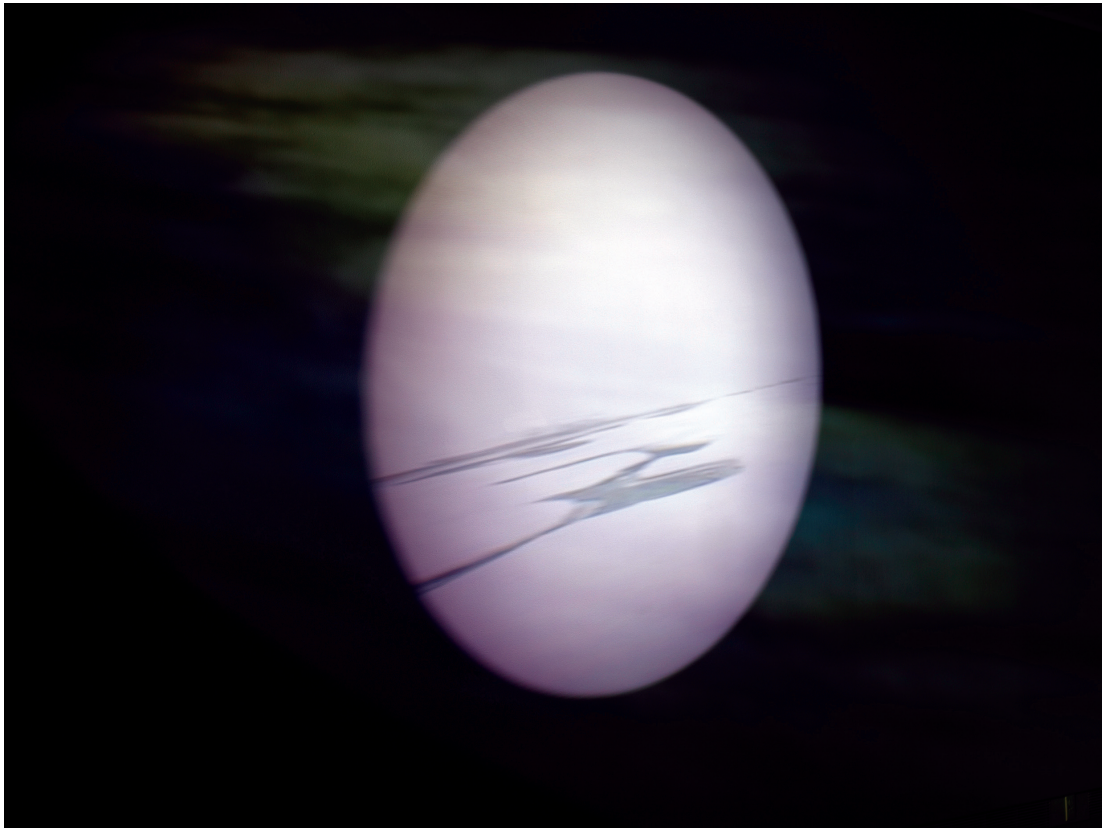
The final stanza of the final poem in the collection, "The Convergence of Meridians," mirrors the idealist philosophy of Eckhardt Tolle in his remarkable book, *The Power of Now*:

There is a moment when all the past
and future come together in the timeless now,
a place with no part showing save the heart.

In 2015, astronauts and Star Trek actors performed the Vulcan salute upon the death of Leonard Nimoy. James Beall is no Pollyanna, but *Onyx Moon* is also a kind of greeting and blessing. As William Meredith writes in his poem, *The Cheer*, "Words addressing evil won't turn evil back, but they can give heart." James Beall too is one of the "bright watchers." *Onyx Moon* seems to say, as would Dr. Spock, "dif-tor heh smusma,": live long and prosper.

Richard Harteis
President, William Meredith Foundation

PART 1



t s beall: still from the video projection piece, "Here There Be Dragons."

Cicada

Cicada, these the same
low boil into the building hiss
rising unto the jet's wail.
It the same, hence years will make

no difference. The heat encompassed
in its veil of air gathers us
like love's holding loose and slick.
Our bodies, then, are our bodies,

and love the metaphor for air.
But if insubstantial, still if fluid,
yet the holding forms a strange
and cyclic music, movements remnant

of a former self, used,
translucent, beneath trees.

Millennium

The way the tongues of flame gutter and sing
means the wood will burn a while. The cat knows
and shifts slowly from haunch to haunch
as though marking a rest upon a sunny ledge.

What will be left from this is a low fire:
orange coals and some blue jets of heat,
yet subtle as the shadow-shapes the logs
become on their way to transformation.

These will warm, still: the hand put up
as if to stay the cold, the hearth's back wall,
so like a cave. I watch as the first man might
have. In morning bless cold ash beneath my hand.

Chicago visits November

Not for long. The city rests there,
maybe a minute at a time. Then,
the sun comes out and we slide
into September, the warmer days.
Then the wind comes around a building
and the clouds come in. It is January, then.
The seasons slide up and down, fingered
by the weather into a great tune, chromatically
yellow to blue.

November's landscape changes like that.
First, you think it's early, then late.
Your senses forgive the mind's
delusioned equivalence of calendar and state.
The season laughs, rolls its fat belly
in the process. The merry middle rolls by.
You think of every reason in summer
for the days to linger. Notice, finally,
the fading of the light.

The Dream of St. Peter

This is the dream: we are trying
to decide the soul of a man,
weigh its worth somehow to know
whether to open the gates and admit

him, weighed down like the rest of us
with his sorrows and joys, that strange
aura of light around the body sometimes
golden or perhaps gray — the color

of a particularly fine clay. Jesus
is always near but takes no part
at these times. He just crouches down,
his head bent, arm extended, finger touching

what passes for earth here. His position
reminds me of the time he was asked
to judge the harlot, how he crouched
down and wrote something

in the light, gray dust. Over and over
indecipherable letters are drawn. We all
ask what he wrote, but never where.

Eumenides

The old ones had a great wisdom about
the nature of retribution walking
on the human plane. How they called to them!
These "gentle sisters" who pursued Orestes

as he flew from their carnal shapes after the
righteous indignation at his act, blood
dripping from his mother's murderer's hand:
an act that seems to us no proper justice.

Yet in that light-drenched land, a grove filled
with a dense shade was set aside beneath
a shining city on the hill, to save us from
their terrible faces that live within us still.

Eye of the Storm

I.

Everything but the present moment is expectation or memory. Consider this quiet, autumnal air at late summer. The crickets chirrup a lazy chime like a scythe at harvest.

The farmer's brown forearms, the dark stain on his shirt, sweat, and its rivulets, these are an expectation or memory of another time and a time to come.

II.

Utter stillness. Is this a calm, or the eye
of the storm? Everywhere we look around
this harbor, the boats' reflections quaver
at each breath. We live the blessings

of peace and prosperity, are appalled
at what they cost.

III.

She is ingenue, a not-quite child, leaning
her hip against the table, or on tiptoes,
noting the menu taped on the window.
Her arms and legs have that amazing golden

color of a child in summer, the hair like
ripe wheat, cut to drape the nape of her neck.

IV.

We dawdle over the last wine, talking
of politics and Armageddon. On the periphery
of my vision I note the girl's turning,
her shirt the color of sky, some blue writing,
darker, above her heart, above the buds of breasts.

V.

I turn my head to read what is written. Who in
this age can say there are no revelations? That
we are only the convergence
of accident and reflex? Here is what was written
on the pale blue wall of memory:

Eye of the Storm.

Gambit

—after Gwen Howard's "A Game of Chess"

"The calm of gods above a troubled field"
takes each within their thoughts as hours pass.
The cautious pawns go out to meet their selves,
headlong the horses charge to slice and swerve

like words well-crafted on a pristine page,
the writ of history carving its own way.
The gulf to memory from hope or fear
is vast. And expectations often go astray

in moments where a glance can shift the poles'
High Heaven and dethrone what gods decreed,
these dancing two in whirling thoughts aloft,
hoped ready for conjunctions in the newer air.

The Gift

The pale evening offers up a stirring
in the trees, but tranquil somehow,
an expectation that the night
will bring up stars out of the darkness

rising from the East. We cannot say
for sure what will become of it. Only
Prometheus, tied to that rock
with his innards being eaten out

by a black bird, knows the future.
This darkness that rises over us,
it is like his. And he pays our price
for the two gifts he gave us: fire,

as fine a light as Lucifer's longing,
and the other, an ignorance of the time
of our own reckoning, a knowledge that
he rightly thought we could not bear.

— for AJB

There is not much of my life
I can tell you. There exist
walls of circumspection, even
the walls built of respect

for your self, which is not
the same as mine. This is so,
although we share the same
dismay at the meanness of some,

their dimness that demands of us
a looking askance so we
can see through the dark,
harsh landscape, the diaspora

that the truly human has always
become. These outposts are
the faces of friends and family,
the pure precision of a well-timed block

or strike, the warm glow
of harbor lights as refuge
from a sea with no horizon, only
wind-whipped waves and wildness towering.

To Derrida, Opining

No word from you has the power
of no word: the simple, equestrian mass
of a thought astride the silence, the brief
quiver along its flank the moment before

the explosion of movement, the instant
the spurs sink deep into the object
of our desire. Thus the web of the relative
present dissolves into an absolution,

the sins of our doubt becoming absolute,
the absolute of our knowing becoming thought.

The Warmth of Clouds

The warmth of clouds is in the mind
imposed upon them, not the glimpse
of chaos, but a curve of brow
so like a face, a rising up

from the water, whole, a form or shape
that somehow is of us, yet not ourselves.
So as these are, we are among the young,
who show themselves before us,

flitting dappled light. So, too, these
new before the world was tamed
when rising mist reveals what
word became its thought and light.

White Carnations

—for Leo Raditsa

The white carnations in a wide-mouthed jar
upon the table open from the green
criss-crossed stems. Beyond, the slattern
light seeps over shrub and window sill to mix

within the hues of white and green. The snow
becomes a landscape of its own, beyond,
belies the still life here, its mimic spring.
The snow, now falling soft as down, now pitched

across the yard like rendered dreams by wind,
comprises all. The world we made in speech
has come to memory, my present faith unequal
to the brink you stepped across.