

“The Vinyl Limbo of Transit”

Review of:
Peter Blair. *Farang*. Pittsburgh: Autumn House, 2009.

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Not long after the end of the Vietnam War, in the late-1970s, Peter Blair spent three years working as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand, teaching English and travelling in the region. Recollections of these experiences, accounts of the whips and scorns of expatriate life in Southeast Asia, form the basis for his latest collection of lyrical narrative poems, *Farang*. It is an impressive work, beautifully written and staunchly devoted to the cause of “foreignness” in all its myriad and wonderful senses.

The poems of the first section, *November Full Moon*, begin with a youthful speaker both shocked by and enamored with the exotic eastern world he finds himself in. The opening poem, “Discussing the Dream of Culture with Professor Kwaam,” is about a discussion of the meaning of *dharma* with a colleague who has just returned from a Buddhist monastery. As the speakers eat noodles at a street stand the conversation takes a somewhat macabre turn

The abbot took us to an autopsy.

*They cut open a woman, removed the heart,
liver, intestines. He tells me about the shriveled skin,
hollow rib cages arching over tables,
pails of limp, gray organs. Dharma. (5)*

While the speaker listens to the Professor (*italics*), he fumbles with his chopsticks and contemplates Thai sunlight shining in noodle bowls. Thus while deeply sensitive to what goes on around him, listening carefully, he is also nervously distracted and curiously unable to face the reality of his situation. The poem ends with the lines “I can’t look at Kwaam’s sad, triumphant smile, / or the emptiness deepening in his sunlit bowl.” This condition of vexed, dreamlike dislocation persists throughout the first section, and together forms a very realistic depiction of the

experience of culture shock. The second poem, “Farang,” for instance, is an hallucinatory montage of bar girls, blood, and beautifully lurid imagery:

Bloody eyes
follow us from a stall.
A buffalo’s skull leers
from behind the red mound
of its butchered flesh. (6)

Even the dead leer at us, strange strangers that we *farang* are, in public places. Here the night markets and all-night partying spots lead to someone throwing a rock at the speaker in a darkened Patpong alley:

Farang! Foreigner!
Floats in from wherever
my fear is. Across the street,
six trishaw drivers lounge,
feet up on handlebars, smiling. (6)

Catching up with his fear, new to himself, the speaker chiefly describes a flash encounter with an oblivious self. This is a sphere of experience—always almost (but never quite) catching up with oneself—that Blair works well in, and will situate himself in throughout the collection. In “Night Club,” for instance, the poet recounts an intense moment involving his lover and teaching colleague, Siripan. The pair should be relaxing at the Bangkok night club where the poem takes place, but Siripan’s “old *farang* friend” has shown up to complicate matters:

Shut out by their past, the language
and the dinky black table, I float
like the suspended disco ball
reflecting their bright intensity
in hundreds of mirrored fragments of rage,
helpless. Should I act like Hemingway,
and lose her forever? Roiling with feelings
should I sit silent, and lose her forever?
They once did *Hamlet*: a student stuttered,
“To be” and another echoed, “or not
to be.” Chris had them join and finish

the speech together, prompting each other:
two choices, two Hamlets, no action.
Siripan looks up into his eyes: I don't
love you. And my *farang* hands
loosen on the throat of my beer. (10-11)

The garish beauty of the moment needs little explanation, but it highlights the way in which Blair sees cultural archetypes intruding on ordinary life, structuring it with tropes and a foreign symbolism all their own. The imagined Thai performance of *Hamlet*—its paralyzed hero, dividing in two, is set against the world and the image of a taciturn, presumably violent Hemingway—is finally resolved in a moment of personal catharsis.

The second section of the book, *Up Country*, relates a series of experiences in north-eastern Thailand (in Ubol Province) and culminates in the unfortunate drowning of a beloved student, Ampon, while on a trip to visit the boy's family on the coast of the Gulf of Siam (Gulf of Thailand). By now there is an unusually sensual, oneiric quality to the language that is difficult to describe except by example. In “Like a Stone Under Water,” after watching the opera *Ramakien*, our speaker is physically assaulted:

The air fills with spirits. A ghost
taps my shoulder, just an apple
someone threw. A man shouts, *Farang!*
A shadow grabs my shirt. Fingers grip
my hair. My wild fear imagines
scimitar claws, white fangs,
demi-gods in the opera. (25)

In *Farang*'s third section, *The Dream of Culture*, Blair turns to contemporary Thai history and some of the remarkable events he witnessed there, including “The Day After the Coup,” in which he describes the imprisonment of the aforementioned friend and colleague, Professor Kwaam. Poems about the life and work of Kukrit Pramoj, the novelist Prime Minister of Thailand (1911-1995) figure prominently in this section too, so at first one is puzzled by the sudden detour into biographical commentary. However, the influence of Kukrit as a cultural symbol (or archetype of the *farang*?) for Blair has a curious genealogy in the book, and in the fourth and final section, *The Land of Transit*, Kukrit appears in the “Up-Country Dream”:

Grandma Blair in a blue sarong stirs
fried rice in a wok, her spatula clanging
in the hiss of oil and egg as she flips
the steaming rice. A motorcycle spatters
in the street. She shakes her head
at me, pours the hot mix onto a plate
and sets it at my place. The rider
on the motorcycle sits across from me,
takes off his helmet. Kukrit, the PM
in *The Ugly American*, that smiling face,
watches me. My hands tremble
with foreboding. I'll soon be arrested. (59)

Again the iconography of Western and American pop culture imposes definite structure on the poet's experience (and/or memory), in this case a scene from the Marlon Brando film, *The Ugly American* (1963). Yet, in this poem the dream of culture is a ghostly superego grandma and the Hollywood version of Kukrit (who did, in fact, act in *The Ugly American*). Here, as elsewhere, the hallucinatory landscape of Culture—foreign grandmother in a sarong, movie star politicians, Asian authoritarianism—is the site on which dislocation and personal anomie are built. Blair seems to be aiming for some latent zone in which even our deepest sense of place, unbeknownst to us, is always already “othered”:

The country within
every country is the land of transit,
Einstein's world
at a fraction of light-speed
in motion in the air
on wheels, on rails, in lobbies,
jail cells, immunity rooms,
the land beyond
jobs, home, sequestered
under TVs hung in airport bars
people slouched in chairs,
the vinyl limbo of transit. (55)

This in-between scene, he says later, is “not on time, / but in time, like a current” that carries everything before it. Like “Traffic Circle,” one of the shorter yet more sophisticated poems in the book, the architecture of desire is emblazoned on his sense of place:

Movie billboards blot out a six-story building
This week: a bare-chested man kung-fu kicks
Against a flaming yellow background, leaps over
tiny scampering armies while cities burn.
Coming Soon: a prisoner, handcuffed in blue rags,
towers sadly over the sidewalk. In painted insets
a judge ponders scales; a woman fingers a gun.

Below, where the scaffold-poles rise from grass,
families live. A mother shifts a steaming pot
on a charcoal brazier. Her boy chases chickens.
Their laundry hangs under the burning cities
and the huge feet of the prisoner. (41)

The neat juxtaposition of these images (Hollywood fantasy/Thai daily life) represents the surreal within the real, the country within the country, and demonstrates the ‘emblematic’ absurdity of daily life in any Asian metropolis. Blair deals in images of such high contrast and odd colorfulness, I think, because he retains the “foreigner’s” sense of dislocation. Indeed, even in the penultimate poem of the book, “Back in Pittsburgh After my Father’s Funeral” Blair returns to his working class Pennsylvania roots as an outsider (another kind of *farang*) and takes a ribbing from the childhood friends he’s obviously grown distant from: “*So, how’s “Thai”-land?* Jim asks with a wink. / *It’s okay. The American soldiers have left.*” There is a felt distance from those “American soldiers,” and the mention of “thighs” that hardly seems to register. Yet, sometime later, back at his apartment in “Making Sticky Rice on Edgerton Place,” we discover the echo of thighs when an insect comes to life in his Thai rice:

After 12,000 miles,
years in dry sacks, months on a shelf
at Kim Do Store, this creature revives
in the ricey water like a seed
opening, a memory: Siripan’s smile

as she lifted her dress around her thighs
wading in the Mekong's moonlit waves. (65)

So *Farang* ends in its own way, with the revival of a lost kernel of sacred memory from the flame of profane images—i.e., an insect in the food, the “thighs” of “Thigh-land.” That the book should end in this curious way, with a memory crawling out of a sauce pan, is somehow very fitting. Anyone who has ever experienced the condition of ‘conspicuous foreignness’ for any length of time, whether abroad or in his/her own hometown, will likely form a deep connection to this book. For despite its “alien” material, its tropical beaches, eccentric teachers, and dirty metropolitan alleyways, *Farang* is a work that transports us headlong through the “vinyl limbo of transit” and delivers us back to ourselves—beaten, changed, but still semi-intact in our foreignness.

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