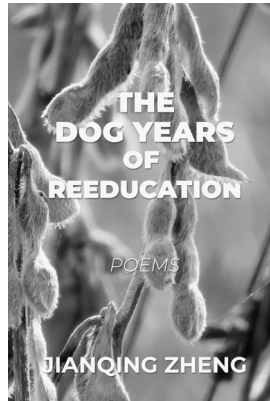


Reviews

The Dog Years of Reeducation. By Jianqing Zheng. (Lake Dallas, Texas: Madville Publishing, 2023. Pp. 84, \$19.95, paperback)

When Jianqing Zheng mentions Li Po in his poem “One Winter Night” at the halfway point in his lyrically stunning and moving collection, *The Dog Years of Reeducation*, the kinship of lineage harkening back to ancient Chinese poets like Li Po and Du Fu is complete. Zheng’s poems have a similar light touch, imagery, poignancy, and affinity with the seasons. As an introduction, he explains that in the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and ’70s, to answer Mao Zedong’s call, millions of middle school and high school graduates, called *zhìqīng*, or *educated youth*, were sent to the countryside to receive “reeducation” from poor peasants and to work and live alongside them.

Zheng was a *zhìqīng* for three years in his youth and writes from memories five decades hence, still vivid and startling, those days “dog-eared” in memory. As he sweats, barehanded and barefooted, in the fields planting rice and cotton, we follow his journey from boyhood to shouldering a man’s load, both physically and psychologically. Despite the separation from his family and former comforts, the arduous hours and hunger, dragging himself to and from the fields—he’s a



boy after all—the humor of interacting with his comrades Pigsy, Pearl, Yi, Wang, and Horse shines through. Most beautiful are his observations of nature, how he feels a part of it—the moon, the stars, the autumn night—perhaps for the first time in his life, now that it’s stripped to the bare essentials, as in: “The moon peeps through broken clouds: / a marble tombstone in gray weeds.”

In “After Rain,” he writes, “Now on the wind, thousands of gray horses / roll away the fevered air” and “I sit on the threshold / dabbing tobacco and dusk / into the cupped paper.” Simple, yet powerful, immediate images and longing for home. Though he labors long days, the world’s beauty seems heightened as he observes girls picking lotus: “her lotus-picking song skimming and flapping like a great egret over the dark green lake and then soaring, hovering, flitting and swooping overhead” and catching butterflies: “It dances in pitch and yaw over the girl’s head.”

Especially admirable is the variation of work in *Reeducation*: imagistic and narrative poems, prose poems, and haiku, the latter two often combined as haibuns. Each is like a watercolor in time and season. At one point, Zheng contracts malaria and is taken to a hospital near his family home. Embedded in the prose poem “Sick” is this haiku of metaphoric mastery:

mom’s tears
flow into the soil
of my heart
the sickbed throbs
with life

Zheng begins to see “reeducation as a coat / altered to wear, / a fate to face and / a life to

live.” He questions whether this “expansive flatland” where he plants and is planted “where rain is source of life // [is] also a dreamland studded / with starry wishes?” Then, in the third section, Mao dies, a turning point in his life as well as the book, noting that he was picking cotton when the news came. The villagers still talked of fertilizer and cotton prices. In the end, he writes, “We no longer look like seedlings / and sound like strangers. // We have plowed ourselves / into the cotton fields.” Something emerges in the boy sent to the countryside to labor in the fields, something like gratitude. Longing fills the fourth and last section: longing for the friends he made in good work, the soil he tilled, the rice he hand-planted that grew him as well. He looks back at the village as he leaves to rejoin his former life, “a string of my muddy footprints / running toward me.”

Although set fifty years ago in a time and place foreign to many American readers of contemporary poetry, this collection remains timely in its historical value and perspective, in its humbleness of surrendering to a subsistence life and to hard knowledge gained and carried as lessons into adulthood, and in the beauty and longing captured in his spare writing. One has the feeling that Zheng has been coming to this work all of his life, and we are richer for having glimpsed these years of toil, dreams, and realizations through a poet’s generous heart and eyes.

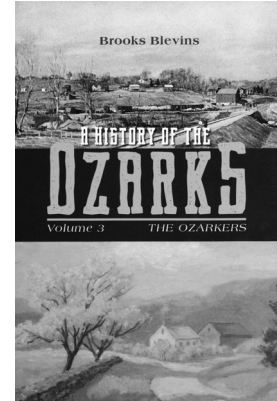
-Linda Parsons



***A History of the Ozarks, Volume 3, The Ozarkers.* By Brooks Blevins. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021. Pp. 328, 24 b/w photographs,**

18 maps, \$34.95, cloth)

In this last volume of his three-part series, *A History of the Ozarks*, the author provides a cultural and economic history of the region beginning at the turn of the nineteenth century through the present and focuses on two main themes: the duality of the region and the region’s evolving culture and economy. Brooks Blevins is the author of nine books, including *Ghost of the Ozarks: Murder and Memory in the Upland South*; and *Arkansas/ Arkansaw: How Bear Hunters, Hillbillies, and Good Ol’ Boys Defined a State* and is the Noel Boyd Professor of Ozarks Studies at Missouri State University.



Blevins writes history in a way that is compelling and readable, and this work is no exception. He begins and ends the book and each chapter with a story. The chapters are organized chronologically around a theme, allowing Blevins to focus on many different individuals and locations within the region. As in his other works, he frames the story of the Ozarks as a smaller part of the larger American story, explaining how the Ozarks region fits this narrative and at times also breaks away from it. Blevins notes early on that the modernization of the Ozarks coincides with the cultural push to “mythologize” the region (11). As Blevins shows readers, while the Ozarks sees railroads come and go, improved roads, the out-migration of a generation, the creation of state parks, and new immigrant populations, the public image of the region remains largely static. Blevins is able to capture how and why this image