WHAT PLACE CAN REVEAL

Brendan Galvin. *The Air's Accomplices.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015, $17.95 paper

Noel Crook. *Salt Moon.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015, $15.95 paper

According to the French philosopher Nicholas Malbranche, "Attention is the natural prayer of the soul." I think it safe to say that neither Brendan Galvin (author of seventeen books), nor Noel Crook (now making her début), would disagree with such an assertion. Both poets have an uncanny talent for attention, for noticing the luminous parliculars of places where they live or happen to be. In their poems, they give us a seductive natural world with a variety of animal life: horses, dogs, a mountain lion, coyotes, foxes, fish, a black bear, a harbor seal, a wild hog, a right whale, a dragonfly, and lots of birds. Crook takes us to places in her home state of Texas and to rural farm country where she lives in North Carolina. Galvin gives us the outer reaches of Cape Cod where he lives, as well as Ireland, the country of his ancestors. Family also figures into the work of both. Neither is interested in conceptual games common to much contemporary poetry—games that might intrigue the mind for a brief moment but leave the emotions untouched, games that finally don't matter in any significant way.

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Noel Crook's *Salt Moon* is the most impressive debut volume I've read in recent years. Her voice is mature, genuine, and confident. Not a formalist, she nonetheless knows how to measure and break lines, knows about economy and sound. The book—as well as each poem—is finely structured, nicely balanced between light and dark, the

latter sometimes prevailing. Three poems in, we come upon "The Slaves," a good place to start, for it shows us death, the shameful history of slavery, and the inevitability of change. Crook begins impressively:

> That first spring in the old farmhouse
> we call ours, I found them, their stones
> strewn in the wooded corner of the mares'
> pasture, sloping into barbed wire, blackberry
> thicket, toward the creek below—a few
> uncertain mounds nudged by roots
> of loblollies, shifted by erosion.

A beautiful sentence—fine sound with some linear surprise. These unkept graves haunt the speaker and make her aware they are nothing like "those ordered rows / of Faithful Wives, Beloved Sons" down the road at the Zion Church. She also wonders about grief-stricken slaves who might have risked punishment for digging up narcissus bulbs from around backyard oak of their Master's house in order that some might brighten graves of their loved ones. And there is the smooth pond washstone where calloused hands washed sheets and petticoats. Occasionally, she and her husband show visitors the "old quarters," where seventeen slept, bunks perhaps three tiers high. After contemplating the possibility of putting up a small cemetery fence, "the kind found on country drives / past old homeplaces that confine death / to a square," she realizes such would be impossible because there is no way to know where graves begin and end. Crook concludes memorably:

> No, let them have their confusion
> of peepers in the spring, in the fall
> the bay of hunting dogs, the knock
> of horse and deer hooves
> over their dark rooms. Let them have
> the rib's slow deliverance through red clay
> into cattails—at the creek's bank
> the blooming of teeth

in the grass. *Let lie, let lie,*
the veery sings, but the earth turns
and turns and will not keep.

Throughout the book we find contrasts: love and death, present and past, east and west, beauty and the beast. In the opening poem, now in North Carolina, the speaker says, "I want the western sky / of my girlhood" which included "the kiss of a boy at sixteen / who flattened me over the hot hood // of his Ram truck." This memory is immediately replaced by "the summer a mountain lion" killed "two bottle-fed backyard deer, their bones / dragged to the dump to be picked clean." On the other hand, there were "nights rampant with stars," "an orange skiff of a moon," and "the solace of canyon wrens," but against the azure blue sky there was often a "lone buzzard wheeling and waiting."

Buzzards, crows, owls, coyotes, and even a house cat ("half prince of sofa-shadow, half Jeffrey Dalmer") remind us of death and the need to be aware of our surroundings. In "Crows," Crook describes how these birds signal approaching autumn, how they harrass the owl (the "old hunchback" in the backyard tree), how the cat patrols dying roses where the family's best dogs are buried, and how she finds a lethal black widow spider in the children's sand box. Air is filled with menace: "The crows call in threes: // *Watch, watch, watch.* Shadows of wings, / they say, and gather the seeds. / Count the children again." This is not the kind of attention we associate with *carpe diem*. Rather, it says danger is ever-present. Be on your guard. People are dangerous too.

Two unforgettable poems from the first section are "Dark Country" and "Twins." Both tell a compelling story of the beast within. The first begins at dusk with "Rorschach shadows," a mother home alone with her daughter. She is nervous because kitchen

windows remain uncurtained, yet tries to forget. "Who'd even find us / out here?" she thinks. "But the dog disagrees." He is restless and aware of something. Crook records various tell-tale sounds breaking the quiet. One is of "the barn cats . . . at their ebullient / murders again." Then comes the recollection of eleven-year-old twins across the creek, their "eyes blue as March mornings, shorn hair / the color of orioles' wings." They stockpiled bullets, then cut phone cords to their house, and waited for their father to come home. Here Crook interrups the narrative to describe further the unsettling night noises and her dog's refusal to lie down. The next poem, "Twins," continues the story and begins with the testimony of teachers saying "they hadn't noticed / anything amiss" and would likely never have guessed the twins would shoot and kill their parents with "birthday gifts—two Rugers— / and their father's own shotgun as a backup." She ends the poem with a painful irony:

> Some months before it happened, I phoned their father
> when I caught them fooling with our yearling colts.
> He showed up in fatigues. "That bay," I said,
> "will break their necks." When he got them home,
> we heard the yelling all the way across the creek.
> Good, I'd thought, that'll be the end of it.

Darkness deepens in the volume's next section, "Evening News," where we see "beggars" and "bony children" in India, the naked body of little girl killed in the Middle East, a gifted piano teacher whose dexterity progressively deteriorates with a brain disease, a Romanian orphanage where children are badly treated, a girl who has witnessed the sexual assault of several of her classmates. In "Skull," the speaker sees a van outside a grocery store with a skull hanging from its rearview mirror. Why? "My children didn't notice, / but it eyed them through dark sockets, / sighed through hollows of its slack jaw." Later that night, ever on guard to protect her children, she says,

> I consider my options, my own
> black capacities: the baseball bat
> nestled in the toy chest, its satisfying
> weight and heft; a claw hammer gleaming
> in the toolbox; in the kitchen, the cool handle
> of a butcher knife that fits the palm like an answer.

But there are no answers. In the section's title poem, seeing windows flickering with televisions on a dark street, she sighs, "Lord, Lord." Gray faces of satellite dishes look up toward the heavens, sending news signals "relentless as prayers." Another poem, "Mercy," shows us there is none, and that "Job was impressive, a poster child / for God . . . / / his great house burned, / livestock driven from his fields, / the throats of his servants slit . . . ." An extraordinary poem that best deals with such Job-like misery is "Turner's Suns." Here beauty and the beast are inseparable. Crook describes Turner's seascapes and tells us: "From his own darkness he gave his brush // to red, the molten pupil of his God's-eye." No mercy is shown, "not one thing spared— // ships sinking, sailors stricken, even / monsters half-hidden in the waves roiling." It is hard to square the beauty of these paintings with the horror they depict, "whole coastal towns exposed." Crook's stoic response:

> To stand beneath one is to know a little
> of what it is to raise your face to the thing
> that could take you in an instant, not
> to ask for its mercy but to open your palms
> and show it your throat.

In another poem about painting, "On the Whitney Exhibition *Picasso and American Art*," Crook takes a satirical look at how New York once "teemed with copycats / the avant-garde, all trying their hands / at slice-and-dice" but in a sexist way, how vulvae were rendered "sharp as shark's teeth," and "pudenda dangled like great dumb mouths." She goes on to say, "Those of us who have them stand cross-armed /

before tits detached, refashioned as epaulets; / cross-ankled in front of labia pasted onto cheeks." In a zinger closure, she denounces fads and fashion as much as sexism. One can only "ponder / how once a genius flourished the blade / of his brush and made dismemberment the rage."

The last section of the book, "Comanche Trace," takes us back to Texas where Noel Crook spent her girlhood years. "Smith Canyon," the first poem, begins: "That summer when loss took me by the throat / I came home to the parched Texas hills." Here Crook continues earlier thematic contrasts: past/present, love/death, holy/unholy. She uses the occasion of her return to visit the unchanged canyon where Comanches once made camp, "chipping arrowheads at the water's edge." She remembers how, as a girl, she "walked the rocky shore, sank deep in the dark water . . . / glad that once the cliffs had whispered // with the scuttling of a million blind crustaceans. / I was their sister . . . " In another poem, she describes swimming naked with her friends in the same place, where "canyon wrens careened our names" while she "floated there along with clouds, / clouds our ceiling, clouds our ground."

One of the many things I admire about this volume is its imagistic and thematic continuity. Buzzards and coyotes appear now and then throughout. "Song," the book's last poem, is again about the hungry soul. Under the moon, Crook hears the back-and-forth voices of coyotes up on Horse Hill, "the ragged belly-deep vowels of yearning," and moves from present to past, to a boy who didn't return her teenage love. She recalls going outside in her nightgown and how she tried to make the same coyote song under the gibbous moon, the reflected eyes of a raccoons in nearby scrub oaks. With her "mouth opened to an O," she tried, but "the song stuck like a bone in my throat."

Thankfully, the bone is no longer lodged in her throat. That song of yearning can easily be heard in these fine poems. Noel Crook brings what she sees and remembers to vivid light in a skillful and natural way with perfectly managed lines. *Salt Moon* is an engaging, very readable, and memorable book.