

Poetry in the Service of Truth

by Catharine Brosman

Kites: Poems, Jonathan Chaves, Resource Publications, 2025, pp. 112, \$12.00, soft-cover.

Jonathan Chaves is an exceptional intellectual and literary figure. Born in 1943, he is of an age at which his accomplishments can serve as models and inspiration for younger figures in the humanities today. He graduated in 1965 from Brooklyn College, in his home borough, with a major in English poetry, his special interests being medieval mystics, including Richard Rolle; he also studied closely the poetry of William Blake. The influence of each is perceptible in Chaves's new collection of verse, *Kites*, where Blake is cited several times.

Chaves took an M.A. in Chinese language and poetry at Columbia University in 1966, then traveled widely. He learned Hindu so that he might read the Upanishads (the present collection contains a poem derived from one). In 1971 he was awarded the Ph.D. in Chinese language and literature and moved on to occupy faculty positions at three

New York institutions before settling at The George Washington University in 1979, where he continues to teach full-time.

In addition to Hindu, Professor Chaves knows French (he admires Baudelaire greatly), and he can read Japanese. Although his wife is Greek, he does not know ancient or modern Greek; but the Greek cultural tradition has influenced him enormously. A non-observant Jew, in 1988 he converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

Chaves has many scholarly books and translations to his credit and is recognized internationally as an authority on Chinese poets, beginning with Zhang Ji (c.766-c.833). *Every Rock a Universe* was named the best translation from Asian literature by the American Literary Translators Association (2014), and *Pilgrim of the Clouds* was nominated in the translation category for the National Book Award. He has written

widely on Chinese graphic art, an integral part of his concerns. The exhibit on which his beautiful book *The Chinese Painter as Poet* was based received a favorable review in the *New York Times*.

Chaves's debut collection of poetry, *Surfing the Torrent* (2023), drew on his intellectual and personal background, which can be summed up as classical, founded in tradition, both Asian and European-Mediterranean. As those readers familiar with the American poetry scene in recent years will recognize, Chaves is thus an outlier, occupying a place on the traditionalist scene beside such craftsmen as Dana Gioia, David Middleton, and James Matthew Wilson.

In Chaves's work beauty, goodness and, above all, truth are the goals but also his means. History is honored; morality is served; natural, verbal, and other artistic beauty is recognized and cultivated. His imaginative sphere is not irrational. He does not throw in phrases such as "I turn on a shovel" nor entertain his readers with trite whining on his misery or boredom, complaints characteristic of poets, both well-known and obscure, from Allen Ginsburg on.

With *Kites*—his second collection—the place of Chinese poetry and thought in Chaves's world view is again displayed prominently, side by side with his Christian belief. Yet, to appreciate the framework and the picture, readers need not know or believe everything that went into the work. It is not a tract, intended to argue points or convey information, however urgent; it is poetry, involving emotions wrought in words,

experienced as reminiscences, meditations, visions (whether glimpses of reality or synthetic imaginative creations).

The cover shows a pen-and-ink sketch by Feng Zikai (1898-1975), containing a descriptive quotation from the poet Huang Ding (1828-1880). Among the poems, the range of forms and topics alike is wide. Although Chaves generally favors fixed meters, rhyme, and inherited forms, he also uses unrhymed lines, following Chinese models, sometimes in stanzaic arrangements, sometimes in free verse—Consider this sample, which opens the title poem:

These are the kites
they slice the blue air

like knives

their lines

swell with the wind

as they bow to each other

and rise again.

"Anyone could write that," scoffers might say. That's a compliment, but not to them. Simplicity is not easy to achieve; it is an art in itself. "Art," wrote Willa Cather, alluding to her novel *The Song of the Lark*, "should simplify ... so that all that one has suppressed and cut away is there to the reader's consciousness as much as if it were in type on the page." An image should be "so ideal that it seems inevitable." Chaves's poem illustrates the inter-artistic connections that interest him deeply, while establishing a bond between the past and

the present—children and their play, like life itself, being essentially identical through the ages.

Such simplicity does not mean *only* simplicity everywhere; it is not to be a straitjacket. In Chaves's verse, decoration and elaboration, including similes, metaphors, hyperbole, and other figures of speech, spring, as it were naturally, from the poet's imagination. Along with general complexity of language, they enrich fundamental insights; they are themselves insights. Even redundancy can be put to use. Think of Lady Macbeth, who, understanding that "all great Neptune's ocean will not wash the blood" from her hand, adds, "No, this my hand may rather / the multitudinous seas incarnadine / Making the green one red" (entirely red).

Whether pared-down or elaborate, Chaves's lines are connected always to his primary concerns, above all truth, human and divine. But these springing as it were naturally from the poet's imagination, enrich fundamental insights, allowing even for redundancy. Think of Lady Macbeth, who, understanding that "all great Neptune's Ocean will not wash the blood" from her hand, adds, "No, this my hand may rather / the multitudinous seas incarnadine / Making the green one red" (entirely red).

According to Judeo-Christian belief, divine verities are, of course, known principally through revelation, itself conveyed in language. The word is primary. But these verities can be glimpsed elsewhere, as the poet shows, in nature, which is a kind long-dead of living

book, and through human relationships particularly, where speech plays an enormous role. Married love occupies a suitably generous space in Chaves's world. The second poem in *Kites*, "Anna's Languages," a strong poem, not only celebrates his wife's command of several languages; it identifies more than one kind of communication. "Body language / pulled me towards you"; "mind language / intertwined with long-dead / (so I thought) / places in my mind / love language / for your children / won my heart, also dormant ... " All such language is "at that central point / where God dwells / in us and above ... "

Consider "Sonnet for a Wronged Man," an epistolary poem addressed to a friend, with an epigraph from a Japanese poet, translated by Arthur Waley. Here are the opening lines.

Dear Friend,

...And such it's ever been, since Eve

And Adam brought us to it. Ah, the gall

Of serpents in the grass. Now Paul

Is stung as well.

Here's a stanza from another sonnet, "Pentecost":

Apostles seated upstairs, anxiously

Awaiting something—when in blinding flash

Twelve tongues of fire struck each like a lash

from a cosmic whip of ecstasy.

"Troubadour Verses for Anna" evokes the Provençal poets, who, singing of

love, extended the vast body of amorous poetry of the Trecento and Quattrocento in Italy, popularizing the ideal of romantic love and influencing enormously the poetry of Renaissance France and Tudor England. The perennial motif of the unsayable is not trite; it is fitting.

ANNA! How can I

at all convey

what I would say?

You are the air

breathed by the trees

a gentle breeze

Yet are the whirlwind

roaring through the wood

cleansing bad for good

You are cicadas' chant

beneath bird song

all summer long

Chaves is an excellent satirist, taking pot shots here and there and denouncing pieties of the ruling classes. You may savor these lines making fun of a *Washington Post* opinion piece asserting that human beings are too numerous:

Let's assume the writer is correct.

The challenge now is for us to detect

The best techniques for lowering population,
increasing deaths, decreasing copulation.

Or maybe Law would help—*mandate* abortion,

For every pregnancy out of proportion,

Like China's quondam policy,

Improving global life for every tree.

In “Grey Potomac,” in blank verse (suitable for meditations) the river subtly becomes an image of the mind and its time. The wavelets of the current, the poet writes, are perhaps the moment, as felt now; or are they memories? He thinks of sitting on the banks of the Hudson. “Greyneſs of feeling as the ſky is grey, / The moving clouds, the water— everything. / Thoſe ſeagulls were the moment, yes, they were.” Time again is paſſing. “The moment has no ſubſtance. Once ſay “It is,” / “And already it is not.” That none of this is new—think of Heraclitis, of Paul Valéry’s “Le Cimetière marin”—is not a flaw; indeed it is the point. Chaves quotes with approval Blake’s obſervation that “the poet’s work is done between pulſations of an artery.”

Catharine Brosman is professor emerita of French at Tulane University; cbrosman@tulane.edu. Her latest books are *Aerosols and Other Poems* (2024), *Partial Memoirs* (2024), and *Metates and Other Poems* (2025). Brosman’s poetry has appeared regularly in AQ, along with her article “Poetry and Western Civilization,” in the spring of 2023. In our winter 2023 issue she reviewed Jonathan Chaves’s *Surfing the Torrent in “Poetry and the Human Experience.”*
