

REBECCA FARIVAR

Dream Yourself Awake: Betsy Wheeler's *Loud Dreaming in a Quiet Room*

Loud Dreaming in a Quiet Room, by Betsy Wheeler. Aptos, CA: The National Poetry Review Press, 2011.

In Betsy Wheeler's debut collection, *Loud Dreaming in a Quiet Room*, dreams certainly push their way to the forefront as reality recedes into the background. Images and memories are sliced up and spliced together in unexpected ways moving according to a logic all their own and thus making each poem feel like a dream unto itself. That's not to say that this is a collection of dreams—it isn't—but rather the poems function according to the same logic we find in dreams, which is to say a loose logic that makes sense nonetheless.

One way Wheeler highlights her use of dream-logic is by positioning herself against other poetic forms. Throughout the collection are many poems titled non-sonnets. In fact, the collection begins with "Non-Sonnet for the *You* behind the Bedroom Door," putting the "non-sonnet form" front and center. Looking at these non-sonnets together, they are quite diverse, varying in line-length and subject matter, so Wheeler is not creating a new form in these poems. Rather, she is positioning the poems against the concept of sonnets. Beyond the 14-line format and the rhyme scheme, part of what defines sonnets is their logical progression. The sonnet is a way to discuss a topic or make an argument by plodding along and then amazing the audience with a swift turn toward the end. Wheeler's non-sonnets fight against logic, or at least a clear linear progression, and this is what ultimately defines this form.

Taking a closer look at "Non-Sonnet For The *You* Behind The Bedroom Door," we can see how Wheeler sets up the appearance of logic and then lets it slowly unravel. Of all the non-sonnets, this poem is among the most devious as it tricks the reader at first by looking like a sonnet on the page with 14 lines. Of course, we are not expecting a sonnet—it is called a non-sonnet, after all—but there is an expectation that by explicitly positioning the poem against the sonnet and then using the 14-line format that the poem will somehow still evoke the

sonnet's logic or romance. But by the end of the second line it's clear that we are in a poem that fully means to leave the sonnet behind and have it's way with us: "Dear Reader, when I say *I mean to ravage you*, / I'm generally talking to ice cubes." It's almost as if the poem is starting with the Volta as the speaker first tells the readers that she's going to ravage us and then immediately flips it to ice cubes. The speaker starts with the subversion of logic.

The poem then progresses in a form that appears logical on its surface, but is actually unraveling. The poem continues:

When pleading in a scaly voice, I say *That's so out-of-doors of you*, I mean I am afraid you will leave me with my muffler of sea-foam green, my star-shaped sunglasses. When I tell you that I love my neighbor I actually mean my next-door neighbor—how his crying makes the trees bow over the house, makes the grass try to stand up straighter.

Perhaps because the two key images in this stanza—first of the speaker dressed in some outlandish, child-like costume and second of the tress and the grass responding to the cries of a man hidden indoors—both evoke a clear sense of loneliness and sadness, it feels like there is a logical connection between them. However, when we take a moment to think how we got between these images there is no real connection. And that's precisely the point. The poem is moving based on the logic of emotion rather than the logic of narrative. There is no explicit connection between the reader and the ice cubes, the speaker and the neighbor, and certainly no reason why trees and grass would care about the sadness of a man, but they feel connected because of the underlying sadness they all convey. The second, and final, stanza of this poem reinforces this emotional non-logic:

When, signed off and halfway sleeping, I murmur
O fabulous coverlet! it means I feel ready for death's comfort.
When I say again *I'll feel sorry when this ends*, and my voice
is shards of ice, then I'm not addressing my drink,
but rather the whole mad collection of You.

The speaker at once embraces death and loathes it, and by throwing in the Romantic O there certainly is an echoing of Keats who vacillated between the same desires. Again, it feels like this makes sense because there is an emotional logic—also similar to Keats—but the

progression from half-asleep murmur to the "mad collection of You" is filled with leaps. That being said, we do get some type of closure as the ice returns in the penultimate line, but transformed from actual ice to the speaker's voice, yet still somehow ice that could be in a drink. Again this adds to the illusion that the poem has come to a logical conclusion when in fact we are just entering the "whole mad collection."

Though the entire collection is not made up of non-sonnets, all of the poems do function with the same type of non-logic, which, actually, logically, makes sense given the context of the collection's title. The other poems are in a variety of free verse forms, but the format that stands out after the non-sonnets are several poems that are comprised of a series of discrete lines. Though the lines stand alone, they build on each other by echoing back similar images. Formally they are quite different from the non-sonnets, but tonally they feel connected. An example of one of these poems is "The Voice in the Sky," which begins:

A detonating effect.

The Embassy green and marbleish.

The water below and the bells.

The bells and their salty confidence.

The ruddy lights and we are frozen.

The French had concerns over architecture but others
believed more in signage.

At first the poem progresses with these seemingly unrelated images, but slowly we can build a picture. The title immediately matches the first line, as we can imagine, were a voice to come out of the sky, it would be loud, striking, and surprising like a detonated bomb. The embassy, notable for its green and marble building, is echoed back with the French concerns over architecture. The bells, tagged at the end and beginning of the lines, give the first tangible connection between the images and encourage the reader to make these connections, even if some may seem tenuous at first. We can even link the "water below" and the statement "we are frozen."

These first few lines lay the ground work for the rest of the poem

as it builds a cacophony of bells, whistles, and booming, bilingual voices that speak from the sky, creating the sense of being foreign and lost looking for embassies and signage, running and waiting for trains. The poem ends with an indirect echo of the first lines:

The night, the ways and the greenish structure.

The bells and the bells.

That signage.

Reminders of boundaries.

The train. Stop.

In this way, we feel like there is some type of closure, that we've moved ahead through this dreamy yet real world and arrived somewhere. After all, the train does stop.

The collection ends with a long poem titled "Start Here," which was originally published as a chapbook of the same title by Small Anchor Press. "Start Here" is similar to the other poems in the collection in how it uses indirect echoes to link together scenes. However, it does have a narrative as the speaker jumps between childhood memories of the countryside to her current life in Brooklyn. The poem is divided into sections that consistently present a new scene and almost always begin with an address, either to Andrew, the speaker's childhood friend and love object, or Brooklyn, where the speaker seems to currently live. In this way, an opposition is created between the speaker's rural childhood and urban adulthood, both of which seem to simultaneously suit her and make her feel out of place. Ultimately, the central drama of the poem is not that of lost love, but rather the speaker wondering in which place is she most herself.

This dilemma comes into focus toward the end of the poem with the final section, which begins addressed to Andrew and declaring that the poem is not for him. After meditating on cicadas and their deaths and considering Andrew sleeping with someone in a hammock outdoors, the speaker comes around to the realization:

. . . and Andrew this
poem is not for you. It
is me at 5 A.M. waking
to no one and when I

interrupt my own sleep
to stumble to the bathroom
it is blindness and lonely or
lovely and who I am which
is me, which is never
so clear.

It is me writing
myself back into
sleep so I just drink
the water, I just
drink the water and think
something has to
start here.

The speaker tries to write herself back to sleep, but she can't fight being awake. In this early morning hour, not quite night but too early to start the day, she says it's never clear to her who she is, but in this moment that dilemma is finally clear. By coming to this realization, it gives her a place to begin understanding herself. Similarly, in this moment the poem becomes clear, ending on the image of a woman drinking water and writing at a table in a barely lit room. No longer are we in the realm of unlikely images connect on emotional logic, but rather a clear stark image inline with the feelings of the moment.

Just as the final poem instructs the reader with its title to "Start Here," the collection ends on the same direction. Of course there is irony in saying the ending is the start, but this is also a sincere declaration. After wandering through dreams, loud dreams that insist on their dream-ness, the speaker is finally and fully awake. This is the true start.