

*On The Occasion of The Last Old Camp Meeting in Llano County*, by J. Scott Brownlee

Tree Light Books

rev. by Alyssa Godina

*On The Occasion of The Last Old Camp Meeting in Llano County* is a poetry chapbook written by J. Scott Brownlee and published by Tree Light Books, the print arm of *Ghost Ocean Magazine*. Brownlee has written three chapbooks and a full length collection, *Requiem for Used Ignition Cap*. He currently teaches as a core faculty member for Brooklyn Poets. In *On The Occasion of The Last Old Camp Meeting in Llano County*, Brownlee captures his hometown of Llano, Texas, through poems that explore the town's distinctive citizens and rural atmosphere.

Brownlee begins documenting and describing life in Llano, Texas with "Indian Blankets," a poem that weaves the myth behind the vibrant flower into a message about the "blossoming" of the world, and, later, moves to a story of a pasture fire that offers hope through destruction ("Pasture Fire"). This is followed by a narrative record of the people in a low income community that shamed his rural life ("Close Reading of a Cliché Country Scene"). Vulnerability fills these poems as Brownlee relives his own experience through these simple, inanimate objects. Through bringing them to life, an insight on the complexity of the human experience is given to the reader. An understanding develops of how these hometown objects and memories can become the foundation of identity.

Within the chapbook, he constantly experiments with persona and form. For example, in "Bluebonnets," Brownlee experiments with persona by taking on the life of a Bluebonnet plant and spinning a tale of rebellion: "Never plant us in the grass because we kill / every good thing we touch. / Call us weeds. Call us desolation. / We have no song to sing but Cain's brotherless tune." No poem in the chapbook is like the other as he plays with couplets ("Close Reading of a Cliché Country Scene," "Ritual," and "Mockingbird"), long narrative poems of reflection ("How Can I Say

This More Plainly” and “On The Occasion of the Last Old Camp Meeting in Llano County”), and uniquely spaced poems that follow no formal rules (“Wildflower Choir,” “Ascension,” and “Oracle”). Brownlee has a talent for painting scenes through descriptive, poetic language that speaks to the reader’s imagination and welcomes them into Brownlee’s Llano, Texas. In “On the Occasion of The Last Old Camp Meeting in Llano Texas”, the author shares a tender moment with a peer that becomes vivid through the author’s usage of imagery and Christian allusions: “Here we blur together, faces inter- / secting in the river’s vision, which is our reflections’ sudden / decreation back to Adam’s voice box like the bridge’s / music as cars pass between us & our singing rises / through the dark of naming.”

This collection is for anyone who comes from a small town and knows how it becomes a universe in itself. And even if one doesn’t have that experience, Brownlee keeps a constant tone of nostalgia that will ignite in the reader and let them see Llano through his eyes. This chapbook brings forward a journey into Llano, Texas, that ultimately anyone who knows the feeling of home will find solace in.