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Alyse Bensel

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Into the Past, Into the Present–Historical Poetry as Warning: A Review of Julie Swarstad Johnson's *Pennsylvania Furnace*.

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Pennsylvania Furnace, Julie Swarstad Johnson's debut poetry collection, explores what possibilities arise when a newcomer encounters the relics so common to a place that they have gradually disappeared into the landscape, becoming increasingly inscrutable and obscure. By listening to those artifacts, Johnson performs a resurrection through poems that traverse history, time, and space. Different registers resonate in this collection: persona poems inhabit the lives of those who lived in Pennsylvania furnace towns, meaningful landscapes across the country are painted with precision, and other poems interrogate the poet's own role in relaying this reclaimed history through research and her own encounters. *Pennsylvania Furnace* serves as both testimony and historical document, illuminating the need to not just simply preserve history but dissect its complications, gaps, and contradictions.

The collection's central core is comprised of poems that animate the dead, who are pieced together or imagined through the archive. For readers unfamiliar with furnaces, these structures were used until the early twentieth century in rural areas of the American landscape to smelt iron ore into iron. Because furnaces needed to be continuously lit to operate, which required a constant fuel source from the surrounding forest, entire villages grew around them. Johnson deftly weaves in much of this context within the poems themselves, as characters reveal how their lives revolved around these furnaces. In "Night Watch, Greenwood Furnace," the distanced speaker describes the light from the furnace at night while the filler's wife observes him perform his work: "thin divide between his lungs / and hell, between him and a light like Armageddon // beginning in this valley, here along the familiar, / whistling stream." The juxtaposition between the filler's nightly labor and the potential danger of the incredibly hot ore are placed in a landscape both fantastic and ordinary. Yet even the filler succumbs to the furnace, as his Christian belief that "Satan's armies fought the Lord" cause him to "[throw] himself down there beside // the tunnel mouth of pray and cry aloud" in response to the Biblical allegory that has been made material. Using a similar perspective of contrasts, "The Woodcutter" describes a widowed woman performing her task harvesting wood in winter so she can earn enough money to care for her children. She becomes otherworldly, larger than herself, in the process of clearing the forest to feed the furnaces. "Her body fills / the space between the trees," the speaker notes, "stretches to meet / the sky she's opened, her children's lifted hands." In serving as the sole provider during a time in which women were homemakers, the transformation is almost monstrous yet beautiful, as she is still tender with her muscles that are "strong enough to down these trees / or darn socks, stitch a quilt to keep our cold." For her children, the mother is represented as the world in all its shapes and forms.

These specters of the past truly begin to come to life through the more intimate persona poem. "The Record Keeper" offers insight into the record keeper's life while visually presenting the process of keeping brief notes alongside a ledger. The poem's sonnet-like structure is halved with a narrow column of words that describe everyday events: "Snow / Balloon ascends from Bellefonte / White broke hand / rain / rain." The quotidian anchors the poem in lived experience, reinforced by the record keeper who admits, "Two inches, all I have. Read my words, see / my only act of keeping in a burning

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world." The idea of making do with what is available is further reflected in the sonnet "The Ironmaster's Daughter," where the young woman, choosing fabric for elaborate dresses, proclaims, "This narrow hall can't hem me in: I swell / to fill its bounds." Like "The Woodcutter," the daughter grows beyond her physical form but does so in order to catch "admiring looks" from men. Through her act of measuring and sewing, she becomes a symbol of protest against the furnace town, as she desires to serve only her own personal ambitions to lead a different life in the city.

But Johnson, through her explorations of the past—which for her inevitably lead to the present—is not interested in escape but an iteration of hopeful mourning. Moving between Arizona and central Pennsylvania, her poems rejoice and interrogate the intricacies of these two very different landscapes. "Phoenix, Arizona," a longer and looser poem in short-lined quintets, leads with a litany of heritage: "I inherited this / sky flushed with depth, / these three hundred days / soaking sunlight each year." The Phoenix landscape, a maze of streets and urban sprawl, is at once beautiful and infuriating to the speaker, who "inherited this lack // of water and lack / of fear deep enough / to make me act." The contrasting rivers, lakes and forests in Pennsylvania seem plentiful in other poems, although these, too, are an illusion. In the collection's opening poem, "What the Gaps Reveal at Swatara Furnace," the speaker enters the furnace ruin surrounded by "the forest only / a century old, resurrected / after the woodcutters turned / its height into charcoal, into // smoke" that billows from the furnace. In these lines, the weight of the landscape's history is overlaid into the new growth forest, where smoke pervades the past and present. Even among "the waves of moss woven // over smoke stains on the smooth / angles of these stones" the aftermath is still starkly visible. Grief is felt for the landscape and its history of being subjected to destruction, rehabilitation, and now, global warming.

History begins to collapse as the contemporary speaker enters the collection as a fully felt presence commenting openly about her desires and fears. Most poignantly, "Meditation for Polly" navigates a band rehearsal, peat fires in North Carolina, the burning coal vein in Centralia, Pennsylvania, the Voyager, and the speaker conducting research on a domestic tragedy of a nineteenth-century woman. The speaker confesses, "we can't halt the spread // of flames underneath our feet, can't bridge that little / distance" despite supposed progress in technology that should be able to render threat harmless. Reading the account of the woman who perishes, because her skirts catch fire by the oven while she is making apple butter, the speaker is at a loss: "I find a gap I cannot cross. I refuse / to think of her body burning." In these poems, finding meaning the wake of historical and contemporary tragedy is of central importance. While visiting an ironmaster's museum, the speaker tries to "investigate each shadow / for something solid to the core, not gilded // by imagination, that easily damaged gilt / of what I want to see." Such a summoning occurs in the Civil War poem, "Black Walnut," which traces the history of the walnut as a dye for Confederate soldier uniforms, the soldiers' cries into battle, and the recording of those cries decades later, when the soldiers are old men. But of relevance to Johnson is what is left out of the archive, the "home-dyed cloth surrounding / those shouting bodies in battle." The poem ends with a meditation on history and the material objects that are often left in the past, unremembered, "a tangle of many voices carried downstream." Johnson's fascination with the fissures in historical record, and how those gaps affect our reading of the past, is tied to a specific kind of forgetting, one in which the world seems limitless and infinite.

Pennsylvania Furnace acts as a treatise against unsustainable environmental practices today, as these poems recount the remnants of history that

show when unchecked production lead to eventual disaster, like the mass deforestation of the American landscape. The record is there, in physical, decaying form, and we do not need to repeat it.