What Walks Away with Us
by Ellen Wehle

Fire Baton, by Elizabeth Hadaway. Arkansas, 81 pp., $16.
Darling Vulgarity, by Michael Waters. BOA Editions, 84 pp., $15.50.

One of my criteria for good poetry is that it should haunt us afterwards. Like a strain of music that flows into the ear and, through some sympathy of understanding, becomes a part of the consciousness, good poetry walks away with us after we put the book down. Sometimes it is the poem in its entirety, sometimes a single image, a voice, a line that glissandos—but something strikes us and, as if we were tuning forks, we vibrate. Out of poetry’s infinite velvet bag of tricks, this ability to linger is one of my favorites, and a main reason I read. I want to know that what I find beautiful is beautiful enough to remain with me, to become part of who I am. Recently I have read three books that, for different reasons, haunt.

I

The earliest poetry, so they say, was oral history. Elizabeth Hadaway’s Fire Baton has the quality of an oral history seeking to record a modern-day culture: the Appalachian Mountains where Hadaway grew up. In the book’s first half, poems such as “Clampdown,” “Tiffanie,” and “Barry on Porch, Barry in Parking Lot” sketch figures from the poet’s childhood, while others, like “American Viscose Plant, 1929,” re-imagine the area as her grandparents must have known it. They are rooted in the everyday; particularities of time and place are rendered in colloquial language (“he is just the sort of / guy who stays to be found / guilty”). It’s worth saying that Fire Baton is a first book and individually its poems are modest. Taken side by side, though, they form a compelling record. Poetry becomes a form of amber preserving what might otherwise be lost.

Insofar as Hadaway’s goal is this preservation of place, she succeeds. “All Short-a Appalachia” informs us that the region’s name is universally mispronounced, even by NPR announcers oh-so-careful to get right
“all the accent marks / in Spanish or Sanskrit.” What’s informative here is less the short a than the attitude: both miffed and droll, astute in observing that even the globally hip get it wrong in their own backyard. One of the few facts I knew before reading *Fire Baton* is that Appalachia was settled largely by English and Scottish immigrants who brought their ballads with them. Ballads crop up several times in the collection, echoing that past. “Living with Ballads: The Nutshell Bed” tells the story of a boy who sees a beautiful girl (“apple petals in her hair”) across a rotting bridge; the girl starts across to him as he watches in horror, expecting a fall to the death. Hadaway describes the gorge far below and her nouns conjure up a lost way of life:

> What’s under them? A swollen-bellied Hereford, snagged and left in sharp junk: sweeprakes, dumprakes, discs, drags, plows and sickles, springtooth harrows thick with rust …

Not only are the nouns rich with history, they sound rich: the repeating d’s and k’s and sinister “springtooth harrow” (what is that?) beg one to read them aloud, which I did.

Another strength is Hadaway’s mix of high and low diction. “Moved, Lost Your Number” opens with a brassy “The world is made of math, at which I suck. / It’s tax and markets, physics theory, string / vibrating at the base of everything.” The adolescent twang of “at which I suck” contrasts with the scientific litany that follows, a move repeated further down the stanza when “Music of the spheres” leads into “put[ting] any stock / in what my mom says.” Such transitions are incongruous and disarming.

Less successful is the book’s most noticeable formal element, rhyme. When the rhyme is working, it’s unobtrusive and seems to arise naturally from the lines’ sense, as in the marvelous title poem, where majorettes meet

> to practice fire baton. They knew their craft. Their wands or brands burned at both ends and flew. The smoothest spins in both hands, keeping time
with drums and flames, defined
my beautiful. Not cute.

In too many places, though, the rhyme is overworked, forcing lines into awkward constructions. Reading in “Idol Meat” that the speaker craves “the taste / of melts-in-your-mouth godhead, no cold whiff / of pine and spruce, mute evergreens, straitlaced / and distant symbols,” it’s hard not to stumble. Why are the trees straitlaced? The syntax, too, is awkward. Having characterized evergreens as “mute,” why tack on two more adjectives except as a way of meeting the rhyme?

Take another example, from “Crop Cults”: “you kissed me at the vernal equinox / and that was great but the coincidence / can’t handcuff us to the grandfather clocks / of history and biology.” Those grandfather clocks trip me up every time. The line feels unnatural within the stanza, clumsy, like an anvil dropping. In another context, characterizing history and biology as stately old clocks might have been interesting. Instead, the line lands with a thud, laboring mightily to deliver an “ocks” sound. As with any formal element, rhyme should serve the poem, not vice versa.

In an interview, Hadaway mentions having had teachers who tried to convince her that “formal poetry, that is, poetry in meter and often in rhyme, was out of style and so [she] shouldn’t write it.” Rather than falling “out of style,” I would say a certain type of formal poetry (using perfect rhyme rather than slant, and rhyming exclusively on end words) has been abandoned by most poets for good reason. Even at its best—when it arises naturally from a poem’s sense—perfect end rhyme risks heavy-handedness, aurally bethunking the reader. At its worst, it leads to contortions in meaning. Taken as a whole, Fire Baton works best when it doesn’t try so hard. The poems that give us tiny snapshots of individual moments in the Appalachian Mountains are very human, and therefore moving. Whether the speaker’s grandfather in “The Black Dog of Blue Ridge” who once saw the black dog of death and “lit out // running, pounding his way down the ruts—chestnuts flying,” or the grandmother in “The Hundredth Summer of the Chestnut Blight” whose “clothesline … hung in coal soot, her whites gray, / her rooster like a rusty hinge all day,” the history here is worth telling.
Serendipity happens. I have found some of my favorite writers without actually looking, which is how I first came across the work of Michael Waters. Roaming a used bookstore one day, I picked up a battered paperback and flipped to his poem “Snow in the Cellar”: “I remember dreaming of a bucket, / Wooden, drawn from the well, / Full of black water and cold as the distant stars.” Inwardly I shivered. That was years ago, yet Waters’ well, and my shiver, have stayed with me. So it was with great interest that I sat down with Waters’ newest, *Darling Vulgarity*.

“Vulgarity,” as in sheer human muck, the sweat and flesh and mess of us, appears in various forms and is one of the book’s underlying themes. As is grace. Repeatedly, we are presented with the base and the sublime and forced to consider how deeply these two may be entwined. Waters has, of course, traversed great distances between the book I stumbled across, his second, and this, his eighth. Unchanged, though, is his mastery of sensory detail. His is some of the most visceral work around.

“Black Olives” is a fine example of Waters’ technique. Alternating medium and extremely long lines, the poem spills rapidly down the page. The first sentence is eighteen lines long; clauses unspool and keep unspooling. Suspended meaning is, in part, what keeps the eye rushing forward. The speaker recalls long afternoons wandering idly through Athens, and the first sentence reaches its period when he reaches his destination: an olive shop amid

a labyrinth of dank aisles and buttressing brick walls.
I’d sidle among squat drums,
fingerling the fruit, thumbing their inky shine, their rucked
skins like blistered fingertips,
their plump flesh, the rough salts needling them, judging their
cowed
heft, biding my time.

As I read this, my mouth literally watered. It probably helps that I’m an olive lover. What does it for me, though, is the voluptuousness of the passage. Not just “inky shine” to capture an olive’s glistening wet blackness but the speaker intimately “thumbing” that inky shine. I can see his thumb stained with juice. “Rucked” is such a fabric word (think prom dresses, swatches of satin) that at first it startles; “cowled,” too,
seems a stretch until I remember the little hood of flesh over a pitted olive’s hollow. Both images, along with “blistered fingertips” and “plump flesh,” give the olives a nearly human presence. Eating them, we sense, will be a consummation.

Use of the almost-jarring—nouns and adjectives that upend our expectations—is one of Waters’ hallmarks. Another is sensuousness, his ability to be transported by the physical world. By the time “Black Olives” closes with the speaker making his way back home, the humble olives “mirroring lights flung from marquees and speeding taxis” have become more than themselves, taking on the soul of the entire city.

The baseness hinted at with “dank aisles” and “smut-stirred Athens” flowers more fully in many of the other poems. Life, the poet seems to say, is not pretty, and because life is not pretty it is all the more lovely to look upon. The book takes its title from “American Eel,” in which the speaker’s teenage daughter offends his fiancée with the word “fuck.” The fiancée (one wonders, could they possibly have married?) is the sort of woman who shows up immaculately dressed for a slog through the marsh. As eels writhe all around them in the mud, the speaker hugs his daughter, his “darling vulgarity” who hasn’t yet learned to ignore in life everything “fuck” represents.

As often happens, the element that I initially admired eventually becomes grating. The sensuous language so effective in “Black Olives” elsewhere becomes too much, overly worked figures leading to a kind of rigor mortis. In “American Eels,” for example, the eels are described as “urging their flaccid / intimations forward inch / by blunt inch.” Later, they are “Creation’s / rank exhalations,” their “frenzied upheavals & shudderings—freighted the air.” I inadvertently smiled at this point, because the word “freighted” seemed an apt description of the writing. The eels are “viscous sleeves” as well as “convulsive balls of gristle,” a surfeit of imagery where the single, dead-on image “throbbing / clumps of sisters tangled like fishing line” is all we need.

I noticed that the language is ratcheted up in poems lacking a narrative “I.” Perhaps—and I’m speculating here—the more lyric poems lend themselves to these excesses because the speaker is entirely outside, directing his eye like a laser on something “other” and trying to pin down that otherness. We see this effect in “Deep-Sea Sponge” and “Who Are These Ravens,” where the language again is overly elaborate, rich … distracting. The spell is broken. As readers, we become so aware
of the writer’s virtuosity that we stop what we’re doing (absorbing the poem) to watch him keep all the balls in the air.

This is only a minor quibble with what remains, overall, a very strong collection. In poems like “Bosphorus,” “Pavese,” and “Fauns Fleeing Before an Automobile,” which I read again and again with pleasure, Waters is right on the money, gauging just the amount of intricacy required.

In these three poems, Waters also continues to explore his theme of the push and pull between the base and the sublime. Consider the petitioners in “Bosphorus” who leave their prayers outside a house where the Virgin Mary reputedly lived. It is a picturesque scene, and goodness knows there’s an entire genre of poetry dedicated to pilgrimages and travels abroad. But what are these particular prayers written on? “Soiled bandages, underwear.” Lesser writers might have played up the absurdity, implying that the supplicants are chumps for believing in their sordid underwear prayers. Instead, Waters’ speaker writes his own prayer on a scrap and tucks it into some pantyhose flapping on the fence. This is true humility, and an acknowledgment that from the lowliest human detritus (trash paper, pantyhose) can spring the highest aspiration (earnest prayer). It’s also a smashing visual image on which to end the poem.

Most importantly, Waters doesn’t hit us over the head. What I have spelled out above is certainly more than “Bosphorus” comes out and says. With few exceptions, meaning in **Darling Vulgarity** falls in the space left between lines. Careful readers will have all they need to fill in that space.

By far my favorite poem of the collection is “Fauns Fleeing Before an Automobile.” I originally read “Fauns” in a journal and I remember being drawn in by the opening rhetorical question:

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What young couple, leaving the affair, hasn’t seen them,
the fauns, leaping vast foliaged silences,
slashed momentarily by headlights:
their yellow, goatlike, sin-slit eyes,
their scabrous haunches,
the dull gloss of cloven hoof as it disappears in brush?
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Quite a few things are going on here. First is the question’s matter-of-fact tone, convincing us that the sight is commonplace. Who hasn’t
seen fauns leaping about? Then there’s the syntax. Clauses rush on for five more lines before the question is complete, suspended meaning once again used to rush us forward. The single colon interrupting our rush is especially effective in the way that it evokes the momentary freeze of the fauns caught by headlights. Lastly, there is the diction. Although parties may still be called “affairs” in some parts of the world, the word strikes my ear as somehow redolent of the ’30s and ’40s, and thus I pictured a car along the lines of a Buick 40 Special. For depicting the fauns’ roughness and stink, there can be no better word than “scabrous.” With the first line of Stanza Two—“We had been arguing, slightly drunk”—“Fauns” segues into the modern day. Exchanging the rhetorical “what young couple” for the immediate “we,” the speaker moves from what has happened at the party, to the abrupt sighting in the car, to what will happen after he and his lover arrive home, all of which is inextricably linked to the fauns. Carl Jung believed that forces within our unconscious are powerful enough to attract corresponding phenomena in the outside world. Here, it’s telling that the goat-eyed ones appear not just to any couple, but this couple, with their goatish characteristics. Drunk, belligerent, they are fighting over jealousy and rude behavior at the party; once home, they will fall upon each other—“the desperate / confusions of flesh”—and make love in what feels like an extension of the fauns’ thrumming urgency. Even as the fauns are at home in darkness and flee the car’s lights, so our own less civilized behaviors shrink from the light of scrutiny. Like the fauns, we, too, are “filth-smeared” and “coarse.” The poem ends, wonderfully, with the fauns (not the humans) huddled together, trying to get over their scare, their glimpse of the fire in “God’s wild eye.”

Throughout Darling Vulgarity, reverence shows up in unexpected places. In “The Tether,” a biologist studies micro-organisms that endlessly bubble up in the hot bath of super-heated marine vents miles beneath the sea. If it’s true that we find ourselves everywhere, the biologist’s musings are all the more poignant, his pity for “God’s disinherited, the nameless / flaws who have so much farther / to climb” actually pity for mankind, we who spend our lives on the same infinite climb. In another, mystical example, a woman’s wounds are portals through which the speaker glimpses a magical garden, maidens singing “a healing chorale / that resurrects starved finches, / lifts fallen fruit back to black branches.” In these poems there is pain and awfulness, but also glimpses of great
beauty, like a chorale that returns to us all we have lost, the starved finches and blackened branches of our own lives made whole again.

III

*In the Black Window, New and Selected Poems* spans thirty years of Michael Van Walleghen’s career. One of the reasons I review is that it leads me to a deeper reading than I achieve in general. The effort to fully enter into a book, the weeks of carrying a book about with me on the subway and streets and living with it, brings me to a point of immersion I simply don’t reach when reading purely for pleasure. With *In the Black Window*, I found myself grateful for the extra time reviewing entails. The book opens with Van Walleghen’s latest work, then retraces his career from his earliest collection (*The Wichita Poems* in 1975) forward. As it happens, when I first picked up the book I flipped to a page in the *Wichita* section, couldn’t stop and read to the end, then went back and read the new poems last. Tracking Van Walleghen’s evolution as a poet, while simultaneously noting the fidelity of his voice, was like watching time-lapse photography. Regardless of the maturation and shifts in technique that thirty years brings about, the same intelligence is clearly at work.

Much of the early work consists of free verse, single-stanza poems with lines varying in length from two to four or five words. Visually, these poems resemble columns. The lack of formal shaping—not even a stanza break—means endwords take on an additional significance, instructing us in how to read. Because most lines either endstop or enjamb on completed phrases rather than mid-phrase, we read at a measured pace. I was struck more than once by this deliberateness of pacing. Deceptively calm in their lack of hurry or fancy lineation, the poems resemble fireworks. The plain sticks packed with gunpowder are not much to look at, but they keep lighting up the sky.

One from the *Wichita* section that I can’t stop thinking about is “The Alligators.” It achieves what much of literature aims for, the intensely personal that is also universal. Reading, I’m ambushed by memory. Wait a second, I want to say, I know this room. Wait a second, that’s our sink. I’ll quote “The Alligators” in its entirety:

Feigning sleep,  
to the casual eye  
more dead than alive,  
they wait. On them,
like a dinner plate
forever dropping,
all things depend.
One sees it clearly
in the eyes
of certain women.
After a time
not even their children
can pull them away.
I have seen them
standing tensely there
as at a window:
my mother
my grandmother looking out
one hand floating absently
among the dishes,
and the sink, the sink
soft-sucking things
it can’t quite swallow.
I have seen them standing there
as rigidly as birds
who feel too late
the almost imperceptible
undulation of stagnant water.
When at last
they lift their heads
I’ve felt the whole zoo listen:
a neighborhood at dark
listening to streetcars
the far factories whistling
children, a lifetime
the perfectly indifferent
closing in.

Read the poem aloud and notice how many times you pause. With only one exception, every sentence ends at the end of a line. The effect of all those hard endstops is a lot of natural pausing. When we see Van Wallegehen’s so-short lines we expect to read rapidly down the column but his linebreaks slow us, upsetting our expectation. In “The Alligators” the only sentence to break the rule is the first, with “they wait” falling mid-line. What’s the effect? Enormous emphasis.
Another of the poem’s strengths is that it occupies several time frames at once. I see a speaker gone back to his childhood in “Not even their children / can pull them away,” which sounds like a memory of pulling at mother’s apron to get her attention, and in the sink “soft-sucking things,” which is the kind of observation a child makes. But the witness aware of his mother’s and grandmother’s despair in kitchens of the past is also a grown man. That ominous presence undulating the sink water is Time and its accumulated power to crush us, the way our very lives wear us down. Perhaps the speaker’s wife is now one of the women realizing her “children, a lifetime” are meaningless against the darkness closing in. By the time we reach this point in the poem, past and present are conflated.

As a bonus, I admire any image that is able to toss up a moment of weirdness. To say that on the alligators, as on a dinner plate dropping, “all things depend” is weirdness of the first order. It makes perfect sense, of course, once the poem further unfolds and we realize the woman washing plates in a sink is also the waterbird being stalked in a zoo. But initially the conjunction of the two, alligator and dinner plate, stopped me cold while my brain tried to make it compute. Personally, I love that sensation.

Writers, we know, circle back to their preoccupations, and throughout the book Van Walleghen touches upon this notion of ordinary, crushing despair. In “The Permanence of Witches,” “Arizona Movies,” and “Tall Birds Stalking” we see ordinary people cast adrift, suffering a malaise that’s unnamable unless we call it “life itself.” Whether witch-like wives grown cold to their husbands or an elderly father dying in the hospital, unable to recognize his family, these are people in a hard place. What keeps us reading is not some literary version of rubber-necking but compassion. Because the poet doesn’t stand outside the suffering and stare in, neither do we. Always, we’re aware, it could be us. It will be us.

This is not to say all of the poems in Van Walleghen’s book are dark. Many gaze back at the speaker’s childhood or adolescence with wry humor, as in “Bowling Alley,” where boys setting up bowling pins for 13 cents a line imagine themselves “on a ship / and dodging broadsides / from the enemy.” In “Blue Tango,” the Catholic school students “stumbling around for months / like arthritic wooden puppets / … failing / to fox-trot, failing to waltz” are befuddled when nuns
announce that now they’ll learn to tango (or, as Van Walleghehn has the nuns say it, “tango!”). I’m of a generation that still learned to waltz and fox-trot in middle school—I remember the little white gloves—but regardless of age, who can’t relate to the stomach-aching awkwardness of the whole thing? The kids are dancing in a church basement while old women sit on the sidelines, and as their circuits bring them in and out of range they catch snippets of adult conversation:

*By the time they opened him up*
repeated someone, *it was everywhere.*

Then off I’d go again, mincing
with my awkward, too-tall partner
toward the gloomy furnace room.

It’s a great scene, hapless teenagers twirling their way through the adults’ obsessive talk of cancer and death. My favorite touch, though, is the furnace room. Oh, the clever implication in a Catholic school of dancing toward hell.

Lastly we come to the new poems, and they are so good that I find myself itching to explicate each one. In the new (2003) section Van Walleghehn is writing in a combination of forms, using couplets, tercets, and in some cases a staggered line wherein words drift autumn-leaf fashion down the page. Noticeable, too, is an increased lyricism. Previous sections contained powerful imagery, too. The difference is that the new poems follow their images over longer passages, resulting in a softer, dreamier atmosphere, as if the poems were blurring at the edges.

Two showstoppers, “Taps” and “Orchids,” use the staggered line to great effect. Both beg to be xeroxed and mailed to friends; both create such a strong sense of reverie I could feel my alpha waves peaking (if you get the book, read these first). Let’s look at “Taps.” Inexplicably, “Taps” is number two in the book’s lineup when it’s obvious to me, at least, that this was the perfect poem with which to begin. Boating on a lake, the speaker listens to his friend playing “Taps” on a trumpet. Consider the purity of those notes floating out over the water. Consider the natural beauty of the scene, trees yellow around the lake’s edge, and the fact that here, again, Van Walleghehn will carry us back into the
close-hovering past. What better place to open a collection like *In the Black Window*?

Lineation in “Taps” is precise, elegant. The word “ravish” comes to mind: each stanza moves forward trope by trope to ravish our senses. We are hearing, touching, and remembering—above all, experiencing—at such a pitch that the clarity is painful. The speaker says the trumpet notes return

> but clear
> and bell-like now
> as if perfected
> in childhood’s dark
> unechoing wood
> by such desire
> even the distant
> cold iron clang
> of drunken
> loudmouth horseshoes
> becomes
> a kind of metronome

and like the iron horseshoes, each word rings out in the empty space around it. I am so deeply held in this poem’s world that were my train to reach my stop right now, I’d surely miss it. Teaching poetry to college students, I’m often asked what there is to get excited about. Why do I spend so much time thinking and writing about something, they say, that makes their heads hurt? Well, this is it, right here:

> in the Lethean
> leaf-strewn water
> one can almost hear
> those same
> few notes returning …

Reading poetry, we *do* hear the notes returning. We hear them long after we close the book and turn away to our dinner, to our waiting lives.