



## DREAM FURROW

JANA PRIKRYL · *Midwood*

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*And you may ask yourself, "Well, how did I get here?" – Talking Heads*

As its title suggests, the poems in Jana Prikryl's *Midwood* are concerned with finding oneself in the middle of things: of cities, of nature, of life and experience; relationships, parenthood, a global pandemic. The title conjures Dante at the start of the *Inferno*, standing in a dark forest 'Midway on our life's journey' (in Robert Pinsky's translation), the pathway nowhere to be seen. As with Dante, Prikryl's poems seem unsure how they came to be here, whether walking 'through a sudden / neighborhood' or sitting on the fire escape, drifting from daydream back to consciousness, not certain how much time has passed. But *middle* doesn't equal *centre*. Instead, these poems rest between what's happened and what's still to come, attentive to the traffic 'spilling into / our lane gently', aware that 'one thing constantly / enters another, becoming not one with it / but taking its place, and on and on, a current'. After all, notes Prikryl in a recent interview, 'the idea that midlife is some kind of mountaintop where you can pause and take in the view [...] is (of course) an illusion. We are haunted even by the ordeals we overcame in the past [while] the future never stops demanding that we change.' In the words of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which never seem far from Prikryl's work:

As we grow older

The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated  
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment  
Isolated, with no before and after,  
But a lifetime burning in every moment[.]

Born in what is now the Czech Republic, Prikryl emigrated with her family to Ontario, Canada at the age of six. Following a stint in Dublin, she now lives in New York – in Midwood, a neighbourhood in southern Brooklyn – where she works as a senior editor for the *New York Review of Books*. As with her previous collections, *Midwood* is an urban poetry of sorts, complete with streets, cafés, and deli counters, public parks and record stores. Far from the busy pinballing of Frank O'Hara, however, Prikryl's cities more often appear as glimpses through apartment (sometimes airplane) windows, looking down from a great height. If this removal offers us a vision of the poet in lockdown, it also reveals one of Prikryl's main concerns in *Midwood*: how to relate to a world you feel distanced from, to integrate yourself again into a place you used to feel a part of.

For Prikryl, one solution to this problem seems to be to slow right down, to pause – 'Holding perfectly still' – and to observe things as they happen, as accurately as possible; to grasp 'the dusty blue rhomboid of window being / in the vanguard of twilight every second', a strange process of reacquaintance. '[W]hy not / enjoy this, meaning / look at it,' she asks: 'so I looked'. And Prikryl has a gift for seeing, as if for the first time, discovering new clarity, flexing 'the poet's immemorial power' (as Randall Jarrell writes of Marianne Moore) 'to make the things of this world seen and felt and living in words': a sparrow in an empty lot, hopping through 'the great complacency of summer'; 'maples with their male-pattern baldness / fluttering blond leaves'; the night sky 'full of unexpected stars,' surprised by the snow 'like a vast piece / of quartz'. Perhaps it is this quality – Prikryl's 'immemorial power' – that Karen Solie has in mind on the book's jacket cover: 'At the heart of *Midwood* is a violent curiosity that details of the world are drawn into, reemerging changed.' At the very least, it is a curiosity that flickers with the spirit of James Schuyler, that other window-gazing poet, the

champion of the everyday. 'Today / you could take up the / tattered shadows off / the grass,' he writes, 'Roll them / and stow them. And collect / the shimmerings in a / cup, like the coffee / here at my right hand.' 'This day, I want to / Send it to you,' read a few lines from 'The Morning of the Poem', Schuyler's own masterpiece of reacquaintance with a world that he feels distant from: 'the sound of stirring air, soft / sunlight, quivering trees / That shake their needles and leaves like fingers / improvising on a keyboard'.

Though Schuyler is usually assigned to the New York School, his diaristic poems are more often concerned with observations of the natural world, particularly scenes around Southampton, Long Island, where he lived with the painter Fairfield Porter and his family in the 1960s. (As Anne Porter remembers it: '[Schuyler] came to lunch one day and stayed for eleven years.')

In her collection of echoes and half-echoed language, *Prikryl*, too, is always drawn back to 'the trees, their varieties, and ivy, nameless shrubs / and hedges'. Twenty-four poems in the collection share the title 'Midwood', a living sequence of emerging observations and reflections on the trees 'doing their thing' – 'daily memos on what you mean', as 'Midwood 11' puts it – like a poetic time-lapse film. *Prikryl*'s poems are documentary, mapping whatever happens to be growing 'Out of the garment / of the land'. They carry a feeling of gentle surprise to find oneself alive, in this place, experiencing all this. As the late Charles Simic has suggested, reading her poems 'is like walking into a movie theatre in the middle of a film one knows nothing about [...] and gradually growing more and more entranced by the mystery of every face and every action, detached as they are from any context'.

This feeling of detachment – this peculiar contextlessness – is affirmed by the number of poems in *Midwood* that discover themselves *in medias res*, in the middle of ongoing journeys. As with Dante in his sudden forest, the speakers of *Prikryl*'s poems, 'Surfacing again' to life, blink and rub their eyes to find that they're already on the move – on buses, in cars, even riding (in one poem) a sled. 'But having braked all the way to the floor of the valley,' begins 'A Banquet', 'it dawned on us the slope we'd have to climb', 'the hill we came down [...] as steep as the hill ahead of us'. These poems stumble upon their scenes as if surprised to be here, happy to take a look around before they just as suddenly

move on again. They are reminiscent of the opening of Samuel Beckett's *Act Without Words I*, which kicks off with a man 'flung backwards' onto stage. 'He falls,' writes Beckett, 'gets up immediately, dusts himself off, turns aside, reflects.'

This quality of Prikryl's poetry is carried to its limit by the poet's use of dreams. 'I've always felt vaguely embarrassed by poems based on dreams,' she notes in a recent interview, 'so in *Midwood* I decided to plow this furrow very deliberately.' If the result affirms – even produces – the above feeling of rootlessness, it is also responsible for the presence of a strange kind of surrealism, a jet-lagged daze more than a dream sequence. There are unusual figures and images here – a plane 'dropping textbooks of some kind / over cities in Germany', 'girls riding bareback on their palominos down the slopes', a bus driver 'in green pantyhose' – many details gesturing towards a semi-mythical Old Europe ('Roman fortifications', gruesome fairytales) to which Prikryl seems tethered. But nothing seems entirely out of place, as though these elements made perfect sense in the context of the poems themselves. With skill and careful management, they achieve the same thing as the dream-like features in paintings by Marc Chagall, whose floating bodies and magical animals understand that the true strangeness of dreams is just how normal and un-dreamlike everything seems at the time: *Correct, a flying cow. So what?*

This is a poetry intent on finding out what's really going on; what's here and what to make of it. In *The After Party* (2016), her first collection, Prikryl is alert to the poet's role as an interpreter of the 'Metaphors [that] swarm the surface of things.' But always in her poems is the possibility that language might reveal not meaning but 'the absence of meaning', an absence which may turn out to be its own fruitful alternative, 'also [...] a guide'. 'So here I am, in the middle way,' writes Eliot, again in *Four Quartets*:

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure  
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which  
One is no longer disposed to say it.

'For us,' he concludes (referring to poets?), 'there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.' We are lucky to have Prikryl trying quite so hard on our behalf.