

Book Reviews

Literary Reviews

Julia Spicher Kasdorf and Steven Rubin, *Shale Play: Poems and Photographs from the Fracking Fields*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018. Pp. xxx + 114. Hardcover, \$24.95.

Of the many byproducts of hydraulic fracturing, art is the least predictable, and the least toxic. But in the case of *Shale Play*, a collaboration between the poet Julia Spicher Kasdorf and the photographer Steven Rubin, the art of fracking is hardly benign. *Shale Play* is among the most striking books of poetry I know; it is also one of the most alarming. Nature has often been betrayed by the artists who love her, the pastoral mode and the sublime tending to distort as well as to cherish, but Kasdorf and Rubin seek to do justice to the places that feature in their damning account of the social and environmental consequences of the search for natural gas in western Pennsylvania. It is a world of coal mines, automotive assembly plants, roadside diners, meth labs, churches, Superfund sites, and foggy hillsides. The *Shale* in question is the Marcellus Shale, “the largest natural gas discovery in the United States,” as Kasdorf and Rubin write: “In the language of the industry, *shale play* refers to a commercially exploited region ... containing petroleum or natural gas accumulated in sedimentary rock.” *Play* also calls to mind the warning phrase *playing with fire*.

The book includes twenty-three poems by Kasdorf and seventy-four photographs by Rubin. For the most part, the poems are writ-

ten in the voices of locals, or rather made from their speech as Kasdorf has recorded it. Her documentary approach is suggested by the poems' long titles: "Happy Holds Forth at Fry Brothers Turkey Ranch on Route 15"; "Citizens Have Their Say before the Fayette County Commissioners Uphold the Lease of German-Masontown Park"; "At Jersey Mills, a Ridge Runner from Way Back Remembers the Wild Life." At times, the poems are dryly funny. "Another side effect of the drilling no one thinks about is all the swearing. / And it's not just the men," Kasdorf writes in "A Mother near the West Virginia Line Considers the Public Health." "Every minister in Masontown is half-time, even / the priest," says the speaker in "A Pastor and Part-Time Security Guard Wonders about the Work Ethic."

The poems also draw on the text of road signs, newspaper reports, archival documents, legal proceedings, administrative hearings, and, in one instance—"Sacrifice Zone, Tioga County, PA"—the poetry of Muriel Rukeyser, whose *U.S. 1* (1938) is an important formal and thematic model for Kasdorf. In "The Book of the Dead," a sequence of twenty poems in *U.S. 1*, Rukeyser responded to the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster of the early 1930s, in which hundreds of workers in West Virginia died of acute silicosis. Echoes of that catastrophe sound in *Shale Play*: workers suffer from pulmonary fibrosis, and "clouds of silica sand blow off train cars over the little league field." Hawks Nest was the responsibility of Union Carbide; in *Shale Play*, lives and landscapes are moulded by Chevron, Shell, and Laurel Mountain Midstream (such a pretty, incongruous name). And just as Rukeyser sensed that Hawks Nest was not merely a local incident but an American story, Kasdorf understands the crisis in Pennsylvania to be an outcome of national and international priorities and decisions.

In the preface, Kasdorf acknowledges Rukeyser's influence:

Wanting to learn what happened in Pennsylvania, I showed up and listened like Muriel Rukeyser in 1936 investigating the Hawks Nest Tunnel disaster, and I also wrote from research and found texts or transcripts, as poet Charles Reznikoff once worked from court testimonies. ... The imagination is our sharpest tool for making meaning from overwhelming emotional experiences, our shortest path to finding empathy for others or envisioning real change.

The poems in *Shale Play* do evoke empathy for others, but they also bear witness to the violence of American history and the contradictions of contemporary life. In the book's final poem, a "Citizen with Too Much Memory" admits her own dependence on

fuel: "I, who have never eaten grass out of necessity, drive home and cook my groceries / on a gas stove."

As a Jewish New Yorker, Rukeyser was an outsider in West Virginia. Kasdorf, who teaches at Penn State University, is in some ways closer to her subject. Her earlier works, including *The Body and the Book: Writing from a Mennonite Life* (2001), examined aspects of her Mennonite identity, but in *Shale Play* she focuses not on herself but on the residents of shale country. A gap, however, remains between the observed and their observers, perhaps inevitably so. Rubin offers a grim list of reasons why local people were unwilling or unable to be photographed:

Those who work for large gas companies are often forbidden from talking to the media, and they risk losing their jobs for doing so. Those who have benefitted from wells on their land are sensitive about monetary gain in places where their neighbors struggle with economic hardship. Those who have been harmed and are now pursuing legal remedies and negotiations with gas companies must avoid publicity for fear it will jeopardize their legal cases. Those who have reached settlements with the companies are bound by nondisclosure agreements. Some people are simply reluctant to be represented in relation to an issue that has become so divisive in their own communities and even families.

A house divided against itself cannot stand, of course, and *Shale Play* portrays the deleterious social effects of fracking as well as the environmental costs—the compromises and concessions that must be endured. Kasdorf and Rubin equally show the residents' dignity and resolve, and the natural beauty that persists even as their world is transformed. Appalachia is nearly invisible from Washington and New York, as Fort McMurray and Fort Chipewyan are obscure to Ottawa and Toronto, but *Shale Play* draws attention to what is routinely overlooked. Elegant and impassioned, it is a superb work of political and environmental art.

Nicholas Bradley
University of Victoria