If grief can be rendered a beautiful thing, Brigitte Byrd certainly accomplishes this drastic feat in her first book. Here loss becomes ethereal, a breath, a brief requiem in the chest of a dead father. “There is always fear” is the echoing call through many of these prose poems. Yet this fear (of death, of love, of self) does not stagnate in the speaker, but becomes the moving force—much like the ocean itself—in a discovery of self and language: “Present and absent at the same time and always alone. She covers her fear she enters her body and looks for the father and he is there and he always was” (31).

The recognition of the impossibility of ever, completely, recovering from a loss, like the death of a father, is at the core of Byrd’s book. However, this impossibility is by no means hopeless, and in “(a house)” it becomes “A mosaic floor over the sea and ants lost in the blues the greens the purples the reds the colors of my sea” (5). A vibrant caging occurs over Byrd’s sea, a confinement turned to steady foundation: “When it is cold in America she wants a mosaic floor over the ocean” (23). But then the floor becomes a fence, and Byrd de-stabilizes that which seemed fixed and solid; suddenly “there is a fence built with pebbles” and we are left grappling with the very real uncertainties that life offers. In Byrd’s book these uncertainties and changes become violent, glittering treasures left sifting through our hands.

The language propels this change, and the sentences themselves are written in a continuous present, reminiscent of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, furthering the act of a transmutable discovery. “Comparative obscurity” begins:

A dark day it is and it is in bed. An empty house is often a full heart when colors have left the rooms. This is what you get when the only brightness is a yellow shade. There is no one to let her in. *I might be wrong.* It is not uncommon that both breasts feel different. Silver is the color of water in the rain on the roofs. The only time a branch falls in my path is when the wind blows. *I*
used to think. If there is estrangement what is the difference between speaking to the dead and speaking to the living. (16)

There is a particular logic found here that is at once playful and at once breathtakingly startling. All is new in Byrd’s language. All is up for grabs: imagery, metaphor, even meaning for “She says she read all night when she opens her eyes filled with meteors” (29). Here, the body acts as vehicle in this ravished realization that out of the vast nothingness of death—the literal death of the poet’s father and the metaphorical death of meaning—there is very real possibility. The language pushes this revelation, not to a fixed meaning, but to its own pulsing reality. A vital aspect in this discovery is the French that appears throughout the book: “De certains hommes on dit qu’ils sont perdus” (57). We are then left even more aware that much of life cannot be understood, cannot be easily translated.

In Fence Above the Sea, the shock of death becomes the shock of understanding and returns to the isolating reality of how a person survives this world. The past and present conjoin and “From here nothingness enwraps the future and there is harmony with the paths of destruction” (59). Even the roles of the poet become confused and “If she is the father and she is the mother she knows death” (28). As Byrd’s meaning is never permanent, neither is the “she” in these poems, so much so until the “she” can be any woman, anyone who has faced the destruction and devastation of time.

However, this knowledge never renders any moment overly morbid. After the startling first line of “Extreme injury,” “It is winter in the house when she knows he is trapped under the frozen ground” there is a brief and brilliant moment of reprieve from this painful reality and “The daughter wears a blue robe with love. She is warm under the stars when the moon shines on the flowers on her knees” (23). These poems beg to question: What is loss? Where do we find the beauty in loss? There are, of course, no definitive answers to these questions. We are not left understanding the complexities of a harsh world in an even harsher time. And how could we? All is violently beautiful in the ravaged places of Byrd’s first book. “Unintentional Promenade” ends “When she squints in the wind the daughter hits her heart” (69). For what is love but the blind persistence of a beating heart?

--Carrie Bennett