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Serpent Curve

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Innovative Traditionalist. Again recall the opening paragraph. Hammond weaves the traditionalist T.S. Eliot with the path-blazing critic Harold Bloom. With both of them in mind, he innovates, or perhaps I should say reinstitutes, an approach to poetry writing that takes us back to classroom I sat in 35 years ago. Eliot, in a timeless essay of 1917, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” tells us that poetry—that literature—is a living organism, that when a poet—I mean a *poet*—creates, he engages in a form of magic realism, capturing the present and changing the past: Lear’s five iambic tolling “Never”s become more—more livable?, containable?, understandable? By a psychic milometer in the listener’s consciousness when Donne challenges death, when Dylan Thomas commands, begs his father to hold on for another breath. Hammond combines this ongoing creative immortality with Bloom’s insight into creative despair, that the poet must always live with death, with his knowledge that it has all been done: “The covert subject of most poetry for the last three centuries has been the anxiety of influence, each poet’s fear that no proper work remains for him to perform.” I’ve penciled in the margin “beautifully put” alongside a passage from Seamus Heaney that Hammond approvingly quotes. It conveys the battle that writing poetry is and underscores what Hammond/Heaney want from an ideal poetry-writing class:

What is involved, after all, is the replacement of literary excellence derived from modes of expression originally taken to be canonical and unquestionable. Writers have to start out as readers, and before they put pen to paper, even the most disaffected of them will have internalized the norms and forms of the tradition from which they wish to secede.

Un-American Patriot. “Po’ biz”: even the term itself in its shoddy, showbiz, throw-awayness, its corrupt familiarity, is a public acknowledgment that the groves of academe have set up shop in the market place, have become part of a cynically taxless plutocracy with mediocrity for all. My reading of po’ biz may be somewhat between the lines, but “mediocre” or some variations of the word must occur in this book at least four score and seven times. I will say this in Raymond P. Hammond’s defense before the recently reconvened House Committee, that he is in good company. From Alexis de Tocqueville who was a qualified admirer of America near its beginning to Jonathan Franzen’s musings about Freedom’s end, there have been many who saw the seeds of decay in its median, consumer mediocrity.

Hammond does not dream the American dream. He does not pretend with the rest of us that all men are equal, all potential poets, painters, posers, million-billion-trillion-aires.

A democracy’s ability to thrive depends upon a large middle class. It also depends upon the rule of the majority. Both of these factors create a dependence upon the median. From strip malls to Mickey Mouse, our society is one in which a middle class and resultant ambivalence toward the arts flourishes. Most poetry written today reflects this mediocrity.

My one reservation about this un-American declaration is the exclusive attack on the middle class. According to economists, if this ever-so profitable recession for banks and businesses and their sidekick politicians continues, there will soon be no middle class. Why not put some of the blame on the uneducated wealthy: the products of our business schools, our technical institutes, for that matter our colleges

of the humanities that award MFA degrees to the readably unread? Consumerism “consumed by that which it was nourished by”: why only yesterday Thanksgiving was consumerized into the day before Black Friday adventing into White Xmas.

Let’s end with the poets. Here’s Wordsworth, two hundred and three years ago, in one of those poems MFA candidates are taught to avoid:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our
powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid
boon!

Those powers wasted, hearts discarded, are what would have allowed the best to aspire beyond the world. That’s why Hammond is a patriot as well as being outrageously un-American. He’s calling us beyond mediocrity. You can summon the “power” as soul or imagination or muse, Muse—and I’m winging it now—and the Muse exists only when an imagination, a heart, a soul, reaches beyond consciousness to something on the verge of being apprehended. Robert Browning gave words to what I’ve been groping for since Thoreau’s opening line, when Browning has his Andrea del Sarto, who never quite stretched far enough, settling as he did for a handful of gold and a twirl of girl, Browning has him sigh, “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what’s a heaven for?”

For quite a while now, at Canisius College, Syracuse University, Bowling Green State University, Fordham University, City College of New York, La Université de Paris, Daniel Leary has been demonstrating and encouraging having a poem by heart.

Stephanie Rauschenbusch

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WHAT’S LEFT

Susan Sindall
Cherry Grove Collections
http://www.cherry-grove.com
80 pages; paper, \$18.00

Susan Sindall has been writing, reading, and publishing her poems for a long time, and as an editor of *Heliotrope* has also encouraged other poets to publish. More recently, she has studied with Ellen Bryant Voigt at Warren Wilson College’s MFA poetry program.

Her newest book, *What’s Left*, is a tremendous achievement—a sort of reckoning up of all that she has experienced, sensed, observed, and remembered in her entire life and of all that’s lost or left behind. There are many themes in this book, and they interweave gracefully with each other. Among them is music—as in “From Brahms’ Letter Thanking Robert Schumann”:

Tenderness, you see, trembles at the edges
of everything. Water slips over rocks
at the inlet, enlarging the pebbles
through the water’s tender moving.

Your hands, poised above the keyboard—
your nerves’ tricky fires on the piano keys:
those sparks, their tortures: we know them...

In Italy, for instance, as I watched Clara
reach for the ripe figs; how gently
she cupped each scrotum : those sacks,
fleshy, yellow, and seed-filled—
just seeing them generates the notes.

Here we have brilliant shoptalk among musicians about where notes of music arise—from tenderness, from seeing water move over stones, from watching a woman handle and eat figs so sexual they are likened to testicles. This is an “ars poetica” but also a metaphysical discussion about geology and geography, about water and its meanings, about stones and their meanings, a discussion which appears in many other poems in this beautifully crafted book. From “Gros Ventre Valley,” we read this stanza:

Water writes its own calligraphy.
Water gathers rocks, hugs boulders
to its sides, spreads them
grandly in a long serpent curve,
the hem of the water’s skirt.

So we find here the geological “serpent curve” echoed throughout the book—introduced actually in the first poem, “After,” in which

she sees
them dangling everywhere, loops
tangled in the branches, heads
or tails, indecipherable....

The snake appears even in “Akmatova’s Fountain House” in which the poet describes a boa constrictor (in a photo?) suffocating a rabbit. Snakes begin to seem objective correlatives, or even symbols, for inspiration, as they were in Stanley Kunitz’s poem about his Provincetown garden.

What’s Left is a tremendous achievement.

But to go back to “Gros Ventre Valley.” How many poets could reckon with death as baldly as in the couplet, “Not much between me and death. / Not enough years left”? This is another leitmotif of the book—death’s approach and its meaning in the midst of life. There are several wonderful elegaic poems dedicated to the poet’s mother and father—who are curiously both seen as under water. In “Voices,” “the great pike, enormous curve of pisces, / smiles my father’s smile.” In “Offshore,” the poet realizes when her mother speaks out loud to her,

You must have been beside me for months
beside me swimming, as our fingers

Rauschenbusch continued on next page



Detail from cover

pulled us across the speckled sand
underneath the green water.

In “Offshore,” we find in the first stanza Sindall’s ability to describe a shore as exactly as Elizabeth Bishop could in “Correspondences”:

Low tide: the sandbar’s tawny flank
lifts from the middle of the river. Rivulets
pretend
to nervous and continental systems
between ridges in every direction.
Tethered skiffs hang exactly sideways.
Everything on the surface waits to be told
what to do.

Here is the patterning of sand exactly described and also the susurrus of inspiration in which “Everything on the surface waits to be told what to do.” I felt this rhythm of waiting for inspiration often in the book—and no wonder, since just about every single poem seems deeply felt, inspired. In “Getting into Stone,” we find a convergence of geology and death, in which human life appears a small thing blinking once “like a firefly”:

Earth’s inevitable axis
creaks, revolving

the barrel of stones, who shove
snout noses underground.
Face to face, they grind into sand.

In the last stanza, Sindall writes so powerfully, “When I lay me down to stones, / they accept me as I am. / Rubble clears its throat above me.” How much more stone-like could this poem be? In its praise of stones, it takes on their qualities. And I love the choice of words in their shoving “snout noses underground.”

There are many small but powerful poems in this book, such as “The Love Dress,” in which the dress encloses and then releases a woman’s, the poet’s, body in its “glowing skin,” or “Half Sleep” in which a childhood self runs through the poem, wearing “my blue pink white plaid dress” which becomes, by the poem’s end, “my blue pink white / scraps of paper”—the poems themselves.

But it would be unfair to write about this book without noting the multi-part long poems which are its string quartets. “Mother Tongue” is a splendid, almost narrative poem, about the funeral of a mother of young children, who mourn her in part by each carrying a flower to place in her coffin, each in his own way. And yet, there is a sense of distance and shock conveyed by these words:

The open coffin invites you into a cream
fabric room. Vanilla covered buttons tuft the
ceiling

over the life-sized doll you’ve always wanted
waiting with curled lashes over closed eyes.

“Renovations” is a five-part poem in which a house becomes an objective correlative for the destruction and re-building of the self and its emotions, as in part 1, in which accidents and emergencies occur, and culminate in these stark lines:

If I could raise
my senses to the third power
and multiply them
by my distance from these objects,
death, would I understand your clarity?

Part 2 creates the ghost of a dead girl (or a version of a childhood self) in the now empty house. In part 4, the basement of the house is a locus of memory of the father and mother, as the child poet wears “scarlet / leather ten league boots” which by the end are “my father’s red boots” while the mother is remembered for “the Cretan terra cotta / honeycomb where my mother’s / snake drinks milk.”

Part 3 describes the dismemberment of the coal-burning furnace, the stripping of the house’s roof, and the discovery of old clothes still hanging:

Bagged
winter coats
with vacant necks
loлл from ceiling hooks
.....
Summer’s full breasts
wait inside a silk blouse.

In the final section, the poet remembers a boy who bit her arm:

Still
red and open on my flesh,
his evenly
dented ghostmouth.

So a lifetime of physical and sensual and emotional memories bites deep into the poet’s work, making it incredibly vivid to us, her open-mouthed readers.

Stephanie Rauschenbusch is a Brooklyn artist and poet.

RUTKOWSKI RECAPITULATED

Peter Selgin

HAYWIRE

Thaddeus Rutkowski

Starcherone Books

http://www.starcherone.com

298 pages; paper, \$18.00

Anyone who has had the pleasure of reading one of Thaddeus Rutkowski’s books, in reading another, will know what he’s in for: the mock-picaresque misadventures of a Chinese/Polish American son delivered in a deadpan style reminiscent of nothing so much as (for those old enough to remember) Jackie Vernon’s “Vacation Slide Show” shtick on

The Ed Sullivan Show. In Vernon’s signature routine, to the clicks of a device held in his hand, he would pretend to project a series of slides onto the fourth wall, which he would then, in a monotonous voice and with the expression of a cadaver, describe. (“Here I am at the tollbooth tossing some money into the basket.” *Click*. “Here I am under my car looking for the money.”) Like most standup comedians, Vernon was the butt of his own humor, the sad sack for whom nothing went right and who never got the girl. The same may be said of the protagonist—the singular case applies—of Rutkowski’s three *bildungsromans*, the not-so-alter egos that share their creator’s name. The slideshow analogy bears up as well, since Rutkowski’s narratives always come diced into brief chapters, or fragments (his previous work, *Teched* [2005], is subtitled “a novel in fractals”).

Because of their fragmentary picaresque structure, Rutkowski’s books suffer from an identity crisis.

Neither novels nor linked short stories nor collected prose poems or flash fictions, they are also all of the above. His works build their effects cumulatively, through an accretion of discreet moments having little if anything to do with each other, rather than energeically, through a sequence of cause and effect, so reading them is like eating a bag of potato chips, with each non-sequitur scene its own salty, satisfying morsel (“Bet you can’t eat just one”). Rutkowski’s works can be opened at random and entered with pleasure, and in this respect, if not others, they may be claimed by poetry.

Yet from the heady fragments, a single, unified narrative does emerge. That narrative, too, will be familiar to Rutkowski’s steadfast readers, and falls roughly into three parts: 1) childhood under auspices of a mulish failed artist Bolshevik Polish

————— Selgin continued on next page