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Rutkowski Recapitulated

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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.

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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

father and an equally ineffectual (if less malignant) Chinese mother who broaches family dysfunctions with a homemade brew of confused Confucianism; 2) college life in New York City, and the protagonist's less-than-victorious pursuit of sex, love, drugs, and art; 3) the less-than-victorious artist grappling (insofar as an automaton can be said to *grapple*) with adulthood and its fetishes, and—in the case of *Haywire*—with two siblings, one of each sex, each with troubles of their own.

As I've said, the devil in Rutkowski's fictions lies in the very particular and peculiar details, and so reviewing them comprehensively does them a disservice; like poems, they don't flourish in summary, though summary must do. *Haywire*'s earliest scenes explore the cruelties and perversions of childhood. In one vignette, the narrator is initiated by the boy next door, who binds his hands and feet with telephone wire, then "de-pants" him, exposing his genitals to imaginary enemies. The scene is telling in several ways, as it embodies the narrator's global attitude to existence, that of someone whose powers of volition are at best circumscribed, at worst like that of a sleepwalker, passing through his own life with his senses receptive to stimulus, but no will of his own with which to brazen out pain and disappointment. In a subsequent episode, Thaddeus's anarcho-survivalist dad shoots a squirrel on the front lawn, then carves its corpse into gamey bits that he marinates, rolls into breadcrumbs, fries and feeds to his kin. "Everyone in my family had a taste." One gets that the taste is also for masochism.

While a sado-masochistic thread runs through many of the book's scenes, others—as when Thaddeus is sent to stay with his pinochle playing paternal grandmother—dish up banality:

At night, she rubbed my face with a cold, damp cloth that smelled like mildew. She told me to sleep in the twin bed next to hers. As I lay there in pajamas, she led me through a prayer that began "Now I lay me down to sleep..."

I heard her breathing become slow and regular, but I stayed awake for a long time. I wondered what it meant to have my soul kept by the Lord while I slept. Would that help me if I died before I woke? If my consciousness no longer worked, how would I know if my soul were being kept? Could I stay alert for just a little while after I died, so I could check to see if the Lord had taken my soul?

An asterisk ends the vignette, and with it the theosophical inquiry, which like every other episode in the book comes to naught; it is merely there by the way, a feature in the passing landscape. Thaddeus's sojourn complete, he and his father "celebrate" his homecoming at a dive where, while dad throws back whisky and beer, he washes down pork rinds with soda between forays to the dartboard and his father's self-aggrandizing outbursts:

"You know," he said, "while you were away, I found some baby squirrels in the yard. They seemed to have fallen out of a tree. I put them in an empty aquarium with some cloth strips for bedding, and I fed them milk through an eyedropper. But one by one, they died."

Considering the earlier squirrel scene, one suspects that as a cultivator of squirrels and children the speaker leaves something to be desired. That this father is a dangerous man is the blunt take-away of such moments, but as with all good fiction, this subtext is never stated but only implied with a stark matter-of-factness that puts one in mind of *Kahlschlagliteratur* ("clear-cutting literature"), the post-WWII

German literary movement whose principal subject was the fate of former soldiers and POWs returning to a ruined homeland, and for which the spare realism of Ernest Hemingway's short stories served as a role model. As with Rutkowski's fiction, the style in those works is terse, blunt, and laconically straightforward, with subjective emotional content eschewed in deference to unembellished objective description, leaving judgments to the reader. But where *Kahlschlagliteratur*'s heroes confront the blight of firebombed cities, in *Haywire*—as in Rutkowski's other works—the blighted landscape has been internalized; the rubble across which his protagonist scrambles is that of a dysfunctional upbringing, with the debris field as long and wide as life itself. Though in an interview Rutkowski points to Donald Barthelme, Richard Brautigan, and *MAD* magazine as influences, he could as convincingly have fingered Arno Schmidt, Wolfgang Borchert, and Heinrich Böll. In their own way, his works are as bleak and devastating.

Reading Rutkowski's work is like eating a bag of potato chips, with each non-sequitur scene its own salty, satisfying morsel.

But Rutkowski's books are also something that *Kahlschlagliteratur* is not: funny. Later in the book, at a Sex Addicts Anonymous meeting attended by Thaddeus, an older man addicted to drive-by sex confesses, "I had to get rid of anything that reminded me of acting out. That included my leather pants. I also had to get rid of books that contained any reference to sex. I could never get rid of enough books. I'd think I had nothing left, then I'd pick up *The Odyssey*, and all of those warriors thwacking each other would trigger me." The comic appeal of such moments and of *Haywire* generally is voyeuristic; the same embarrassed thrill we get from watching someone drag a strip of toilet tissue on his or her shoe. It's not *meant* to be funny any more than it was meant for us to see; we just happen to be there at the right time. Thus, Rutkowski rubbernecks the prolonged accident of his narrator's life. If the book is as sad and horrible as it is funny, it is likewise so without intention, by default. As Alexandr Kuprin puts it, "All the horror, gentlemen, is in just this: that there is no horror!"

Because the pleasure of Rutkowski's books lies mainly in the particular selection of impeccably rendered non-sequiturs rather than in any epiphany

or surprise achieved by the aggregate, that we keep reading the same essential story over and over again hardly matters. In this way, Rutkowski's books are like the proverbial river that can be crossed only once; the stream may be the same, and flow in the same predictable direction and at the same depth, but the water is always different. Each time, however, the pleasure is consistent, and consistently high.

And where is it written that an artist must change his technique, or, for that matter, his subject? Giorgio Morandi had his dusty bottles, Edgar Degas his ballerinas, Claude Monet his haystacks and lily pads. The fox may know many things, but the hedgehog knows one great thing. In Rutkowski's case, that one great thing is the author himself, or his doppelgänger, in all his dysfunctional glory. That singular knowledge has so far produced three very fine books. In ways they may be interchangeable, but then so are Morandi's bottles, Charles Bukowski's women (and his bottles), and James Bond flicks. Call it a literary franchise, if you like. If so, it's a winning franchise.

Peter Selgin is the author of Drowning Lessons, winner of the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award, and Life Goes to the Movies, a novel, and two books on writing craft. Confessions of a Left-Handed Man, a memoir in essays, is forthcoming from the University of Iowa Press/Sightline Books.