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Beautiful Lesson of the I

Frances Brent

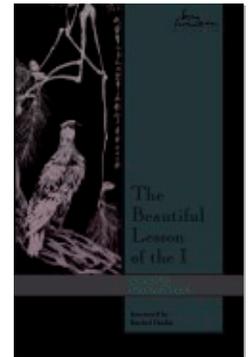
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FOREWORD

As the pun in its title reminds us, this collection is full of poems about seeing. But since, appropriately for the distilled and trenchant character of this book, no word in the title is inert, the poems in “The Beautiful Lesson” are also about beauty (a word for which I find no good synonym) and about teaching and learning.

A primary lesson these poems teach: pay attention. The physical smallness of most of them on the page works to focus eye, ear, and mind (and this modest scale, I can’t resist adding, is a welcome contrast to the many poems one sees these days whose heedless expanses tax the attention of the most sympathetic reader by attempting narrative dimensions without providing the pleasures of narrative). But the ambition in these very un-narrative poems is far from miniature. The fact that we need to lean in close to catch what is being said does not mean that the book is a catechism of diminutives. Yes, a walnut, an apple, a doll’s house, a rat, an egg are all small—but small compared to what? All are larger than what they contain, and they all contain something. I am reminded of Hamlet’s claim that he could be bounded in a nutshell and count himself a king of infinite space, “were it not that I have bad dreams.” In “The Beautiful Lesson of the I,” both space and dreams figure. The rat’s carcass turns out to contain “disquieting continents”; the basket, the bottle, the box, and most notably the globe are all vessels. “Globe,” which provides a witty and original evocation of a floating fetus, speaks of “the substanceless / envelope where something is preserved / but made small enough to go unnoticed.” That envelope might contain pickling fluid, an embryo, or a poem.

As students of fermentation know, inseparable from preservation is transformation—and transformation in poetic terms is trope. “Melon,” a poem to which I kept returning, begins “There once was a man / who had to see everything in order to remember.” “See” here turns out to mean something akin to “liken to something else,” for what follows is as vivid and accurate a rendition of a melon rind (cantaloupe, I think) as I’ve ever come across: “the melon is a grained and dented moon covered in netting.” Exactly. Or in “Rose,” which can hardly help evoking Blake in passing, “A finger-sized hole / bores through the outspread folds / like a cigarette burn. / When I turn back the petals, / I uncover the silver, jeweled beetle.”

The rightness and precision in poem after poem here correspond to and are buttressed by the quiet authority of a voice that issues from

painstaking observation, not improvisation and anecdote. Nor is the observation limited to the phenomenal world, for poems like “Little Dream before Sleep” and “The Place Where I Harbor Anger” contrive to make visible intensely inward and private, yet also surely universal, experiences.

The beautiful lesson of this quiet and unerring book is above all mimesis—not merely in the sense of *A* resembling *B*, but in the much more untamed sense of correspondences that can be unexpected, grotesque, or sinister. No wonder James Ensor is a presiding presence here—but (among others) so too, it occurs to me, is May Swenson, whose poetry has some of the same homely yet *unheimlich* character, some of the same patient attention which never feels humdrum but rather leans toward defamiliarization, and some of the wonder and delight that is offered by “The Beautiful Lesson of the I.” And though I hadn’t taken this into account while making my choice among competing manuscripts, I believe Swenson would have admired and enjoyed this collection—as I do.

Rachel Hadas

THE BEAUTIFUL LESSON
OF THE I

