

TED BYRNE / North of California Street: A Tall Serious Girl

The Words / of a poem are a roundabout way of saying nothing.
—“Phaedrus”

At the moment I can still only puzzle over this book. I love the weight of it, the binding and the cloth. I love the way the title put me off until I discovered its secret, on the very last page. The painting on the slipcover, by Fran Herndon, is as painterly as the writing is writerly. There isn't a colour I could comfortably name, except perhaps blue. Judging by its title—“Eye on the Sea”—the painting is about the sea. But surely it's about paint, or painting. Or about looking at the sea. Or, given its multiple internal framings, about various lines of approach, various blues. The endorsements (encomiums) and the introduction are true, but deadly. The poetry is everything they say it is, but somehow remains uncontained in this big, handsome book.

The poems are not all comfortable being together, although I guess it was inevitable. It's almost like an assemblage of possible books. I found myself making lists, which I do when I'm ill at ease: Eliot (“Pompei”); Douglas Sirk (“Flowers”); “What Ever Happened to Baby Jane” (“Flesh Eating Poem”); *Mad Magazine* and the Jesuit Relations (“Tete Rouge”); Zane Grey (“Pony Express Riders”); “The Dream Life of Walter Mitty” (“Punishment”); Cocteau (“The Death of Orpheus”)... and so on. Or: boy's own serials; post-surrealist assemblage; sixteenth-century English verse; nineteenth century opera; several intoxicants, including sex and camaraderie, all in moderation; the city and that which is not the city (800 mile distant suburbs); the Berkeley Renaissance; the Leisure Poets; exception; Cubist collage; the New York Schools; Bolinas without Buddhism. Or: hyperpoetical; gnostic; apoetical; workerist; erotic; socio-political, but always familial; metaphysical; diaristic. In all of which diversity, in all of its stammering, its perfect articulations, the poetry enacts a grasping after “the poem.”

There is an ideology of the poem that stitches all of this together. The poem as miracle, as gift or force (“The poem wrestles you / to the ground”). The poem, or its source, is something greater than the individual poem; the poet is the vessel of the poem; writing is a writing toward, or an anticipation of the event of the poem

("just keep writing this silly shit & pray for a poem"). This is then dissimulated by a nonchalance, or an anxiety—a structural denial. Extreme elegance of expression—

In a world of flowers
the enclosing is pregnant with silent clockwork
and the shade with death...

—or perfectly metrical moments like

Leaves torn from dry branches
rise in the wind,
birds wheel in a bleak sky...

are mocked by rough verses like

It's pretty shitty
living in a Protestant city
& my heart too bleak for self-pity.

or leveling observations like

Going to the store
for a pack of cigarettes, going to Prince George,
going to sleep, exactly the same
trip.

Even when the source is explicit, something denies it ("It's the Psyche in me that's mad / because Eros has poured flame into me"). The orphic and the refusal of the orphic ("You save me from philosophy / with your Is, Is, Is"). All apparently artless, which is to say artful. And ultimately lyric—odes and songs, even occasional pre-modern forms like the triple quatrains of "White Matches," or the sonnets "After Verlaine," "Icarus" and "Seventh Avenue." He wrestles over and over with the poem. The poem often wins.

The poems speak to each other, sometimes across great distances. But they are also wonderfully self-contained. Like tracks on a recording. We will all have our favorites. The book begins and ends with virtuoso performances—the four poems that constitute "Flowers," and "Veracruz." The first poem, "Pablito at the Corrida," seems impenetrable at first. An obliquity that persists throughout the book, but not in this initial, Eliotic form. Once you get what it's about—the death of a bull fighter—the poem becomes a powerful metonymic description of raped innocence.

The following poem, “Pompei,” involves a similar trauma of the innocents: “poems,” “the eyes of the matrons,” “virginity, the little lost dog,” Pliny the Elder. The first line reads: “When I read this poem I think of Pompei.” That is, the poem is not about Pompei. “Flowers” works out the logic of this displacement, this writing. Flowers die “stoically,” like Pliny, “to prove the syllogism, whatever dies without reason is beautiful,” flowers die without reason, flowers are beautiful. This logic is faulty, and the fault is in the premise, which is disastrous. This is troubling, but not fatal. “In a rational poem / written by the unwounded / he is found out by the unsounded speech, irrational...” The poem keeps coming back to the syllogism,

trying to restate it:
unable to stop the syllogism,
an unquenchable flame in your pants,
an imperishable flower, however fierce,
whatever lives to a purpose grows ugly,
you live to a purpose,
you grow ugly...

But the poem is not about flowers, reason, or the ethics of beauty, it's about fear. Just as the first poem—this poem tells us—was not about Pablito, but about a fearful love. I won't comment on the last poem in this sequence, “Flesh Eating Poem”—it's too scary. Later on he says that when he was a kid he was frightened of ticks in the forest, “then / later it was Korea that was dangerous.” Finally, “to be a person like anyone else / terrifies me.” It's this being a person, “like anyone else,” that the book is endlessly about, which is to say near to, or proximate, as we are.

At the other end of the book, “Veracruz” culminates one of the themes (“My father stole my cock from me”), an encryption (“an opaque unknown sticking up out of stuff it was born in”), that emerges in the second half of the collection, as it (the collection) becomes progressively less immediate, or less anxious in its proximateness. It starts to look back, as earlier it looked forward. Is nostalgia a mild form of neurosis, or a cure for melancholy? “Veracruz” demonstrates the likelihood of the latter proposition. “Veracruz” is a perfect poem and should be published in those high school text books that probably don't even exist anymore, alongside Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost.

In between are extraordinary poems like “White Matches,” “Punishment,” “A New Moon,” “Phaedrus,” “Paradise Shelter,” “The Berlin Wall” and “Pub Night.”

There is no typical poem that one could offer as an example. In fact, it would be impossible not to give the wrong impression of this book. Right now, re-reading the last half of the book, with its local histories, travels and moral questionings, I'm still drawn to the fractured, intense meditations on the real—for Stanley and Lacan, the real is everything that doesn't work—on love, truth, time and death, and on the practice of self, that seem to be addressed to us, in the city.

In this regard, "Pub Night" might be read as emblematic. "This I record," he writes, like a first century (BCE) Roman, or a thirteenth century Florentine. But like a twentieth century cosmopolitan, his thinking is in unresolved lemmas, a series of unclosed parentheses. In "listening" to his lover, his mind is divided between the other ("you") and—not what the other is saying, but—the "variousness" of what is being said. In this extreme inattention, which makes of the lover, without more ado, what the lover always is in lyric poetry (i.e. absent), it strikes him that "love is true, not just real, not just a sentiment." He records "this" on the torn tab of a cigarette pack. However, "this" is not the trite observation that "love is true," but rather the contention that "Truth has a double / value: obverse / reverse." Strictly speaking, the obverse has priority over the reverse, and yet both sides are always the other side of something: the obverse is a reverse. The line break in the lines just quoted, for instance, immediately gives rise to a reverse that undermines the obverse, namely: "truth" has a double, which is "value." Don't forget, it's pub night, and we can think through all of this with a bit of a slur. That is, it's comic, deadly comic.

A couple of days later, he finds the aforementioned scrap of paper in his pocket and tapes it in his "writing book." There it takes on another status, as it moves through the writing book, toward the "record" that the poem finally is. But, as if to put us immediately off that trail, he tapes it "under" a statement by Robert Duncan: "I never made any vow to poetry / except to cut its throat, if i could / make somebody laugh." He notes in passing, that the "tab of the cigarette pack has an obverse too." Which is to say that his drunken note, to the effect that truth has two sides, is itself on the reverse side (the downside) of a publicity slogan: "Player's / You can't beat / the taste of / Player's." As if the joke has not gone far enough, this is accompanied by a the québécois version: "Rien ne surpassa le gout de Player's," as if to ask, again, which (language) is the obverse, which the reverse. Finally, he tries to resolve all of this by pleading, like a maudlin drunk, that by "obverse/reverse" he means "one Truth, i

hope, not two [majuscule 'T', miniscule 'i'] / ... a mystery, plain & simple." As simple that is

as a glass of beer (& needing many
of same to perceive, no doubt, but
when perceived, perceived with a
lessening of tension, as something
simpler
than terror

A visiting English poet recently said, "When I got to New York, all the talk was of George Stanley." On another occasion, Stanley himself was overheard to say, on the reception of this book, something like, "I've emerged from total obscurity into relative obscurity." It's about time.

Tell me again
what you said, it is possible
everything I think
is wrong.