

Two essays:

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Tony Roberts: The Hard Losses of Louise Glück

Mary Woodward: 'Luminous praise of the ordinary':

The poetry of Rachel Wetzteon (1967-2009)

Tony Roberts' fourth book of poems, *Drawndark*, appeared in 2014. He is also the author of an essay collection, *The Taste in My Mind* (2015), and the editor of *Poetry in the Blood* (2014), all from Shoestring Press. Concerning Roberts' poetry, Al Alvarez wrote of 'an authentic adult voice, tender, ironic, relaxed and highly educated'. Reviewing his prose, John Forth found 'a detailed map of the age ... condensed to appear as table talk'.

The Hard Losses of Louise Glück

Birth, not death, is the hard loss.

I know. I also left a skin there.

'Cottonmouth Country'

1

The early poetry of Louise Glück takes its thematic tenor from Ecclesiastes 4, which opens with the oppressiveness of life and promotes the state of the unborn as the happiest. Birth is the first wound for Glück, 'the hard loss' from which we never recover. Intimacy is the second. Her voices constantly reiterate that message in a variety of ways, through broken narrative, enigmatic suggestion and moods of revulsion, suffering, guilt and grief. Her first four books – *Firstborn* (1968); *The House on Marshland* (1975), *Descending Figure* (1980), *The Triumph of Achilles* (1985) — and the absorbing essays collected in *Proofs & Theories* (1994) explore and illustrate uncomfortable perspectives with only the bleak beauty of her expression – except on rare occasions – to mitigate the darkness of the vision.

Frequently the early poems are energised by a disgust at life's sensuous processes which takes the Confessional (think Plath, Berryman, Sexton) to Jacobean intensity. However, with Glück the personal is refracted through distancing voices or what Helen Vendler described as a 'posthumous tone', and by an increasing turning to The Bible, fairy tale and myth to deliver archetypal experiences (Glück's 'classicizing gestures', according to Rosanna Warren). The simple clarity of her expression and the urge to narrative paradoxically work against easy accessibility, because of the poet's unwillingness to fully disclose.

As Dave Smith noted, in the early work 'you find story, sharp and hacked'. Time and again in the essays in *Proofs & Theories*, Glück celebrates brevity, the unfinished, the unresolved, the 'reluctance to conclude'. For her 'The true has about it an air of mystery or inexplicability. This mystery is an attribute of the elemental'. In 'Disruption, Hesitation, Silence' she writes, 'I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent, deliberate silence. The unsaid, for me, exerts great power'. For her it is art's role 'to harness the power of the unfinished'. Writing on George Oppen –a poet whose work is sympathetic to her vision –she explains:

I love white space, love the telling omission, love lacunae, and find oddly depressing that which seems to have left out nothing. Such poetry seems to love completion too much... it lacks magnetism, the power to seem, simultaneously, whole and not final, the power to generate, not annul, energy.

This accords well with Glück's method of writing at that time. In 'The Dreamer and the Watcher' she says of her technique: 'For me, all poems begin in some fragment of motivating language –the task of writing a poem is the search for context.'

We are teased by the seeming openness of Glück's diction and rhythm. Wendy Lesser noted in 'The Washington Post Book World' that 'Glück's language is staunchly straightforward, remarkably close to the diction of ordinary speech. Yet her careful selection for rhythm and repetition, and the specificity of even her idiomatically vague phrases, give her poems a weight that is far from colloquial.' The poems resist interpretation and thereby remain fresh. Hence Robert Hass could write of not being sure he entirely understood 'The Magi', in offering Glück's poem to readers of his genial 'Poet's Choice' column and Helen Vendler's laudatory 1978 essay, 'The Poetry of Louise Glück', is peppered with versions of 'if I read the poem aright'. She concludes, however: 'Glück's cryptic narratives invite our participation: we must,

according to the case, fill out the story, substitute ourselves for the fictive personages, invent a scenario from which the speaker can utter her lines, decode the import, “solve” the allegory. Or such is our first impulse. Later, I think, we no longer care... Glück’s independent structures, populated by nameless and often ghostly forms engaged in archaic or timeless motions, satisfy without referent.’

Lest one thinks of Vendler’s words as some evasion of the responsibility to understand, it is at least worth remembering Susan Sontag’s essay ‘Against Interpretation’ (1966) in which the essayist famously attacked criticism’s obsession with meaning: ‘interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art. Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world. To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world – in order to set up a shadow world of “meanings”.’

11

For me, Louise Glück’s more immediately personal poems are her most startling, the ones which deal with recognisable American lives, and *Firstborn* remains to this day a powerful debut. Everything appals the personas of these poems. The dominant response to experience is loathing. In the opening poem ‘The Chicago Train’ one remembers the ugly parody of birth, how ‘the kid / Got his head between his mama’s legs and slept’ and the speaker recalling the ‘pulsing crotch... the lice rooted in that baby’s hair.’ Then there is dysfunctional family in ‘Returning a Lost Child’, the mother whose ‘thin / Arms, hung like flypaper, twist about the boy’ and ‘the father strung / On crutches, waiting to be roused’.

Self-loathing is equally pungent. With the many moments of sensuality and disgust, we are hardly far from Hamlet’s urging Gertrude to avoid ‘the bloat king’ with his ‘reechy kisses’, ‘paddling in your neck with his damned fingers’. In ‘Hesitate to Call’ we want to avert the ear:

Lived to see you throwing
Me aside. That fought
Like netted fish inside me. Saw you throbbing
In my syrups.

while in ‘The Egg’ it is the eye:

The thing

Is hatching. Look. The bones
Are bending to give way.
It's dark. It's dark.
He's brought a bowl to catch
The pieces of the baby.

'The Wound' offers another image of horror: 'The air stiffens to a crust'. Even quieter domestic moods are dysfunctional, as in 'Thanksgiving' where the popular sister sings 'a Fellini theme' and for the 'consoling meal' the speaker watches her mother

tucking skin

As though she missed her young, white bits of onion
Misted snow over the pronged death.

The Fellini cast arrives in numbers in Part Two. These are Glück's case studies of the damaged and the resigned: sadistic male predators, victim lovers, the memory haunted, the faded 'queen', the cripple, the outraged nurse, the possessed and the rejected. All is atmosphere. To the speakers in the poems perspectives are tightened. In 'Seconds' we have the neighbours

Now huge with cake their

White face floats above its cup; they smile,
Sunken women, sucking at their tea...

In 'Letter From Our Man in Blossomtime' the wife is a revelation 'her white / Forearms, bared in ruth- / less battle with the dinner'. The collection's title poem, 'Firstborn', begins: 'The weeks go by. I shelve them, / They are all the same, like peeled soup cans'. The fact that the first poem invokes 'raw Botticelli' and the latter an onion 'Floating like Ophelia, caked with grease' has an absurdly reductive yet ambiguous power.

The photographer in 'Pictures of the People in the War' says 'one never / Gets so close to anyone within experience' as he did, but Glück takes another route. In her essay 'Against Sincerity' she has reminded us 'The truth, on the page, need not have been lived. It is, instead, all that can be envisioned.' Art's 'truth' is not a matter of authenticity, but illumination.

'Cottonmouth Country' is the title of the third section and the opening poem introduces the notion of death as wooer. It ends with the collection's key lines (with

their snakeskin image): 'Birth, not death, is the hard loss. / I know. I also left a skin there.' These poems, various in their speakers and forms, are the product of an imagination that acknowledges being oversensitive.

What we can take from this first collection is admiration for the poet's magnetic power, her ability to shake the usual domestic themes and turn up something rawly new. The same energy powers Louise Glück's second collection *The House on Marshland*, though this and subsequent volumes better cohere. There is some difference in form between books, though brevity of line and poem are still favoured. The self-important initial capitals are missing, the effect less assertive. Beauty and quiet terror co-exist more resonantly and there are fewer 'others'. Grief has become a more powerful sentiment than revulsion, though when Glück writes, in 'For My Mother:

And then spring
came and withdrew from me
the absolute
knowledge of the unborn

we know we are still thematically connected to the 'hard loss', to the wounds of *Firstborn*. 'All Hallows', the book's opening poem, deals again in the corruption of childbirth. Helen Vendler read the poem as an allegory of birth and at its ending 'the child victim is sold into bondage, enticed into the world'. The suggestion of Halloween and the last crops of the year support this, since it is allegedly the time when spirits are free to pass between their world and ours. There is of course no option here: '*Come here, little one*' the voice croons 'And the soul creeps out of the tree'; it needs no enticing from the wife in the window.

Pagan and Christian, Glück's draws these myths and fairy tales about her. Fear closes in. Gretel in 'Gretel in Darkness' yearns guiltily for her brother, 'we are there still and it is real, real, / that black forest and the fire in earnest'. The townspeople watch the wise men returning winter after winter in 'The Magi', probably (as Robert Hass suspected) with some irony for their route is now peopled, 'cities sprung around this route their gold / engraved on the desert', but what has happened beyond confirmation that this is the child-God?

This second collection also explores the wounds of intimacy. Tension comes from a chafing at commitment, at the intimacy experience involves. The domestic pleasure of a family photograph is ominously marred by sunlight in 'Still Life' so that, 'Not one of us does not avert his eyes.' The alternative to commitment is also loss. The child in 'The Apple Trees', at present in his crib, is bound some time to wander: 'I wait to see how he will leave me. / Already on his hand the map appears'. All the love poems are spurred on by the fear or the experience of loss and rejection. Abishag's words apply to various speakers: '*She has the look of one who seeks / some greater and destroying passion*'. Poems begin with lines like 'You having turned from me'; 'There is always

something to be made of pain'; 'Had you died when we were together'; 'I think now it is better to love no one'. In 'The Letters' dry leaves drift like the letters the lovers will soon burn. Beauty is above all perishable. The deer in 'Messengers', so beautiful in movement ('as though their bodies did not impede them'), resolve into 'dead things, saddled with flesh'. Even the beautiful calm of a house at dusk in which a woman carries roses and a man lifts his head from his work reveals 'a form / of suffering', because creation, for the writer, involves intruding upon lives ('Poem'). Glück's 'house' is built after all on marshland; there is no security.

Descending Figure – Glück's favourite of her first four books – explores the same themes. Intimacy is literally described as a 'wound' in 'The Return'. Love will not stem the bleeding; momentary beauty is our only distraction; even the dead are uneasy. 'World Breaking Apart', another poem that locates meaninglessness in the failure of intimacy, meditates on pain:

Like the winter wind, it leaves
settled forms in the snow. Known, identifiable –
except there are no uses for them.

'The Drowned Children' is almost ineffably sad, opening with a quiet rationalisation that is heart-breaking: 'You see, they have no judgment. / So it is natural that they should drown'. 'The Garden' offers images of birth, life and death stunned by the fear of loss and yet offering no alternative in death: 'Admit that it is terrible to be like them, / beyond harm.' The landscape of loss is without support:

How far away they seem,
the wooden doors, the bread and milk
laid like weights on the table.

Glück captures the paradox of birth into death in the title of her poem 'Pietà', which inverts the normal iconography taking the Italian definition 'pity' literally, presenting us with a pregnant Mary and a fatherless Christ reluctant to be born.

Such fear comes closer to home in the title poem 'Descending Figure'. In her essay 'Death and Absence' the poet has described it as being 'saturated with a mother's grief and fearfulness and a haunted child's compulsive compensation'. The poem deals obliquely with the death of the poet's elder sister, Glück's lifelong sense of guilt, her debilitating attempt at substituting herself as 'compensation', and her recognition after giving birth herself how 'appalling' maternal love can be, hedged in by terrifying fears for the child':

Long ago, at this hour, my mother stood
at the lawn's edge, holding my little sister.
Everyone was gone; I was playing
in the dark street with my other sister,
whom death had made so lonely.

Glück's love poems carry similar anxiety. 'Night Piece' introduces the growing child to his own monsters: 'He cannot sleep / apart from them'. 'Aubade' fixes on the image of a gull, expressive of 'the unexhausted / need of the body'. In 'Epithalamium' (another ironic title) intimacy cannot assuage such need; 'the terrible charity of marriage' leaves one unprotected:

Here is my hand, he said.
But that was long ago.
Here is my hand that will not harm you.

Admiration of male beauty in 'The Mirror' turns to horror when the man's shaving becomes bleeding. In 'Rosy', the crippled dog seeking further self-harm is likened to the lover being rejected. Even in the contented waking scene of 'Happiness' it is the shadow of the 'the burning wheel' which 'passes gently over us'. Suitably the collection ends with the four part poem 'Lamentations', Glück's version of the creation myth. The man and woman who have become parents with 'no authority above them', have also discovered in their sin and nakedness, 'white flesh / on which wounds would show clearly / like words on a page.'

The last of Louise Glück's early books – before the poet moved more to narrative sequence – is *The Triumph of Achilles*, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for poetry. This collection takes her further into her characteristic mythologizing and into fears of intimacy. The first two poems, 'Mock Orange' and 'Metamorphosis' and others like 'Winter Morning' 'Summer' 'The Mountain', 'Legend' and 'Morning' confirm, for me at least, the feeling that Glück's more immediately personal poems are her most satisfying.

'I know / intense love always leads to mourning', Glück writes in the poignant 'Metamorphosis', a poem addressing a dying father. Everything fails in time and especially optimism. Glück's 'The Reproach' opens:

You have betrayed me, Eros.

You have sent me
my true love.

'Morning' concludes with the virtuous bride, so different from the mother who cried
at her wedding, happily innocent of time:

Never has she been further from sadness
than she is now. She feels no call to weep,
but neither does she know
the meaning of that word, youth.

In 'Mock Orange' the odour of this fragrant white flower with its virginal
associations merges with the odour of sex to repel the speaker, since the sex act is
'humiliating' and the post-coital 'split into the old selves, / the tired antagonisms' so
desperate. Such images of relationships are predominantly negative. In 'Hawk's
Shadow' the momentarily fusing of predator and prey, mirrors the lover and beloved.
Uncomfortable, too, is the final poem, 'Horse', in which the husband believes his
marriage is exhausted, his wife wedded now to dreams of fulfilment through escape.

Relationships sour. 'Marathon', a poem in nine sections, reflects on such failure. After
the elemental force of lovemaking, happiness is offered as pre-natal oblivion. 'Once
we were happy, we had no memories', the voice tells us, and again further on:

Sooner or later you will call my name,
cry of loss, mistaken
cry of recognition, of arrested need
for someone who exists in memory: no voice
carries to that kingdom.

Finally we learn that in the world accessible only to dreams 'the bond with any one
soul / is meaningless; you throw it away'. 'Summer' remembers the days of 'our first
happiness' and then the lovers losing their way, drifting as on a raft in their bed:

And in each of us began
a deep isolation, though we never spoke of this,
of the absence of regret.

The poem ends with the hollow freedom of 'artists' left to continue their journey. The seasons change but one is never whole because, as the teacher illustrates in 'The Mountain' (contrary to her intention): the Sisyphean labour is never really attained. Even standing at the top 'the rock has added / height to the mountain'.

Who would have thought that such themes could be so freshly articulated time and again? Louise Glück's poetry clearly addresses both a stark recognition and a need in her readers. Perhaps it is as she wrote in 'Death and Absence':

When you read anything worth remembering, you
liberate a human voice; you release into the world again
a companion spirit.

I read poems to hear that voice. And I write to speak
to those I have heard.

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Mary Woodward has had poetry in many literary magazines, one pamphlet *Almost like Talking 1993*, SmithDoorstep, and a full collection *The White Valentine* 2104 Worplesdon Press.

‘ Luminous praise of the ordinary ’

The poetry of Rachel Wetzton (1967-2009)

Though she did once have a poem in *Poetry Review* I had never heard of Rachel Wetzton till I came across a reference in the Bookslut online archive. I then looked up a couple of her poems on websites. I wanted to read more. I like contemporary American poetry. The trouble with English poetry is not that it is deliberately parochial but it is always set out along such familiar fault lines, while for a reader like me American poetry does give a break from all that tribal insider identification – another country, same language, different set up. So I bought online all 4 of her books by Penguin and Persea Books, which gradually turned up from evocative US addresses.

The facts of her life are glamorous and sad: a New Yorker from a privileged Manhattan literary family, educated at Yale, John Hopkins, Columbia, followed by

teaching in New York...and then she throws it all in over Christmas 2009. Her last collection, *Silver Roses*, was published posthumously. Her first, *The Other Stars*, won the U.S. 1993 National Poetry Series competition and sets the pattern for her work – a mixture of formality with a current freshness of idiom and tone. She also published *Influential Ghosts*, a study of Auden's sources and studies of Larkin as well as editing Emily Dickinson for Barnes and Noble.

She is included in *Rebel Angels: 25 Poets of the New Formalism* (eds. Mason & Jarman 1996) and in many ways she is prepared to live up to being categorised as a formalist. In this first book there is a sonnet sequence, odes, a sestina, a villanelle, little songs like Elizabethan lyrics, rambling Browningsque monologues, all in the characteristic Wetzsteon voice, poised, watchful, laconic but precise. She wrote a piece on form which is on the Poetry Society of America website and explains how John Hollander's class at Yale on Advanced Writing influenced her and how two ('Stage Directions for a Short Play' and 'Dissolving Views') of the poems in *The Other Stars* are in her favourite sapphic stanzas...her enthusiasm for the way form intensifies what she is saying in a poem is clear:

I'm more reluctant to tamper with the sapphic stanza than with any other form. Why? I suppose because its rhythm seems so perfect—so close to the way we think and talk at our most impassioned moments—that I don't want to spoil it, want to take full advantage of its propulsive, remarkable force. Whether you end up varying it or not, though, I urge you to try it. It's a haunting, beautiful form that will grab you and refuse to let you go until you've succumbed to its many charms.

('On Form')

Possibly this use of form is more a result of a desire to prove early in her career that she has absorbed the lessons of her highly academic training as a poet than any obsessive commitment to the permanent necessity of form. Increasingly there is

another, highly individual kind of post-modernism to her syntax, her tone, her sense of detail. So if you recoil from formality do not assume she is a poet you would not like...formal she might be, uncontemporary she is not.

One of the key aspects of her persona as a poet is that of New York flaneuse; it becomes stronger as her life progresses, but is clear even from the first poem of this collection 'Urban Gallery' ... her city is a city of boys, gigolos, bad girls – 'I took to the street and saw it was worthy.' She is eager to be a part of this cavalcade of life and it is to become her theatre –

It does not matter

what fever you feed, so long as you feed it freely...

...lovers, permit me entrance.

nor is she a lighthearted poet...there is a video nasty side to a poem like 'The Case of the Corpse' where the charm of a picnic is ruined by the appearance of this apparition which 'cast its shadow on the feast'. Even falling in love is overshadowed by the sense of urban decay she is always alert for – yet it is often a mix of the dark and the light for her –

What we, the fortunate ones, know and profit from

is that beyond the desolate chirps, beneath

the ravaged barks, everything present enjoys

subzero mayhem, a time of electric ice.

('Falling in Love in Winter')

Love and its difficulties are her prime concern. For her, her whole environment is transfigured by the process of falling in love ('When Love Takes Place') and she prefers the obsessive state of being in love to a more general ease with other people –

Teeming humanity
in all its wonders, though,
when I am love-stricken,
bores me to bits.
Better to hole myself
up in a mania,
rave in a ready-made
palace of fits.

('Three Songs')

Love for her at this stage of her life is a chase, one fraught with tension and anxiety. 'Where in God's name are you?' begins 'The Hunted' and it ends –

And therefore, renegade traveler, wherever you are,
send news: the air is alive with something, but it is
something evermore about to burn.

The central section of the book, which gives it its title is a sonnet sequence...unrhymed but all firmly divided half way through and syllabically controlled. The man she is in love with is absent, as the long poem 'A Prayer to St Anthony' which expresses her anxiety and sense of abandonment makes clear; the sonnets seem to deal with this relationship too. In the end she settles for the failure of the affair and is prepared to return to her work – without actually giving up –

Strangest of all it that, given the chance
to see my subject in the fabulous flesh at last,
I would flatly refuse. These barren days
when I heat my room by the fading coals of my goals,
this ache for an ache is as good as it gets,
so go on running; I will go on looking for you
as the willow bends, as the stomach hunts for the ulcer.

('The Other Stars')

There is a European tone to the final section of the book, Baudelaire, the prose poems of 'Parables of Flight', a reference to 'high windows' in 'Drinks in the Town Square' (she was a Larkin scholar and fan). And her own romantic cynicism about love in 'Dinner at Le Caprice' –

And love is a mad caprice

doomed as fat farm animals, fragile as glass

Life is, potentially, full of horror for her, and maybe the grimmest poem in the collection 'Worms and Us' gives a glimpse of her own tendency to undermine herself – 'I am a grinning humanist with bad dreams'. Yet in all her work she uses no Plathian anger; there are very few familial references and her concern with herself, though all-absorbing, is always rendered with reticence and precision. You will not be pushed around, rather gently and wittily persuaded to think – 'my spirit counts its woes like pearls on a string' ('Short Ode to Screwball Women', *Sakura Park*).

Though she often writes about happiness (see her piece on Larkin and happiness on the CPRW website, a revealing essay from which the title of this discussion is taken) equally she is determined to explore unhappiness and her own struggles, even at this early stage, to survive...the witty, perceptive flaneur is not out there on the streets

without a personal battle. 'Love's Passing', a sequence of rhymed sonnet length stanzas, ends with –

But finally now you stand
seeing your city as if for the first time, ready to come back
to the world a new person, until your next attack.

The general consensus on *Home and Away*, her second collection, is that it is less successful than her first; published in 1998 by Penguin it is dedicated to the memory of her father, Ross Wetzteon, Village Voice editor and historian of Greenwich Village, who had died in February of that year. So there is an elegiac tone to the book, present early on in the sonnet sequence about Venice. This is Wetzteon doing what she does in New York, what she does everywhere - evaluating her surroundings, finding her feelings about her own life in its details... Venice's role as honeymoon destination is not for her –

I'm suddenly suspicious – no, confused –
about the train of thought that brought us here:
if sickness and decay are what it takes
to get a new life off to a good start,
do we haunt empty squares and rank canals
in order to confirm our own fresh scent?
('Sonnet xix')

All the distractions of Venice, the art, the sense of being on holiday, the novelty of it all, fail in the end to shake her from herself and her own misgivings:

By this I knew I'd never leave my room

to look at cities, parks or art again;
the carnage was a comfort, not a care,

('Sonnet xlix')

But there is the same pleasure in reading these sonnets as in reading Lowell's *Notebook* sonnets...individually, they may seem obscure & fragmentary but reading the whole gives a sense of a self, a life, a voice which is compelling.

Maybe, she suggests in 'The Late Show', travel is not for her –

When friends asked you what your trips were like,
you started pulling out the mirror and letting it do
do all the talking. There on the table amid
childish inner tubes and cheap souvenirs,

it sang the praises of never getting there

We learn much in this collection about what influences her – there is an interesting 4+page poem on Auden, outlining what she admires in him –

You still show us

Not a room but a way to light it,

('In Memory of W H Auden')

And a poem about the cinema, 'Learning from the Movies' – with her characteristic eye for a well played role –

As fast as the woman in the big shouldered suit

who can laugh at a slap and teach men to whistle

settles into the rhythms of an occupied backwater town

('Learning from the Movies')

There are many such accomplished poems in *Home and Away* but somehow their edges are softened. Maybe they do present an intermediate phase...she knows what drives her and how to write, but has not quite homed in on her subject matter; travel, art, influences jostle here and get attention, but in the end slip from the reader as if they have not quite summoned up enough determination to hit home.

Eight years then intervene before *Sakura Park*, published 2006 by Persea Books, which most critics agree is her best work. Everything a new reader might like in *The Other Stars* is here but developed, more forceful, even more vivid. I've never been to New York but *Sakura Park* gives a real sense of what it was like for her living there. 'A Short Ode to Morningside Heights', a poem about the area she where lived in an apartment close to Columbia and St Patrick's Cathedral, sketches the milieu –

The pastry shop's abuzz

with crazy George and filthy graffiti

but the peacocks are strutting across the way

and the sumptuous cathedral gives

the open –air banter a reason to deepen:

build structures inside the mind it tells

the languorous talkers, to rival the ones outside!

And the book closes with a poem about the park itself, famous for the cherry trees sent there by the Japanese people in 1912 so New York too could properly celebrate the coming of spring. This poem acts as a manifesto for her sense of self and the direction of the life she finds often to be so difficult; she might struggle with her mental health but she is a fighter –

At least I've got by pumping heart

some rules of conduct: refuse to choose

between turning pages and turning heads

though the stubborn dine alone. Get over

'getting over': dark clouds don't fade

but drift with ever deeper colours

('Sakura Park')

Yes, Wetzton's most successful work is often like 'Sex and the City' – but with dazzling prosody and a ravishing ease of diction and idiom. There are the poems you would hope for from a Manhattanite...poems about cinema, opera, cafes, theatre, smoking, a be-sweatered dachshund on the pavement, therapy of course, and the challenge of being an intellectual woman in a world where that is not necessarily an advantage – where she sees how her search for love is not going to be easy –

Face the facts;

go on this way and you'll soon come to harm.

The world's most famous scholars wander down

the most appalling alleyways in town,
a blond and busty airhead on each arm.

There is an inner motor known as lust
that makes a man of learning walk a mile
to gratify his raging senses while
the woman he can talk to gathers dust.

('Love and Work')

This might sound very like Dorothy Parker but with Wetzteon the wise cracking is
from a poet who is only brittle intermittently –

I crave, I long for transforming love

as surely as leaves need water and mouths seek bread.

But I also fear the cold changes

that lie in wait and threaten to turn

moons of honey to pools of molasses

('On Leaving the Bachelorette Brunch')

In this poem as in 'Sakura Park' her solution to the pain of her emotional dilemmas is
the presence of (even in New York) of nature, of life broader than our personal
battles: the final lines of each conjure up the optimism she found in the details of the
ordinary – 'But look at the birds' and –

....meanwhile's far from nothing

the humming moment, the rustle of cherry trees.

('Sakura Park')

And maybe one of the most illuminating poems in the book is 'At the Zen Mountain Monastery' where she concludes the difficulties of her life and her reality have to be accepted –

they are my tortures;

I want them raucous and I want them near

like howling pets I nonetheless adore

and holler adamant instructions to –

sprint, mad ambition! scavenge, hopeless love

that begs requital! – on our evening stroll

down Broadway and up West End Avenue.

And maybe as at the end of 'Thirty -Three' she knows her art depends on her failure:

The splendour of all her wounds waiting to happen

entered her and she wrote a story:

'I summon hunger and risk, those lovely

scattershot graces,' was the way it began.

It is a complex book, full of light (even 'The Long Run' her wonderful elegy for her beloved father and her 9/11 poem 'A Trampoline in Wayne' are optimistic) as well as

dark, and at the end you feel there will be a lifetime, a career of polished, witty, passionate books to follow. But sadly that was not to be. All that did follow is *Silver Roses*, a posthumous collection with a poignant forward by Grace Schulman. The book seems to be made up of poems about unexpected happiness, an affair which seems after all to be the One – in ‘Halt!’ she asks –

And who’s this in the mirror with
her willow cabin swept out to sea?
I must face my fate like Estragon, asking
what do we do now, now that we are happy?

Of course for Wetzteon the answer is she kept on writing poems. Mistress of prosody that she is, the poems follow the same accomplished pattern of displays of form and meter, and the literary connections (‘Septimus’, ‘Nightingales’, ‘A New Look at Alexander Pope’s “Rape of the Lock” ’, ‘Freely from Wyatt’) mingle with the constant Wetzteon New York idiomatic ease –

I sat on the subway sipping latte,
reading a short history of ruins...

And so, to the unthumbed cookbooks,
to the lavender lipstick bought
in a you-must-change-your-life frenzy,

a gentle *not yet*: this caffeine high,
this madcap tribute to Hepburn’s ghost

(‘Ruins’)

Ah, the reader is tempted to think – is this woman who has had such a fight with life, who has ‘always lived in the present tensely’ (‘Midsummer Night’s Swing’), going to have to settle for getting what she wanted? Is not going to have to make do with what she had in ‘Love and Work’ most dreaded – ‘a crowded bookcase and an empty bed’? Yes; in these poems it seems so, even in the very last stanza of the last poem in the collection -

and I am trying to
fathom the way I got from there to here,
the joy that snuck up when I’d sworn off joy;
we’ve made a sterling start, we’ve got a plan

(‘Silver Roses’)

But we know no more than that the three year romance ended, and for Rachel life became unendurable that Christmas 2009. It seems asking too much to weigh this collection against the others; of course it is a fragment, organised and edited by someone other than the poet. We have no idea what she would have published as her fourth collection if she had survived that crisis. But it is a worthwhile book full of good poems. Up to a point it completes the picture for us. Anyone familiar with her earlier books will find in this collection the final motifs in the pattern of her work.

She put up a mighty struggle to be happy but was defeated. And she gave a full account of that struggle, of her wonderfully sophisticated New York life with all its joys, as well as her mental health issues and frequent unhappiness. Her candour and wit are rare; her skill and daring with formal technique mean that the chaos and flux of her life are offered to the reader both tempered and clarified.

If you want more of an introduction to her work try Adam Kirsch’s lovely essay ‘Not Quite’ on the Poetry Foundation site where he calls her ‘her generation’s best love poet’...an accolade which provokes some conflict...read the comments...Rachel herself would laugh, I think. I also tend to agree with him. Love poets are thin on the

ground these days for some reason – nice, anyway, to read a row about whether or not a contemporary poet is a great love poet. Also worth reading is a very good essay by Mark Halliday, originally published in *Pleiades* and now available on Poetry website, where he discusses *Silver Roses* and *Sakura Park* in close detail.

There are many other on-line tributes from friends and colleagues, and of course the obituaries – she seems to have been a much admired and respected teacher and mentor as well as a beloved friend. She worked as a waitress in London for a summer when she was 19, and sometimes wrote on English subjects – Ruskin, Pemberley, even an homage to Eddie Izzard! I am sure, given the influences she had chosen, she would have liked to have a readership here.