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Three Fine Poetry Books from the (almost) West The Illustrated Statue of Liberty

by Bruce Rice

Regina, SK: Coteau Books, 2003, ISBN 1-55050-268-9, 108 pp., \$12.95 paper.

OR

by Tonja Gunvaldsen Klaassen

London, ON: Brick Books, 2003, ISBN 1-894078-27-6, 80 pp., \$15.00 paper.

with wax

by Derek Beaulieu

Toronto, ON: Coach House Books, 2003, ISBN 1-55245-118-6, 96 pp., \$16.95 paper.

Bruce Rice, of Regina, begins in the halls of madness, the asylums he has glimpsed through his father's telling or through his own read experiences. Rice writes in "My Days with Young Christian Players": "Stories come to me now, not the whole truth, but true enough:" (5)

Starting in these other worlds Rice maintains his position at the edges and leads us through tough and telling terrain. Rice's syntax is straight ahead, but what's said is always fresh, engaging and surprising. When he starts from the place of madness, even the ordinary becomes extraordinary. We go with the speaker and his father to a psychiatric hospital in the mid-sixties: "beds so close they blocked our way like cast iron spiders--white ones found in a cave when the light falls on them. I could see through rows of rifle-slit windows in one sullen door after another" (4).

We meet odd characters: Jerry the Giant, Doug the Twirler, Jake who digs. There is sterilization, LSD, suicide-survivors, a "She" who communicates with angels and receives debilitating shock treatments. Rice explores this realm of devastation in verse and prose poem forms. The shifts are seamless and never feel self-conscious. The reader is immediately aware that Rice is a poet of potent and unexpected thought, who inhabits the level of consciousness beneath the surfaces of things.

In the section from which the book's title is taken, Rice probes the physical reality of the Statue of Liberty, Rice family ancestry, and the history of immigrants landing at Ellis Island. This is no section for rushing through; there is no simple narrative and no easy epiphany. The complexity of ideas and poetic strategies slows the reader, who must make an effort to go at least halfway to engage the work. Beginning here Rice also includes historic stereoscopic images and photographs--including one of Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill--interesting for their

quaintness and graphic quality, but they also draw attention to the selection and framing involved in observation and depiction. Hence the photography here inspires, and also parallels poetic rendering.

Rice writes: "The heart travels blindly and mostly alone. What can we know? Truth is not history" (40). Rice is mirroring to us, while drawing our attention to his role as documentarian and interpreter. This section, in trying to capture the fleeting, deals with transience. From "Improvisation on Mr. Foster's New York Standard Guide":

Slowly your hands passed over me like rough cloth; the floor
creaked in one room, then another; all through the house the
boards were trying to remember some gesture or weight. (40)

In the third section, "Learn to Paint," and the poem of the same name, Rice writes:

I was wrong
Light will not wait.
This hour, this exhaustion
Is the space you have made for attention.
It must be pulled, dragged ahead
By what you do not know. (60)

And in this half-blind striving--an act of moving from confinement to liberty--perhaps we are reaching toward depth of understanding and sometimes transcendence. The poet is engaged in a kind of foraging. There are angels and heavens coexisting with madness, erasure (eradication), and hell; and with the in-between we inhabit.

At the end, speaking of heaven's illumination, Rice writes: "It would be thought a grace to be human, to be close to life as we are now" (98). This is the thread through this work--to be human is to be in a state of grace. The recognition of this is the problem, as Rice reminds us.

* * *

Nearing the end of the last poem in Tonja Gunvaldsen Klaassen's *ÖR*, the poet writes:

in this wilder territory
our tongues lack maps
teeth cracking under silver
filigree--entry signs: uprooted words . . . (72)

This excerpt might well be taken as a summary or key to what's been encountered in this remarkable book. By the time we arrive at these words, we have travelled through that "wilder territory." The journey has taken the mode

required in encountering a wild or strange terrain--not a linear plodding, but a probing and wandering, detouring and forging ahead, leaping and standing still. We have experienced the delicacy of "silver filigree," and the hard elements that can crack our teeth. The speaking tongue of the work (our tongues), lacking maps, has not encountered the predictable, the worn path, but has continually savoured surprising turns of word, sound and image. And indeed, through her astute, sonically sensitive ear, Klaassen has uprooted words to show us where they can reach. In short, *ÖR* is a wonder of surprise and a subtle linguistic tour de force.

The book is divided into seven sections by a graphic marker (but with no titles or numbers) that indicates slight changes of pace or poetic locus. The first locus is that of birth--perhaps of the poet and another--"My palms are lined with what / / proof I have of birth--" (11). From this point the reader is borne into a beautifully sonorous terrain. Lend an ear and eye: "she kept violets--quiet and resigned" (17); "O omniscient, omnivorous, oneiric bear" (68).

Klaassen, who spent her poetically formative years in Saskatoon and now lives in Halifax, entices the reader with language and rhythm, precision of word and line, through an imagi-scape in verse or prose poem, to revel in the elemental--in fables, tales, keen observances and poignant reflections. The personal is evident here, but the movement is outward into the natural world, revealing the web of existence we so often lose sight of. Yet the numinous, mystical, dream-like, elusive force of that world is also woven in. For example, in the poem "Under," spoken from the perspective of a child who is ill:

From the pot-bottom, fork-scrapes rise, descry
a face

translated to antlered moon.

Solstice of branches, scratches and bronchial tubes. (12)

Along with the word-music in these poems, what I admire greatly is the refusal of closure, the continual opening of the poem. This is induced I think from the poet's sense of wonder, but also from the "leaping" method Klaassen uses as the propelling impetus in the poems. Sound and association evidently lead thought and image and create the unpredictability that freshens and stretches the narrative; and they infuse a sense of mystery to each piece. These poems do not give themselves away like confection. They never weary the reader with predictability; they leave something new to discover or rediscover with each reading.

Klaassen is also adventurous with form, seeming to let the poem choose its shape. Occasionally verse opens into the realm of the prose poem, in such as "Notes: Clara Schumann," or "In the Woods."

The poet's wilderness includes that close-to-home world of child care, the harsh world of hospitals, needles, illnesses:

How many stern nurses
plunging needles of poisons into your fat little leg
while I clamour the bells? (47)

Or it may include more distant locales. In the third section of the book--set in a tropical zone--in "Latitude," a triptych, we find a snorkeler: "My hair and weeds, eels, a sarong untied in a flash, fringed sickle of the barracuda" (34) And later in the same piece: "a metamorphosis of dorsal fins, hungry lungs, lips, valves, striped vibrations of sound drowned in light, a white net dragging a wave, a bare foot, embryonic and blue-veined, mauve-grey boats trailing ropes and odes" (36). I'll state the obvious and say that operative here is an extraordinary ear and eye.

Exotic and sensuous are words I would attach to Klaassen's poems. Her poems, like her own words, find the terrifying and the beautiful at once: "Again the Bear: this time in doublet, diamonds in his fur" (67). Yes, you've got to watch out, in her "wilder territory," for both terror and transcendence.

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with wax by Derek Beaulieu presents itself as a mystery to the "conventional" reader who starts at the beginning. That reader, willing to venture into the text without the benefit of the end-notes discovers an often a-syntactic language that seems to draw attention to its surface, while deflecting absolute meaning. The poems--actually prose poems--are often juxtaposed with visual images which tilt toward concrete poetry, but offer only traces of something decipherable or imagistic.

Not only that, but the work is laden with strange terms--*mondmilch*, *gours*, *aurochs*. Of course, the dedicated reader will reach for his or her dictionary and so may begin to get clues to the origin and effort of this work.

Without the end-notes (which I won't reveal here--the way a bad movie reviewer tells the plot), the reader begins to get a sense that Calgary poet Derek Beaulieu is drawing to the foreground the poem's production, with and without attendant blemishes. Hence the work is often inconclusive in terms of what we've received as "normal" in the lyric sense of the word.

Maybe there's a hint here early in the book in part IV of "Rotunda":

the only corruption the reader growing weary
worthy observe performative poetics as noble
relations between us & this volume (14)

And near the end:

. . . it requires they did not forget
formalized legibility

this quality of legibility is difficult to explain

(& not generally understood since facts are not always type) (84)

Beaulieu's work slides, shifts and touches base with the "language" writers, the visual poets, and the experimentalists he's often featured in his now retired House Press publications. In *with wax* he's realizing his own voice, which operates with an insistence given to subtlety and sleight of hand with meaning. But it is a feint that keeps consistency with the work's source locale and material. It is a work that invites a meditation and then a probing outside the text and the currency of that text, to begin to assemble a full "meaning." It is enjoyable because it is a text which, while seeming to turn inward, actually invites the reader to explore outside the text, and then to bring those discoveries back into the reading. In that sense it is an interactive text--the kind that rewards effort.

The physical appearance of this book is modest, understated, but there's a serious mind at work within its pages. And if we think about wax, its varied forms and uses, we begin to get a sense of the malleability and viscosity of Derek Beaulieu's intriguing poetic exploration.

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