



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Swoon* by Victoria Redel

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Source: *Harvard Review*, No. 26 (2004), pp. 221-223

Published by: Harvard Review

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27568906>

Accessed: 03-01-2022 13:46 UTC

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They meet in 1981 when a photography class she is teaching in Rockport, Maine, goes on the road in search of subjects. "On the road to Owl's Head lighthouse . . . we saw it . . . It was mysterious in its excess. It was as if a magnet had dragged several hotels, a waterfront, and a whole town up or down the coast to this spot." She keeps returning, sometimes with a friend or a tape recorder, to snatch up more hood ornaments, hat blocks, gas caps, and ancient golf balls. Over time, she mines the owner's history as well as his property. But she refrains from mere clinical labels to explain his obsessions, for she feels a kinship with him. The mutual affection and respect between this "city girl" and the quiet but highly-opinionated widower is made clear in the conversation they have in the chapter called "Transcription." After twenty years of one-way visits, Purcell finally shows Buckminster around her Boston studio, and he pronounces it "absolutely amazing."

Purcell writes in the first chapter: "It will take the length of this book to explain the ways in which this love manifests itself." The author's artistic vision began at a young age, perhaps as a reaction to an academic father who always addressed his children with the question "Where is your book?" When she showed him her termite-eaten book piece, he tried to extract factual meaning from the remaining text. She, on the other hand, had stuffed the holes with butterfly wings, inspired by the theme of regeneration inherent in three of the remaining words, *père et fils*.

Purcell's prose is as precise as her vision. She addresses potentially heavy subjects like aesthetic theory with a lightness of style, and her synapse-hops of delight in intuitive connection are contagious. After meditating on a piece displaying "the nature of *Cat*," she begins with a porous stone cat. She eventually positions a worm-bored shell, a piece of worm-eaten bread from World War I, and a bit of accordion next to it. Why? "The differences between wood and stone, bread, shell, and cat melt away because they are now together as *Things that have Holes*."

At five by eight inches, the book is too small to do justice to the photo reproductions in the lengthy but important "Notes" section. Still, it is a must for found-object fetishists, connoisseurs of surreal roadside discoveries, and family humanists of all generations.

—Marcia Deihl

Swoon by Victoria Redel, University of Chicago Press, 2003, \$14.00 paper, ISBN 0226706133.

The title of Victoria Redel's delicious and provoking new volume well evokes the flushed, brainy business of these poems. Is the title a command

to the reader—and can one be commanded to swoon? Does it name the action of the poems themselves, the poet's submission to the "whole heartbreaking deal" of her life? The answer, of course, is both. In *Swoon*, the ravishing world as perceived by this poet is transferred to the reader in piercing, expert strokes.

The poems of *Swoon* find their poet-speakers at the threshold of riveting oppositions. In the opening poem, the speaker is "scolded" off her arty lily pad by an angry Anna Akhmatova:

*With what shame I sank off the lily pad
and swam to her on the muddy littered bank.
[. . .]
Wake up, girl, she says, wagging at me my own strappy sandals.*

Art, then, must not be separated from life, but must be coincident with it—nagging mothers, strappy sandals, muddy banks, and all. The reward for embracing the world is the ambiguous bodily thrill of this poem's last line: "*Such noises I heard then, noises to wither my creamed and polished heart.*"

Much of *Swoon* is concerned with the erotic, yet it is not so much these intimacies as their location in a detailed and various universe that makes these poems striking. The bluntly titled "Where We Fuck" is less concerned with its titular act than with the linguistic pleasure of listing and the speaker's associations with the places she names: "Already I am thinking Potsdam. Do the streets twist? / And in Berlin? Do they lead / /back past the hotel clerk who lets the phone just ring?" Later in this poem, this geographical querying shifts to a naming of the lover's geography ("You are street and canal and blind alley"), and finally to sexual command itself "Rub way in. Come out all red."

Sensuous as these poems are, it is Redel's deployment of structure and address that secure their seductive power. In "Pavane", a tone of intimate indulgence sweeps the poem along through its seemingly nonsensical elements: "The Marquis, the Marais, or the whole thing. Who wouldn't take warning in your fingers." Here linguistic and bodily texture are pleasantly if dangerously dizzied, indistinguishable.

Equally ensnaring are the poems of the second part of *Swoon*, which deal with the precarious dynamics of motherhood. Here it is the poet's sons who are quoted in the opening poem and, unlike Akhmatova, appear throughout. Yet Redel applies the same unpredictable strategies of rhetorical structure and address to this set of subjects. A trip to Costco becomes a self-enacting *ars poetica*; the speaker-poet vows to include the homely in her poems even as these become the fabric of the poem itself—"Dunkaroos," "cheddar goldfish," the "quarter-size violin" her child uses at a lesson.

Other poems resemble eerie fables, or operate by elaborate and intricately entwined metaphors, as when, gorgeously, violins appear to grow on the tree that will provide wood for them. Whatever her rhetorical gambit, Redel is not afraid to trace out the ungraceful implications of a mother's dilemmas. In "Play," a speaker declares "my happiness is like my friend's infant son napping in the stroller," but when the child becomes fitful and is held struggling by his mother, the speaker allows her metaphor to become troubled and doubled-up: "I'll be there crashed against my own sharp corners."

Even those poems that are largely narrative are tweaked and torqued by unusual modes of address or pointed last lines. In "Stridor," an account of a child's near-death is made disorienting by an opening stanza which calls into question the poem's truthfulness, and by a jarring questioning mode. These effects force the reader into the speaker's uncertain perspective while setting up the devastating flatness of the final non-question: "Who is ready to boast about the living to the living."

The book ends with a series of prose poems exploring fraught but seemingly singular aspects of womanhood. The most concentrated run of poems in the book, these should also be the most compelling, but since variety is here set aside for more pointed inquiry, these seem less beguiling than what precedes them. Yet if the last section of *Swoon* represents a departure in technique, it perhaps presages the ongoingness of Redel's mission to meet the changing world head-on, to record and remake these encounters in art.

—Joyelle McSweeney

My Mojave by Donald Revell, Alice James Books, 2003, \$13.95 paper, ISBN 1882295404.

In an interview for the *American Poetry Review*, Donald Revell says that, "It was a modernist fantasy that order could somehow be imposed on reality," and later, in the same interview, that "poetry is a vehicle by which we hope, nearly, to arrive at reality." Yet teasing out the boundaries of reality is a quest for Revell, and his starting point is the particular moment. In one of the lyrics in his new collection, *My Mojave*, Revell writes, "All days take instruction from accident." But this focus on the particular is accompanied by a restless desire for transcendence and revelation. Revell is both fascinated and frustrated by the seeming impenetrability and elusiveness of what he calls "reality"; in one lyric, he states flatly, "I want to go to the invisible and see it," and in another he laments that "every blessed thing is elusive."