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Claire Gaskin, *Paperweight*

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One can see why Gaskin chose ‘paperweight’ to be the title poem: it gathers and illuminates so many of the collection’s concerns. In it, she sits in a café, drinking tea and reading Virginia Woolf, one eye on the erotically-edged behaviour of the staff and their customers (“her orange-singlet breasts / rest on the laminex / she leans forward as he leans back”). Her mood, however, is not governed just by this awareness (“the body must be heard / says Cixous”), but also by her father’s death. The relation between the two is that her father, as she explained in a recent *Australian Poetry Journal* interview, was “very right-wing fundamentalist Catholic. Still confiscated, up until he died, books off my mother if they had sex scenes in them.” She has, in other words, two opposing gravities to negotiate, neither of which lead neatly to resolution. There is also a specific tension connected with writing: “the dead”, she says, “are useful as paperweights”, i.e. they sit on papers – and, presumably, writing pads – and prevent one from using them. Because this was the father, she explained in the same interview, who confiscated any books he disapproved of: “I’d bring a certain book, and if it was left of centre, any book that was left of centre, it would disappear. And he did that right up until I was an adult and even when I was an adult.” So there are two anxieties: how to write freely, and how to negotiate the world of attraction – and they are both shadowed by the one difficult absence. The fact that they are both also versions of the desire to “be one’s own person”, explains why she is reading the Woolf with such focus: “who say(s) it’s not good to work from anger or defence / so long as you write what you wish to write / she says / for another six pages while my vegetables get hot in the car”. Later in the book, in a collection of aphorisms, she writes, “I trust my doubt. I don’t write for justice or justification but to keep free”, and, in the light of her comments about her father, one can see why she might say this. It may seem unexceptionable, but “writing to keep free” is a specific and slightly unusual motivation. Gaskin is responding to a negative prompt – not writing to explore something, or play, or sing – but as an act of resistance, or escape. The implication is that one wouldn’t be free if one didn’t write, that without it the forces represented by the paperweight might prevail. As a writer, Gaskin is too self-aware to suggest that her articulations gain any permanent victories – that because one has written, one has solved. It is the process itself that is liberating. Still, one is left with the suggestion that the writing at least holds these forces in balance – thus allowing her to proceed – even if she also knows that to the extent that her father lives on in her, she too becomes something of a paperweight:

my heart a paperweight
on a fiction of self-possession(.)

This is very much a poetry of the interior life, and Gaskin’s strongest suit lies in her ability to articulate its weight and strangeness. This is the point at which her attention is most finely tuned, and, one feels, the site at which she conceives the poetic to dwell: poetry is achieved when one has articulated one’s interiorities and their transitions in all their oneiric

unexpectedness. Because of this, the single phrase or idea is her natural unit – rhythmically, emotionally and imaginatively – sometimes as a single line, sometimes as two or three:

we break a choir of promises quietly ('value')

devouring photos of food we make our homes homeless ('dreaming of the dreamer')

If these units cohere around well-defined gravities, as in 'paperweight', or perhaps a single mood or object – her dejection after an argument in 'stubborn beauty', or the inflexibility of her parents' beliefs in 'infallibility' – then each module of resonance will dream its way with relative ease towards the constellation of the poem. This doesn't always happen, however, and when it doesn't, one can find oneself missing that space, largely absent in this poetic, in which the reader is invited to share understandings derived from the material of the poem. 'Macbeth' is a poem about the corruption of the spirit after one has committed a wrong. The exact nature of the wrong isn't made clear, because that isn't Gaskin's focus: it is, rather, the feeling the wrong has induced. The problem is, however, that without knowing what occasioned this guilt, the reader has little stake in it:

my standing heart opens the door of ribs
come what come return
the grace of a glass to hold water

time and the embrace runs through the roughest night
an hour in front of the flower clock

By the time she writes, a little further down,

what do you bring from old notebooks to the broken line of your life
she stands in the corner holding three lemons
the cat paw rain unsheafs its claws

one is starting to look for some means by which the speaker might emerge from her self-absorption, and move beyond the elaboration of metaphor for a feeling one cannot oneself weigh. Without that, she is simply repeating herself – though eloquently enough – and at some point, the reader will refuse to follow. This is not simply an issue with Gaskin: it is a problem with all poetry – with some of the styles derived from surrealism, for example – which focuses so intently on the interior life that it cuts itself off from the world it had come from. It is a problem for the poem's voice, which risks being trapped in its inwardness, and for the reader, who, rather than being invited to participate in the poem, is asked to stand to one side as a witness.

Some of this is a function of her accretive style. "(W)riting face down", she says, in *infallibility* (14), "the only sense is collage", and Gaskin's style might be described as a collage of interiorities. In collage, there are rarely either overarching meanings, or overt interactions between the individual elements: it is an inherently paratactical mode, which seeks out moments and images, and strings them together as islets of awareness – but which does not subtend beyond that into a generalised space (which is not to say, when working well, that they don't extrude their filaments into a satisfying organism). Rather than interacting, the elements in a collage simply accumulate, as memory and attention interrupt themselves into phrases worth seizing on. Between them there is seepage and suggestiveness, but they do not aspire to a field of common understandings in which agency is possible.

There are strengths in such poetry: one can go straight to the strangeness of things if one jettisons the encumbrance of contexts. But there are also losses: contexts are what we live in, and if one deletes them, one also removes the stages in which choices can be made. Gaskin risks, for instance, not being able to lead her thoughtful feminism out of its archive of resistant observations into a space where decisions and actions are implied and perhaps even necessary. The book's first poem, 'value', begins:

looking into people's back yards from the train window
I fell backwards onto obscurity

the writing is witness to that
it was safer between destinations

This is, in effect, an announcement that we will be encountering a poetry of the texture of memories: that it will be sited one step back from the point at which one engages with events. The problem with this is that memories do not exist by themselves. They are functions of the world they have been sifted from, and which, finally, they are defined by. One can dwell in them: they can be compelling and even addictive. But we cannot live in them permanently, and neither can the poem – not without the risk of self-absorption. Ultimately, meanings are joint constructions, and publication is an invitation to a public. Without inflecting her beautifully-weighted feelings back towards the world and the reader, they risk an element of solipsism, as if the poet were their one true reader. Gaskin is a real talent: most poets never really articulate their interior lives, and few do it as well as Gaskin does. But integrity is a subtle trap for a writer. It feels as if it should be enough – damn it all, it costs enough – particularly when, as with Gaskin, its pursuit *is* one's act of resistance. But even integrity is only a starting-point: a place from which one's gestures can begin.

There is achievement here: one might cite "a liberty of flowers", "just do the best you can", "stubborn beauty" and the title poem itself. But having nurtured an attentiveness, and found a way to articulate it, there is still the question of what to do with those hard-won meditations – with exactly what the relationship is going to be between the realist and non-realist components in her work.

WORKS CITED

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