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## From Rhymed Lines to Mongrel Tongues

X. J. KENNEDY ISN'T JUST A POET—HE'S A POET EMERITUS, or so claimed R. S. Gwynn, holding a laurel wreath aloft over Kennedy's head at the 2017 West Chester Poetry Conference. With dozens of poetry collections, textbooks, edited works and volumes of light and children's verse behind him, Kennedy has certainly earned the title—and nowhere does he seem more emeritus than in the poems of *That Swing*.<sup>1</sup> Here, in Kennedy's signature combination of storytelling, formal nimbleness, and comic moments mixed with reverie and melancholy, we find the poet assessing the past and looking out on a future beyond his own lifetime. "Lonesome George," the poem that opens the book, is typical of the poems in the collection in contemplating both death and posterity. The titular George is a giant tortoise kept penned in the Galapagos Islands, lonesome because "No mate for him exists. / Last one of his subspecies . . ." As Kennedy's aging speaker looks on, he feels a kind of kinship with the stoically enduring animal:

For a long moment we bind  
sympathetic looks,  
we holdouts of our kind,  
like rhymed lines, printed books.

The section in which "Lonesome George" appears is called "Recollections," but the poems in the section look forward more than they look back. They gaze, particularly, at artistic posterity. Another poem in the section, "My Mother Consigns to the Flames My Trove of Comic Books," for example, begins with the burning of Superman and Batman, with the Human Torch sizzling like bacon—and ends in a lament for the priceless, lost archive. "How can we know which art / The whimsical future will decide to cherish?"

The second section of *That Swing*, "Saints and Others," turns from personal memories to figures drawn from church history and the literary canon, but the themes of death and postmortem fate remain the same. The next two sections, "Versions" and "Diversions," offer loose translations and light verse, respectively—and Kennedy finds ways to relate both to his principal themes. His translations include a version

<sup>1</sup> THAT SWING, by X. J. Kennedy. Johns Hopkins University Press. \$19.95p.

of Robert Desnos's immensely moving "Last Poem," found in the French poet's effects as he lay dying in a German concentration camp. An address to Desnos's wife, it speaks of the end of life and of the endurance of love in memory:

I'm left a shade among the shades.  
 A hundred times more shade than shade,  
 A shade cast time and time again  
 Into your sun-transfigured life.

The transition from poems like this to the light verse of "Diversions" is jarring, but not unwelcome—rather like the moment *A Winter's Tale* transforms from tragic to comic with the famous "Exit pursued by a bear." The titular diversions consist of attempts to escape from merciless time: a poem in praise of a broken clock, a poem about a man who prolonged his undergraduate experience for 12 years. We're in Arcadia, here, with death and decay held momentarily at bay.

*That Swing* ends with sections titled "Easter" and "Last Acts." The first deals with rebirths of various kinds, including, in "Invitation to the Dance," an impromptu dance party at an assisted living facility, led by one Mabel O'Lannihan, an indomitable Amazon emerita if ever there was one. The final section offers us poems about characters facing death while clinging to some semblance of control over events. In "Departure," for example, we find an old woman who has carefully planned her suicide, bringing her affairs and correspondence to a close but making one final error by "looking in the mirror as she died":

And though the gunshot had been carefully placed  
 It struck her that to lie there found by men,  
 The careful powder on her face defaced,  
 Would violate at last her long-kept pride,  
 But there was no more she could do just then.

The woman gives us something like an epitome of the book as a whole: *That Swing* is, in the final analysis, a volume in which the poet emeritus assesses his own fastidious art, and weighs what it can and cannot do in the face of mortality.

Unlike X. J. Kennedy, whose *That Swing* peers into the dark with uncharacteristic frequency, Charles Simic is the kind of poet who has long since set up housekeeping in the dark existential abyss. His latest collection, *Scrabbled in the Dark*,<sup>2</sup> contains poems in his established idiom: short, eerie pieces rich with image and stingy with discursive explanation—poems in which the world appears uncanny and, for the most part, vaguely menacing. The images are typical of Simic: injured flies,

<sup>2</sup> SCRIBBLED IN THE DARK, by Charles Simic. Ecco. \$22.99.

threadbare gypsies, bare light bulbs hanging over rooms equally bare, an actor “unable to recall his lines / At the end of some tragic farce.” The four parts into which the book is broken are similar in tone, form, and imagery, but one senses a different emphasis in each section, perhaps something arrived at more through the poet’s intuition than any schematic plan. “Illegible Scribble” gives us something like a miniature poetics for the opening section:

O barbed wire of crossed-out words  
 Crown of thorns,  
 Camp meeting of dead wall reveries,  
 Spilled worry beads,  
 Fortune teller’s coffee dregs,  
 My footholds in the abyss.

The scribbled-over phrase, here, comes tantalizingly close to being readable but can’t quite render up a definitive meaning. The shape, though, suggests images redolent of both violence and significance: footholds for the mind, but nothing more. This is true of many of the poems in the section, which give startling, memorable mental pictures, but which stop short of becoming decodable, resisting paraphrase. The overall effect is of a world always hovering just on the far side of intelligibility: Simic’s roots in Surrealism run deep, and (thankfully) he has never abandoned them.

The second section of *Scribbled in the Dark* gives us wintery landscapes and situations of political injustice and moral urgency. Simic makes good use of the juxtaposition of incongruous images, placing, for example, a political prisoner with electrical wires secured to his hands into a shop window’s Christmas display. This poem, “The Night and the Cold,” is at its core a version of Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts,” stressing our banal complicity in a world of troubles. The image of the wire-holding prisoner, familiar from Abu Ghraib prison during Bush’s war in Iraq, is unusual among these poems in connecting to a particular historical context. Simic’s political vision usually shies away from specifics, relying instead on a perennial dark sense of human nature. “The innocent get slaughtered,” he writes in “Roadhouse,” “While some guy on TV makes excuses.” He comes by his cynicism honestly, though: his childhood of horrors in war-torn Yugoslavia give him every reason to doubt the innate goodness of humanity.

For all of the darkness in his view of the world, Simic remains quite capable of delight, as we see in the poems of the third and fourth sections of *Scribbled in the Dark*. Section three eroticizes Simic’s love of enigma, as in “My Goddess,” where the narrator speaks to a woman he appears to have lived with for many years. After describing their long-established domestic scene, he calls out to her as “Diane—or whatever you call yourself” and suggesting she find “a pair of dark glasses / You

could wear in bed for me.” He knows her well and loves her: but part of what he loves is the idea that she’ll act the part of the mysterious stranger, unknowable and unnamed behind her sunglasses. The final section shows us the possibility of human companionship in an alienating universe resistant to our attempts to interpret it. In “Night Owls,” for example, he calls out to all the “addicts of introspection,” using their visions as burglars’ tools “to pick the locks of the universe’s mysteries.” Alone with their speculations and haunted dreams, they form a kind of community. “Fellow sufferers, wretches like me,” he declaims, “Let’s all get some shuteye if we can.”

One could be forgiven for thinking that some of the poems in Alan Felsenthal’s confident debut collection, *Lowly*,<sup>3</sup> belong in a book like *Scribbled in the Dark*. Were one to meet Felsenthal’s “El Dorado” running wild in the deserts of Arabia, one might instantly scream out “Simic!”:

A firefly committed to the orphanage  
the night I graduated  
and prayed for the petite kindness  
unknown to an aiming hand  
inside a shoe.

The imagery, the tone, the darkly comic sense of a violent world devoid of divine justice: it all seems to come out of the Simic playbook. But this sort of poetry doesn’t represent the heart of Felsenthal’s book, which is in essence an extended rumination, over many poems, on the theme of connecting with one’s ancestors through rituals connected with death and remembrance.

Near the beginning of *Lowly*, Felsenthal introduces the idea of the fear of forgetting. He shows us, in “Argo,” a ship in arctic waters: “The half of her you can see / is the present tense,” he writes, “Her wake is words.” We are borne forward by this ship, dependent for our safety on the submerged half that represents the past. Later, we’re told that “The half you cannot see was stolen” and hear of ancestors who slept through the voyage, remembering little. The narrative, like that of so many of the poems of *Lowly*, is oblique, cryptic even. But—also like other poems in the book—it hints at ancestral immigrants, possibly refugees, who passed on their experiences only partially, perhaps too scarred or exhausted by the events of their lives to commemorate them properly.

Felsenthal takes us on journeys to the land of the dead and to funerals where community is forged between the living and the dead. In “Alternative Zoo,” for example, he shows us how a “. . . whole family / produced tears together, not as a trick or decorative device but to pacify / the soul leaving the house.” He shows us, too, the sacredness of burial places, even to those who have no idea who lies there:

<sup>3</sup> *LOWLY*, by Alan Felsenthal. Ugly Duckling Presse. \$15.00p.

If a nomad  
had to pass the gravesite of another tribe, he  
might repair a plot by adding stones.  
How did he know whose

it was wasn't a question he asked.

The very idea of connection with the past, and with the common humanity, is sacred, even when the particulars of history and identity are missing.

When Felsenthal does give us historical particulars, they come largely from the Jewish tradition: the pages of *Lowly* are populated with figures like Lot's wife, King David playing his lyre, Jonah in the belly of the whale, and Abraham walking Isaac to the place of sacrifice. Sometimes he hints at family involvement in the darkest chapters of the Jewish experience, as in "The Problem of Rhyme." Here it is the phonetic resemblance of words, rather than ordinary narrative development, that connects us to the past—a hint, perhaps, that such matters must be approached aslant:

The problem of rhyme is not  
what grandmother spoke  
about when she talked  
in her German accent.  
What she meant,  
the problem of Rhine,  
sounded more like rime  
frosting the banks.

The "problem of Rhine," we soon learn, is the problem of the Holocaust, which drove the grandmother from her home. Again, the difficulty of transmitting this knowledge comes to the fore, this time in an ancestor's stutter:

"My mother  
grew this stutter,"  
she sighed, "I could not  
understand it was words  
until she died.  
The problem with Rhine  
is no river here stays  
worthy of drowning.  
When the righteous  
leave a place, the place  
is diminished,

and a woman is finished  
 who does not know  
 it is her time to swim.

Perhaps ancestral memory is so important to Felsenthal because he is keenly aware of how fragile it is, how easy it is to let it slip in this age of distraction. As he writes in “Nothing Attacked Wanted to Be”: “Unknown, in Hebrew, means ‘not yet traumatic.’ / Like we’re all freed now, like, because of Wi-Fi we’re free of the Sphinx? / What, my Lord? Oh, nothing. This video.”

If Felsenthal fears distraction and forgetting, Airea D. Matthews fears self-deception—or so we can gather from her debut collection, the Yale Younger Poets Prize-winning *Simulacra*.<sup>4</sup> The book—a contender for strongest debut collection of the year—is formally audacious. Matthews packs it with lyric poetry, prose poems, and closet drama, as well as epistolary poems and their contemporary analog, poems composed of fictitious text messages. The poems of *Simulacra* treat the theme of addiction—not from the addict’s point of view, but from the point of view of the addict’s family. The poems are particularly powerful in revealing a well-meaning family’s complicity. They cast light on the willingness of families to enable destructive behavior and, especially, the urge to cover up violence and disorder, to put up a false front so as to convince the world, and themselves, that everything is somehow okay when it most decidedly is not.

In “Meeting Want,” the first of *Simulacra*’s three sections, Matthews shows us the grim reality of addiction in the poem “Hero(i)n,” in which we see a man reduced to “a naked beggar” who “shakes on his kitchen floor like / breccia in a rain stick, begging: *2 bird bags, 4 quarters, 1 gram?*” while his daughters “empty cupboards, offer open tin at his feet” crying for him to “*eat, eat.*” We also see a surreal transformation of the experience of an addict’s enabling family. In the prose poem “The Mine Owner’s Wife,” for example, we see a self-damaging man sitting at a well-laid table, deliberately cutting his tongue and bleeding over the china and crystal goblets, all while his wife acts as if nothing were wrong. “And this,” the poem says at the end, “every single night.” Another prose poem, “The Good Dentist’s Wife,” tells a twisted tale of codependency, in which a dentist derives strange satisfaction from extracting women’s teeth. His wife, wishing him to remain loyal to her, allows him to take her teeth, one by one over time, becoming dependent on seeing his pleasure in her increasing deformity. Near the end, a waitress approaches the couple at their anniversary dinner, and “the missus giggled in her palm, covering her mouth with her hands,” while “the good dentist eyed the waitress’ full, gap-tooth smile,” and “his familiar longing surfaced.” Matthews unearths something gothic in this dark tale, which touches on perversity, addiction, enabling behaviors, and infidelity, and juxtaposes

<sup>4</sup> SIMULACRA, by Airea D. Matthews. Yale University Press. \$45.00; \$20.00.

them against the uncannily innocent gesture of a girlish giggle demurely covered with a hand.

*Simulacra*'s second section, ". . . And Repeating," worries over whether addiction will be passed down from generation to generation—whether it is a pattern that will repeat, perhaps carried in one's DNA. One poem, "Rebel Opera," offers an astonishing image of how addiction dominates a family's life, even as they attempt to keep up a semblance of normality: it is structured as a play in which a mother and daughter sit inside the giant mouth of the addict husband and father, not sure whether to try to escape or pretend that nothing's wrong. This section of the book also introduces a series of poems consisting of imagined text messages exchanged between Matthews and Anne Sexton. "Talk to my poems," Sexton advised her daughter in a letter written before her suicide. Here, Matthews follows that advice, writing in response to texted lines from Sexton's "Flee on Your Donkey" and to lines from a Rimbaud poem Sexton used as her poem's epigraph. Sexton, famous as a confessional poet, makes a strange but compelling confessor for Matthews' revelations.

Matthews introduces a plethora of characters in "Who," the final section of her book. Drawn from history as well as from Greek and Egyptian mythology, they're all conscripted in various ways to serve Matthews' own themes. In "If My Late Grandmother Were Gertrude Stein," for example, Matthews writes of her family experience in the style of the famous modernist expat:

Old Crow. Liquor. Drink. Drunk. Girdle. Grits. Girt. Tea. Grit tea. Tea git. Get shaved. Shook. Shucked. Shit. Flour. Flower. Lard and swallow. . . . Down town dim. Slight dark. Old Arc. New Arc. New Ark. New work. Newark. Lark-fed. Corned bread. Bedfeather back. Sunday-shack church fat. Greased-gloved. Dust-rubbed. Cheap-heeled shoe.

The style travels a long distance from Paris to the hardscrabble world of midcentury African-American Newark. It's a strange trip, but an integral part of *Simulacra*, which treats addiction the way *The Waste Land* treats infertility: by refracting it through history, mythology, and fantasy. Like Eliot's poem, *Simulacra* is a shored-up set of fragments gesturing at a hoped-for act of healing that will make us whole.

Julian Talamantez Brolaski is, I say with some confidence, the only half-Native American, trans-male, country music singing student of Renaissance poetry writing today; and *Of Mongrelitude*,<sup>5</sup> his third collection, is as idiosyncratic as his background might suggest. It is a stylistically bold book, with debts to popular culture, Native American mythology, and the classics of English literature, as well as to the experimental tradition in American poetry. Like Brolaski's previous collection,

<sup>5</sup> OF MONGRELITUDE, by Julian Talamantez Brolaski. Wave Books. \$18.00p.

*Advice for Lovers*, it is also an emotionally engaging book, provided one is willing to dial into the formally challenging frequency in which it broadcasts.

When one inhabits an identity that is both marginal and poorly understood, one is forced into a kind of constant self-consciousness about that identity, and *Of Mongrelitude* offers moments of identity politics, both ethnicity-based (“when the guy at the bodega / complained about white ppl and gentrifications, you said me and my friend are native / I’m Suquamish, look it up”) and gender-specific (one poem recounts Brolaski’s difficulties in a restaurant that forbade him the use of both the men’s and women’s restrooms). There are other moments when we see Brolaski’s struggle with social isolation. Alienation is a persistent theme, as in “on loneliness,” which begins:

when the rains finally came, they were relentless  
the ground, unaccustomed to moisture  
after years of drought, was forced to reject  
the thing it craved the most

Too long a solitude, the poem argues in its images, renders us unable to accept love when it finally comes.

The clarity of the opening image of “on loneliness” is an exception in *Of Mongrelitude*, a book in which the subjects of the poems tend to recede behind the verbal surfaces. Syntax slides or shatters, and different types of diction collide such that Brolaski’s words tend to draw attention to themselves as words, pulling attention away from their referents much the way the planes, angles, and multiple points of view command more attention in Cubist paintings than do the guitars, bottles, or bodies glimpsed behind them. The nature of those verbal surfaces is already hinted at in the book’s title, where the “of” seems archaic but is wedded to a neologism. Brolaski’s language combines words, spellings, and idioms from Renaissance and even Middle English with nonce words, text message abbreviations, and bits of European or Native American languages, all while making allusions to classic literature, popular culture, and arcane corners of world literature. If “on loneliness” represents the most accessible side of Brolaski’s work, “like w / like wars not” represents the other extreme, in which the words become a kind of thick impasto:

th’harmonious shrinkage of the serpent in face of angels  
who goeth wayfully in the mud up to thir nostrils  
marveliss monandis isánáklésh  
face half-stained with minerals  
and hartely (this embrigature) goes sally-ho forth  
to proclaim thir lineage ligned  
w/ romanz-reading on the boke?

One imagines there are many readers who, encountering this stanza, will be put off and read no further—even if they do recognize Isánáklésh as an Apache goddess of motherhood and the earth. It would be a shame to give up, though: Brolaski’s poetry is always interesting if we bear with it. Later in “like w / like wars not,” for example, the poem gives us elaborate images of serpents and angels drawn from Milton in a way that positions Brolaski’s speaker as a kind of Satanic outsider figure, a sympathetic character among the outsiders and “heretickes.”

Brolaski’s hybrid or mongrel linguistic style—one might almost call it an idiolect—is, in some sense, his message. His identity is such that there is no obvious style for it, no socially sanctioned uniform, no given way of acting, speaking, or appearing (the problems he faces in finding a restroom make this all too clear). When nothing seems natural, everything becomes a kind of costume—even levels of diction and ranges of reference. With this come challenges, to be sure, but also a certain freedom to bring diverse elements together, to invent a way of writing that, whatever else it says, also utters “I am plural” or “I contain multitudes.” It is a different way of shoring up fragments, a different way to talk of who you are.

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