

Strangeness for the Sake of Reason

Peter Streckfus. *The Cuckoo*. Yale University Press, 2004. Hardcover, 80 pp., \$25. Paper, \$13.

Young poets these days tend to like experiments for the sake of experiments—they like to dazzle us with their strangeness, which is perceived by many today to be a supreme goal for the art. Peter Streckfus's first book, *Cuckoo*, is a collection of poetry in which verbal experiments and wordplay fireworks exist for an altogether different reason.

Streckfus states, early in the collection: "I will speak nonsense. You speak truth. We'll see what comes out of it." This is his manifesto of sorts, proposing strangeness as a way to search for reason. If the logic is to be found, it is to be located in the story that changes into lyric by its sheer wonder at the oddity of being here at all. This metamorphosis is apparent in such pieces as "Bird" or "Why I Slept With Him," poems that teach us that insight is to be found in eccentricity. It is an old lesson, one could counter. However, the quiet precision of Streckfus's lyric reasserts this with its own peculiar resonance, its new grace.

The transformation of tone is also present here. What can begin as a half-whisper in a typical Streckfus poem may turn into an intense, at times painful, shout—but we realize this only when we are already midway through the poem, unable to stop. Consider, for example, the longer piece, "Event," which begins with lines like "your sweetness brought me to this" then proceeds to the image of the concubine at the center of the poem being "beaten to death. Her body is left out like that." The woman is being beaten "with the branch of a litchee." This very sentence, "with the branch of a litchee" is repeated a dozen times, which gathers a sensation of pain in the reader who repeats it together with Streckfus. The reader is forced by the sixth or seventh repetition to say the sentence out loud.

But what makes such moments in Streckfus's longer poems successful is the fact that Streckfus's violence is not imposed on the reader. It is earned, and it is achieved best, I think, at times when his attentiveness to particular details and his intimacy of tone are balanced in a dreamlike, surreal narrative, which is both intensely psychological in its personal impact and carefully fictional in its design. This is the case in "Event," and it is also so in "The Organum," the final sequence in the book which, as the notes tell us, is wholly composed of language found in other people's texts. Here is a fragment from "The Organum":

Of wolves,

A woman crouched beside an open door, beating her head
with a stone and weeping.

Of the voyagers

The dwelling, a dried meat they called pemmican,
A dozen scattered children.

Of luck

That Indians have been known to ride into the midst of an enemy's
camp to be rid of a life supposed to lie under the heel of fate.

He mounted and rode round the village of Heaven without regard
For good or ill.

Of faith and of mercy,

Why did you have to use your tricks to harm me?

The brutality and splendor here appear not only in the content but also in the form of the piece. Perhaps this is, in the end, the abrupt beauty of the cuckoo, the bird of the book's title, as it "drops its eggs in another's nest."

And, yet, for all the intensity of such places in Streckfus's longer pieces, I find myself more drawn to his clearer moments, to shorter

poems like “Immenuenoa,” “Encephalitis,” and “The English,” where the beautiful music and imagery-laden variations of tone come together in simpler, but—to my ear, at least—subtler, wiser ways.

In his shorter poems, Streckfus is able to attract his reader by his elegantly simple playfulness, his almost-ironic-but-not-quite-ironic tone. In fact, it comes as a surprise when one reads the publisher’s statement on the back of the book that Streckfus assumes the “impossible combination of John Ashbery and Ezra Pound”—why one would consider such a combination impossible is beyond me. On the contrary, I think that combining Pound with Ashbery would not be a very difficult thing to do at all; it would be natural, almost expected in the current poetry arena. It is a far more difficult thing, however, to add a spice of playfulness to the poem which speaks with the somewhat authoritarian and—and this is crucial point, I think—clear tone of early Milosz. This is something Streckfus seems to be able to accomplish quite well in “The Celery Cutters’ Song”—

The Celery Cutters' Song

We talked in the celery about the Russian
Jews with what little we knew, about the human
tendency to shtetls, our arms and hands dotted
with the yellow blotches, our boots, pants and nails dirtied.
Love and laziness singing at the periphery,
 we spoke on, the celery
often calling us to silence. Mansions bordered
us from three sides. We searched for any order
where we could hang our words, and though we spoke and
worked
from dawn that morning, filling every crate we brought,
that other song, *her legs so white*, grew. Sipping tea,
 we talked in the celery
as we lunched, chewing the acrid leaves. Is there harm,
is it wrong, to wonder at lives like they are poems?

The truck came. We piled on the wormy and yellowed
Ones for the goats and then the crates. The sky changed.
The song returned. We watched and rode the bed, silently,
we, in the truck with the celery.

In pieces like this, Streckfus's lyricism drives him to question continually what it is to live in time. Pieces such as this, to my mind, make the book necessary. This not-quite-naïve voice speaks to me with more power than some more admirably complex pieces I can find elsewhere. It seems to be (nearly) devoid of irony, which is more than welcome in the current landscape of American poetry where irony's salt is eating up everything in sight. This situation makes the warmth and intimacy of the above poem, or others in the volume, such as "Blue," (which seem to add to this collection a sense of mystery and wisdom), a perfect pitch for the current moment:

Blue

A row of shelves hides a wall and a door here. They are all blue,
just blue.

I wonder if you and I would ever paint a wall together, and a
door.

Take one color and paint it all, even the hinges and the knob.

And then each other, clothes and all.

Just some color to put on history, not to change it, but to look

At it together and remember what we did to what we see
over what we cannot see.

Note from the Plagiarist

That winter, I reread the book in the library where, I later learned,
the author himself had often sat and read, in the town where he

had died. I was searching for a poem that spoke of work to give to a friend's husband, a carpenter. But, perhaps insensitively, I also meant it for her, a kind of apology. She was afraid I had plagiarized one of her poems, or, at least gutted it and then refused the guts. When she reminded me of her work, I was afraid also: the same blue door, its knob, its hinges.

In that book, I found the king salmon, and the fishes coming out of its mouth. The eels, I already knew, were his, though it took months to place them. But the fish as well, they too had come from him. I realized my life, even its weaker sentiments, had been written for me, almost as if planned: the poem about work, it wasn't in the book. Yet, months before, as I sat in a real chair and wrote to you, I saw a door hidden behind shelves, its hinges, blue.

Here, again, the proverbial cuckoo of the book's title has "drop[ped] its eggs in another's nest"—this time around though, the fact of the stealing of words takes the higher form of abandonment. It is seductive, yes, but also wise. For the author is stealing from himself, in the context of his own making. There is something of Anne Carson's prose here, but with a more personal turn. And, paradoxically, the wisdom seems to appear in the poem's refusal of wisdom.

It is difficult to map any good young poet's influences. Louise Glück, in her thoughtful introduction, connects Streckfus's use of other people's language "to his own ends" with the methods used often by Frank Bidart, a splendid poet of Glück's own generation. One is also tempted to think in this regard of another of Glück's contemporaries, Charles Wright. There is a sense of affirmation, a hint of praise and attention to the natural world that we find in Streckfus which is also present in Wright's work but is famously absent in Bidart's. Streckfus possesses something of which Wright's poetry is devoid: a gift for making the object strange (something that I, as a Russian-born reader, am tempted to call *ostranenie*) not in its appearance but in its nature. In addition, Streckfus possesses an ability for pushing the narrative into

lyric and not otherwise. This gift and also Streckfus's light humor, are among things that make this poet's voice distinct. *The Cuckoo* is an intelligent and beautiful collection of poems that suggests serious questions without shoving them rudely in our face, as Streckfus fashions his own gracious and, at times, rather dark, lyrical view of the sublime.

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