

Frederick Seidel, *Ooga-Booga*. New York: Farrar, 2006. 112pp. \$24

Frederick Seidel's six-figure Ducati 999FO5 factory Superbike racer is one of four Italian professional racing motorcycles he owns. You don't have to be Peter Unger to feel this is a bit excessive. Seidel's *Ooga-Booga* is, among other things, a book of hymns (well, ditties) to Ducati: "I'm about to take a taxi / To Ducati," he writes in "Bologna,"

And see Claudio Domenicali, and see Paolo Ciabatti,  
To discuss the motorcycle being made for me.  
One of eight factory Superbike racers  
Ducati Corse will make for the year,

Completely by hand, will be mine.  
I want to run racing slicks  
On the street for the look,  
Their powerful fat smooth black shine.

"The Lord is my shepherd," Seidel declares, "and the Director of Superbike Racing."

The veneration of toys for the superrich is not the least of Seidel's charms. Here is a seventy-one-year-old poet who "hate[s] seeing the anus of a beautiful woman" and imagines a terrorist sharing the train beneath the English Channel with "a flock of Japanese schoolgirls ready to be fucked / In their school uniforms in paradise"; who confesses "In Paris I used to call the Sri Lankan servants 'Shrees.' / I am not able not to"; who is given to schoolboy blurts like "Shit with a cunt! / The prince was blunt. / Shit with a cunt. // Cunt with a dick!" Carolyn Forché he's not. Frederick Seidel is a ghoul, and he has produced this century's finest collection of English poems.

Tactful from the outset, Seidel entitled his first collection of poems *Final Solutions*. It was chosen for an award presented by New York's 92nd Street Y, but the author was asked to remove some possibly libelous references to Mamie Eisenhower. Naturally he refused, and the prize was revoked. Atheneum Books, which had undertaken to publish the volume, balked, and *Final Solutions* was eventually issued by Random House. Seidel didn't publish again for seventeen years.

Though today the episode seems exquisitely quaint—arriving as it did in 1962, a full thirteen years after a rather more dangerous poet was awarded a more prestigious prize despite having made seditious broadcasts on Fascist radio—its moneyed outrageousness proved a fair augur of the poet's later career. The young Frederick Seidel was capable of such lines as:

*Caneton à la presse* at the now extinct Café Chauveron.  
Chauveron himself cooking, fussed  
And approved  
Behind Elaine, whose party it was;  
Whose own restaurant would be famous soon.

This delicately balanced stanza appears in Seidel's second volume, *Sunrise*, as do these impassioned lines on Robert Kennedy: "Younger brother of a murdered president, / Senator and candidate for president." The poems are as dead as the Kennedy brothers, with nary a compelling image or turn of phrase to redeem their fussily stylized paeans to socialite aspiration. In an eviscerating review, Eliot Weinberger composed the book's epitaph: "It may be the least numinous poetry ever written." *Sunrise* is now out of print, though used copies may be found on Amazon for about five dollars.

Having begun as an imitator of Robert Lowell, though one untempered by middle-class *ressentiment*, Seidel appears to have spent the intervening years reimagining John Ashbery as one of Lowell's particularly manic delusions. Borrowing Lowell's fascination with social milieu, Seidel now articulates to the point of parody the irony Lowell's detractors overlook in his self-inflationary tendencies.

While Seidel's earlier work contained suggestions of the weaponized virulence to come, it was the x-ray verses of 1993's *My Tokyo* that revealed Seidel's fully metastasized malignancy. In the first poem, Seidel, calling a friend who lives on Park Avenue from a pay phone, waits while the servants fetch her; a homeless man walks up, spreads a newspaper beneath himself, evacuates his bowels into it, folds it up, and deposits it in a trash can while the maître d' seats an early customer at Mortimer's. Into the "gossip and glitz" (as Weinberger had it) Seidel introduces a little reality, as if to say: you haven't begun to imagine how anti-numinous poetry can get. Where once his formal trappings stage-lighted the po-face his poems put on, Seidel's later work tends to be relaxed and confident in its rhythms, while his imagery and language are sure-footedly (if often disconcertingly) vibrant. Here is "Spring" from 1998's *Going Fast*:

I want to date-rape life. I kiss the cactus spines.  
Running a fever in the cold keeps me alive.  
My twin, the garbage truck seducing Key Food, whines  
And dines and crushes, just like me, and wants to drive.  
I want to drive into a drive-in bank and kiss  
And kill you, life. Sag Harbor, I'm your lover. I'm  
Yours, Sagaponack, too. This shark of bliss  
I input generates a desert slick as slime.

As if in response to Weinberger—who sneeringly began his review (which appeared in *Sulfur*, so it's likely Seidel never saw it) with the question "So what's a

guy like me doing with a book like that in a place like this?”—Seidel now writes poetry that mocks the juvenile notion of contemporary poetry as a zero-sum game. This obscenely wealthy poet who will deign to publish only in *Raritan* shows up the blinkered idiocy of the assumption that someone “like me” is not supposed to read books “like that.” Every book since *My Tokyo* has seemed more assured, more difficult to place on the mainstream/experimental spectrum, culminating in the volumes collected in 2003 as *The Cosmos Trilogy*, a reverse *Commedia* opening with the Big Bang and finding its inferno on a September morning in Area Code 212, where “warm firm flesh” “transubstantiates...into rotten sleet.” Idiosyncratic motifs recur throughout Seidel’s later volumes—car alarms, Ducati bikes, presidents, Congo crocodiles, asteroids, penises, antlers, allusions to Pound’s Canto 83, the lines “I don’t believe in anything, I do / Believe in you”—as if the exercise of his deceptively sing-song-y ear demanded a singularly honed continuity.

These obsessions are fruited in *Ooga-Booga*, a title designed to rub our noses in the twentieth century. The phrase occurs in the book’s finest poem, “Barbados,” whose opening stanza every soi-disant avant-gardiste should have by heart:

Literally the most expensive hotel in the world  
Is the smell of rain about to fall.  
It does the opposite, a grove of lemon trees.  
*I* isn’t anything.  
It is the hooks of rain  
Hovering with their sweets inches off the ground.  
*I* is the spiders marching through the air.  
The lines dangle the bait  
The ground will bite.  
Your wife is as white as vinegar, pure aristo privilege.  
The excellent smell of rain before it falls overpowers  
The last aristocrats before the asteroid.  
I sense your disdain, darling.  
I share it.

“The most expensive hotel in the world / Is the smell of rain about to fall” would have sufficed, and been lovely, but only Seidel would perfect the lines with “Literally,” which modifies either “most expensive” or, more seductively, “is,” thereby refusing metaphor and positing Ashberian elision as Lowellian life-study. Seidel takes the world literally, which is to say with its illusions flensed. (“Poetry,” as Philip Larkin said, “is an affair of sanity, of seeing things as they are.”) Seidel sees that “*I*” isn’t (just) anything, but it isn’t nothing, either: “the first one hacked to pieces” is always an “*I*.”

The poem continues:

The most expensive hotel in the world  
 Is the slave ship unloading Africans on the moon.  
 They wear the opposite of space suits floating off the dock  
 To a sugar mill on a hilltop.  
 They float into the machinery.  
 The machine inside the windmill isn't vegetarian.  
 A "lopper" lops off a limb caught  
 In the rollers and the machine never has to stop.  
 A black arm turns into brown sugar,  
 And the screaming rest of the slave keeps the other.  
 His African screams can't be heard above the roar.  
 A spaceship near the end of a voyage was becalmed.  
 Two astronauts floated weightlessly off the deck  
 Overboard into the equator in their chains and *splash* and drowned.

It should be impossible to write poems that simultaneously recall Ashbery, Lowell, and Larkin—probably the three most influential English poets of the postwar period. The lines "They wear the opposite of space suits floating off the dock / To a sugar mill on a hilltop" could easily appear in an Ashbery poem, where they would refer to almost anything at all besides the Middle Passage. And while one can imagine Lowell breezing through the unspeakable details, it would never have occurred to him to present them as a cartoon. Larkin might well have attained the stanza's cynicism, and even its pop-cultural resonance (the allusion to the Stones' slave-ship anthem "Brown Sugar" recalling Larkin's "the Beatles' first LP"), but never its whimsical baseline weirdness. Seidel manages to assimilate his precursors while *sounding* sui generis: "so cheerily suicidal, so sui-Seidel," as he puts it elsewhere.

After several more stanzas set forth a malarial dream of Africa, where "The field of sugarcane is filled with hippopotamus cane toads" and "The crocodile explodes out of the water and screams at the crowd / That one of them has stolen his mobile phone," "Barbados" concludes with the epileptogenic strobe of jungle drums:

Into the coconut grove they go. *Into the coconut grove they go.*  
 The car in the parking lot is theirs. *The car in the parking lot is theirs.*  
 The groves of lemon trees give light. *Ooga-booga!*  
 The hotel sheds light. *Ooga-booga!*  
 The long pink-shell sky of meaning wanted it to be, but really,  
 The precious thing is that they voted. *Ooga-booga!* And there we were,  
 The cane toads and the smell of rain about to fall.  
 The crocodiles and spiders are  
 The hippos and their friends who shot them dead.  
 The xylophone is playing too loud  
 Under the coconut palms, which go to the end of the world.

The slave is screaming too loud and we  
Can't help hearing  
Our tribal chant and getting up to dance under the mushroom cloud.

Amid syntactical obscurity and quasi-racist call-and-response, the lyricism of lightgiving lemon groves, “cane toads and the smell of rain about to fall” hits with something of the dislocating force of Canto 83, which recalls “the clouds over Taishan / When some of the rain has fallen / and half remains yet to fall.” The cloud Seidel dances under is no less a product of “death cells,” and he neither shies from nor obsequiously guilt-trips over a recognition of the mortal price tag his tourist paradise carries. As he writes in the opening “Kill Poem”:

The title is *Kill Poetry*,  
And in the book poetry kills.  
In the poem the stag at bay weeps, literally.  
Kill poetry is the *hallali* on Avenue Paul-Valéry.  
Get rid of poetry. Kill poetry.  
Label on a vial of pills. Kill kill kill kills.  
Its title is *Kill Poem*,  
From the *Book of Kills*.  
The antlered heads are mounted weeping all around the walls.

Like Larkin's, this is the poetry liberalism deserves, toxic enough to kill insects, seeing things as they are, without uplift or piety—*seeing* each amoral, gibbering detail, cataloguing each fainting patron at history's Grand Guignol. As Cal Bedient has argued, citing Barthes, Seidel's theater is reality “assigned an emphatic accent.” And this accentual dialectics, enormously assured, is the source of Seidel's artistry: while kicking over modernity's vilest rocks, he hums a catchy tune, picking up crawling things while motorizing the vernacular. His lines fairly writhe with interest, piling shock upon shock before they resolve in a kind of sick lyricism:

The chunnel train stops in the tunnel with an announcement  
That everyone now alive is already human remains.  
The terrorists have seen to it that trains  
Swap human body parts around with bombs.  
The Japanese schoolgirls say so sorry.  
Their new pubic hair is made of light.

No one else sounds like this.

In perhaps his most devastating mode, Seidel composes short, declarative quatrains (the hundred poems of *The Cosmos Trilogy* take this form) that dare the reader to find them lightweight, but whose cumulative effect is

that of a quiet storm. Here is the ending of “Letter to the Editors of *Vogue*,” from *Life on Earth*:

I am drinking gasoline  
To stay awake  
In the midst of so much  
Murder.

My daughter squeaks and squeaks  
Like a mouse screaming in a trap,  
Dangling from the cat who makes her come  
When he does it to her.

Her killer goes out into  
The streets to join his brothers  
In the revolution  
Who don't have jobs.

The plastic packed beautifully  
Inside a tampons box that I carefully leave in the loo  
At Café Oasis goes rigid and the  
Unveiled meet God.

In their recognition of comedy and horror's imbrication and their rage against the bare insult of mortality, these poems recall Philip Roth's late novels. “I am easily old enough to die,” Seidel writes. A young woman smoking seems to him ludicrously fortunate: “you can drink and smoke / Too much at twenty-six, / And stink of cigarettes, / And stand outside on the sidewalk outside the bar to have a cigarette, // As the law now requires, and it is paradise.” “Let me masturbate to death,” Seidel prays. “Let my hand fall off.”

“I take your point,” someone tells Mickey Sabbath in Roth's *Sabbath's Theater*. “I get the philosophy. It's a fierce one. You're a fierce man. You've let the whole creature out, haven't you?” The closing lines of Roth's novel could serve as the epigraph to Seidel's collected poems, which if there is any justice will be entitled *Kill Poetry*: “And he couldn't do it. He could not fucking die. How could he leave? How could he go? Everything he hated was here.”

Michael Robbins

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