

turn to the credits for those. Perhaps the resulting sense of disorientation is appropriate, but on balance I'd have preferred less minimalist bibliographical apparatus. There are compensations, though, like the index where you can count up the number of times Creeley titled a poem "Here" (8) or "There" (8) or "Place" (5). These are small measures of his persistence perhaps; but these two volumes also bring the larger-scale ambition of this particular, obsessive, and yet various and vital poet plainly into the light.

Fiona Green

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Devin Johnston, *Sources*. New York: Turtle Point, 2008. 96pp. \$15.95

Devin Johnston's *Sources* deals in the stuff of poetry: birds, weather, love, other poems. But its main pleasure is Johnston's mastery of craft. "Thunderheads," a weather poem, begins,

Days spent in the shelter of work
blown apart at dusk:

skirts rustle mimic rain
as shadows bloom across the draw;
a five-ton hammer taps
a crimped leaf; cutterheads
dredge voices through the wall.

Discrete perspectives on the storm complement each other like rhymes. "Skirts" links to images of rustling curtains and women fleeing the "bloom of shadows"; the sound of a tapped leaf predicts—and then joins—the dredge of voices. The word "taps" seems commissioned specially for the poem—manufactured to note the gentle action of the cloud's "five-ton hammer." (In another poem, the word "auctioneering," which describes a warbler's call, is similarly fitted for its line.) Johnston, here, records the changing scene as he remains focused on the present. Change is a condition of presentness.

"Four Nights" describes another cloud-scene:

A wave, a welter
of clouds cross-
hatched with rain:

excess, happiness.

A wave of clouds becomes a welter as the rain appears. The break at “cross- / hatched” reenacts the storm’s crash or clash, and the rain’s hatching. The comma between “excess” and “happiness” marks the transformation’s near-imperceptibility: excess leads to happiness, the poem suggests, and is happiness. The sense of excess-as-surplus is a subtle joke, called out by the poem’s precision: the rain is in excess of the clouds as “cross- / hatched” is in excess of its line or the poem is in excess of the storm. (“Excess” has the Latin root “excedere”—to surpass, to outperform.)

Writing like this is the main key of *Sources*. The poems are exquisite and comprehensive. Their music and surface beauty invite intense scrutiny, asking us to look deeper and better—at the objects they describe, but more importantly at the resources and effects of description itself. (Johnston has developed this key through two earlier books, *Telepathy* and *Aversions*, and promoted it with Flood Editions, a publishing house he co-directs with Michael O’Leary.) The poem “Clouds” considers the stakes of this invitation. It opens with another cloudscape, this time viewed through a kitchen window. The clouds “diurnal, tidal” evoke their literal, liquid sources: “spume of Puget Sound, eggs / boiled at Little Bighorn, evaporated / birdbaths on display, sunbathers / stretched beside the pool...” It concludes:

We say, *that’s life, that’s love*—
Yet the active file distinguishes
hounds, greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs;
gate and mirror; heads of lettuce
glazed with rain; Taj Mahal
and traveler; marching trees of
Birnam Wood; sheep from Deuteronomy.

Above the kitchen sink, we skim
a massive novel shorn of names, wild
ramifications of dis-
 appointment, old life
convoluted past recall.

Descriptions from the “active file”—descriptions actively crafted, rather than spontaneously recalled—replace the earlier catalogue. A “file” abrades as it houses. Clouds come to resemble trees from *Macbeth*’s Birnam Wood, sheep from Deuteronomy. This “novel” is both a “dis- / appointment” and literally a series of appointments: a recognition of the poem’s incommensurability with one’s “old life” and of its potential to realize a new one. Craft, here, is not an instrument of memorialization, but of discovery. A “novel shorn of names” is not a novel without names; it’s a novel with names constantly recast in the imagination. Read “shorn” think “wind shear.” The poem records this

discovery as loss and gain: the “old life / convoluted past recall” met by the “wild / ramifications” of the poem itself. Valéry would call Johnston’s “wild ramifications” *wonder*.

The less successful poems in *Sources* seem to actively avoid such ramifications. They are instead content with aphorism or willfully minor. “Swift-footed” opens with an unconvincing epigram:

Look at the sun
beating down
on what was
February’s cold
mud:
 everything
durable proves
unendurable.

“The Door” asks, “What was this basement door / scratched by the dog, / cut from the hardest / shagbark stock?” Its answer literalizes the book’s title as a poetic exercise: “The straightest went / for ax hafts / turned on a lathe, / the trunk for sash / and door.” This is pretty but not nearly as exciting (or revelatory) as the book’s best poems.

Johnston’s translations from Latin and Greek suggest another gloss on the volume’s title. “After Sappho” begins,

Some say flashing metal, some say fire,
others call a Sea Harrier
in vertical ascent
 the loveliest sight
that dark earth offers. I say
whatever you love most.

This translation from fragment 16 is first an occasion to vitalize English—a revitalized original is byproduct. Where Jim Powell, for instance, renders Sappho’s “fleet,” Johnston presents a fighter-jet. The tack mocks the problem of anachronism in translation, while creating a complex of music and imagery that is the poet’s own. Internal repetition galvanizes the stanza: “Some say” leads to “Sea Harrier” and to “say fire”; “metal” leads to “call,” and to “loveliest”; “ascent” to “sight” to “most.” As with the cloud poems, the true source and subject of “After Sappho” is the imagination—the mind reshaping its environment as it discovers it.

Joshua Kotin

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