

Far be it from me to take anything away from star fucking or former anti-war Congressman Wayne Gilchrest (R-MD), but what are they adding to this poem besides non-sequitur punchlines? The poet disarms us with the insouciance of her speaker, intrigues us with a gloss on the passage of time, makes us suspicious with clichés, and startles us with materialistic considerations before seducing us with the strange detachment of “when it flashes red you’re getting hurt.” Then, as if she were embarrassed by having sculpted so many fluent lines, she distracts us from the delicate balance in the situations she’s created. No theory of de-familiarization can dissolve the fact that moments like these are as annoying as they are estranging. The problem, to put it more precisely, is that they are estranging *because* they are annoying. Generous readers of *The Anger Scale* will look long and hard at their own expectations and the excrescences of the Internet, but they will also want to know what Degentesh intended for them to make of these moments. It is difficult to say. This is not to deny a *tour de force*—only to suggest that, in this book of borrowed language, questions of why the poet made the choices she did become more, not less, important.

V. Joshua Adams

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August Kleinzahler, *Sleeping It Off in Rapid City: Poems, New and Selected*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008. 234pp. \$26

From the point of view of lyric poetry—poetry that is defined by the concise and musical utterance of personal feeling—the basic environmental question is: *Where are you, and how do you feel about it?* August Kleinzahler’s best poems, nearly all of which are present in his new and selected *Sleeping It Off in Rapid City*, deal with this question directly and well. They reveal him to be a poet of place, a member of a diverse lineage that includes Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, Seamus Heaney, Anne Stevenson, Lorine Niedecker and William Carlos Williams.

The title poem is the most sophisticated in the collection. Within the first twenty lines we get a taste of Kleinzahler’s aesthetic in the form of a neat splice from the first tercet of Dante’s *Inferno*: “*Nel mezzo... / 4a.m.—per una selva oscura*” (thus reading, approximately, “In the middle...4a.m.—of a dark wood”). The dark wood in this case is the national forest in the Black Hills; the poet puts himself in the middle, not of Dante’s allegorical road of life, but of a natural space. He is also situated precisely in diurnal time—the moment, perhaps, where drunkenness turns into hangover. Most of the poem occupies itself with the juxtaposition of tangible facts, from geology (“vast, ponderosa-feathered batholith / You can see it from space”) to history

("Custer once came through, in the summer of '74 / With that mustache and golden hair"); from Cold War politics ("The ghosts of 98 foot long Titans and Minutemen") to the more superficial trappings of contemporary American culture (Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* was filmed nearby).

Were the poem nothing more than an ample portrait of the area around Rapid City, it would demonstrate Kleinzahler's keen eye for landscape, one that perceives time as well as space. But the poet also asserts that "This is a sacred place"; "I can tell this is a sacred place, I needn't be told / It's in the air / I feel it." To be sure, the poem's situation is a geographically and historically convenient one for reflecting on layers of local significance: the meeting place of agricultural prairies and comparatively wild national forest, modern consumerism and the echo of a radically different prior culture, "The middle of the middle of the heart of this great land." But *sacred*? If Kleinzahler is being tongue-in-cheek then we may laugh at his rueful irony. "Sleeping It Off in Rapid City" is undeniably the disgruntled rant of a man depressed by the cultural impoverishment of America's hinterlands however attuned he may be to the local concentration of history. I think, however, that Kleinzahler gives us something more than a critical landscape poem. He asks us to consider the ways in which a place like Rapid City, as our poet has described it, may actually partake of the sacred. Here are the last dozen lines:

This is a sacred place
I have come here from far away
After many years of wandering
Disillusion
And found surcease here from all my cares
Surcease here from doubt
Here, at the center of it all
On a great slab of Mesozoic rock
This sanctified ground
Here, yes, here
The dead solid center of the universe
At the heart of the heart of America

"Here, yes, here" anticipates the skepticism which the poem as a whole would seem to encourage. It is directed, too, against an intellectual and artistic culture not often interested in the intricacies and well being of places like Rapid City. The conclusion proposes that we take our poet literally, that we believe he has found a kind of supreme value in the provincial and the geological: "On a great slab of Mesozoic rock." This is not only compelling because it accommodates an ironic, even embittered relationship to place; it seems as though the re-sacralization of provincial place at the end of "Sleeping It Off" is valid precisely because of its coexistence with an ironic disposition. For

Kleinzahler the poetic relationship to place is not a choice between irony and sincerity, but the literal site where the two must combine.

A mix of irony and sincerity in fact characterizes many of Kleinzahler's poems. His style is as playful and humorous as it is direct and nostalgic. How many poets can use the word "heart" without sounding trite? In addition to the ending just quoted, two of the collection's finest loco-descriptive pieces, both treating on the poet's youthful stomping grounds, end on "heart" with a pathos that is almost droll:

Flowering pear blossoms, mingling
Drifting in gutters
How many years
For how many years
A stranger to my own heart

These final lines from "Gray Light in May" show Kleinzahler's skill at versification, as he repeats the phrase "how many years" to effect transition from natural scenery to lyric sentiment. A similar combination of scenery, community and personal nostalgia appears at the end of "Family Album":

Willow and plum tree
green pods from maple whirling down to the sidewalk...
Only the guy at the hot dog stand since when
maybe remembers me,
or at least looks twice.

But the smushfaced bus from New York, dropping
them off at night along
the avenues of brick, somber as the dead child
and crimes of old mayors
lets off no one I know, or want to.

Warm grass and dragonflies—
O, my heart.

What in the foregoing description elicits such an abrupt apostrophe, "O, my heart"? Is it the "Warm grass and dragonflies" or the "smushfaced bus" or the disreputable local history of "old mayors"? Poetically, Kleinzahler frames the social within the natural such that neither we nor he can separate a community from its environment. Just as the sincere utterance at the end of "Sleeping It Off" is qualified and complicated by the poem's particular location and persistent ironic tone, so the sentiment of these two endings serves to enrich the natural description in which it is embedded. The mixture produces sentiment rather than sentimentality.

Kleinzahler is forthright about a landscape aesthetic which he inherits directly from William Carlos Williams. In “Poetics” he seems plainspoken enough:

I have loved the air outside Shop-Rite Liquor
on summer evenings
better than the Marin hills at dusk
lavender and gold
stretching miles to the sea.

The elegant closing of this stanza belies the elevation of culture—even one characterized by such blemishes as “unsuccessful neon” and “pizza crust”—over nature. Nevertheless, Kleinzahler is emphatically a poet of the city, usually the New Jersey towns of his youth or the San Francisco Bay area of his maturity. His descriptive habits and urban sensibility do not always result in private lyricism. “Meat” is a very fine urban poem, both elegant and critical. The poet wonders “How much meat moves / Into the city each night” and he describes “the moon a chemical orange,” a “wilderness of streets” and the haze of “industrial meadows,” an expert use of diction to highlight a dichotomy of city and nature that breaks down, gruesomely, when he finishes by conceiving of the whole town as “A giant breathing cell / Exhaling its waste / From the stacks by the river / And feeding through the night.”

If “Sleeping It Off in Rapid City” is the most sophisticated of the new poems that comprise the first section of the book, then “Anniversary” is the most graceful. It is a consummate nature poem, the reverent description of a natural phenomenon, in this case the behavior of first one hawk and then a pair (it makes an interesting comparison with Robinson Jeffers’s “Hurt Hawks”). The poem is also the record of a habitual dawn walk from the city to a particular spot in the countryside. Kleinzahler does not dichotomize city and country in his description. He goes out “on the heels of first birdsong, juice-heads / sleeping rough by the culvert.” His eye is attuned to seasonality that is as perceptible in the town as anywhere: “when it was the flowering pansies’ time in the park and untended lots, / and still a touch of cool in the air.” But it is the lyric turn, the infusion of the poet’s thoughts and feelings into the world around him, which makes the poem moving:

...off they flew together
drifting, spiraling, higher and higher
in partnered loops, wheeling and diving,
enraptured by all they were, were able to do,
not as separate beings, but as two.

This is a very artful deployment of rhyme in what is subtly a love poem (to

what does the title, “Anniversary,” refer?). Kleinzahler has a well-tuned and well-disciplined ear, a trait that would make him worth reading even were his sense of place less intricate and rich. He combines the poet’s lyric and descriptive functions to imbue locality with meaning.

Where Kleinzahler’s poems stray from the descriptive, the local or the lyrical, they lose force and technical proficiency. There are some notable exceptions, poems like “Green Sees Things in Waves” and “On Johnny’s Time,” poems that excel on their own terms, largely unrelated to those I have been discussing. And some of his more comic and satiric pieces, like “Hyper-Berceuse: 3 A.M.” are entertaining enough. But where he does not blend irony with sincerity, he can be wholly and overweeningly ironic. That kind of poetry, however carefully wrought and clever, is more likely to prove ephemeral.

Jon Geltner

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Martin Corless-Smith, *Nota*. New York: Fence, 2003. 88pp. \$12
Martin Corless-Smith, *Swallows*. New York: Fence, 2006. 101pp.
\$13

The following is the fourth chapter of an unfolding critical novella on current British Poetry, to be entitled Corroded by Symbolisme: An Anti-Review of Twelve British Poets, Being Also a True Account of Dark and Mysterious Events Surrounding a Famous Poem Supposedly Written by Frank O’Hara. The first three installments appeared in previous issues of this magazine.

So back at The Eagle now, Tim Atkins having left twenty or so minutes past. Well, as I sat there, thinking, meditating on the discomfiting events of the day, I felt a hand, light as a swallow, light upon my shoulder. I turned around to see the strikingly handsome Martin Corless-Smith, in all his well-tuned burlinesses. This was a startlyng coincidence, Tim having just been with me, for Martin is fascinated by Horace, too, and writes about hime, in his two latest bookums, *Nota* and *Swallows*, and of his lost Sabine Villa, Horace being in this way a kind of ghost flutteryng through those airy bookums.

Well, hi there, Martin, I said.

Hello, Kent, he said. May I join you ?

Whay of course, I said, By all means!

Martin had the day before given a rip-roaring readinge with Geraldine Monk, a smashyng success, readinge from his latest bookum, *Swallows*, the successor to his brilliant collection, *Nota*, though I have already mentyoned