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Vignettes and Havensville Farm

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Vignettes and Havensville Farm

by

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in

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and

English

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Introduction:

When Cole Swensen writes “So far gives in in grains. Rain rains down upon rain” (53) the concrete image and the form of the line are in a tense coexistence. On one hand, this poem conveys an image of rain falling; on the other, when rain is the subject, object, and verb of a sentence, its excess hints at the emotional state of the speaker. We see a forlornness on the speaker’s part to be saturated with this thing, exemplified in it filling her/his periphery and very language (think “Water, water, every where / Nor any drop to drink”). However, this “rain” is made dynamic through the playful tone conveyed in its rhyme to “grains,” which cuts away some of the “forlornness” found in the repetition. To add the multitudes already elaborated upon, the repetition of the word “rain,” through a small amount of semantic satiation, also has the effect of making the word verge on becoming jargon, and as such, the ability for “rain” to represent a real. The ideas in things here are a resistance to things being merely aesthetic. Instead, things here contain multitudes and hidden contexts that the speaker hints at in form, but are ultimately unknowable. That is the poetry I want to write. Not language for language’s sake; not images for smooth readerly consumption, but a fraught coalescence of both. I want the “so much depends upon” as much as I want Williams’ image. When Joseph Massey writes “A parking lot—degrees of torpor” (58) I want the m-dash to forge an analogy between this emotion and the image regardless of me being unable to understand the context of their conjunction. The prevalent notion throughout New Criticism and beyond that poems “do,” but don’t “mean” forgets that poems develop and underdevelop their own meanings and contexts. When Joshua Marie Wilkinson writes “A storm like / thousands of locusts / listening” (Wilkinson 34), an image is created, there is a storm; there are locusts presented in negation. However, this “listening” offers a shift in tone and perspective as the macro becomes specific and sensory. As Wilkinson

exemplifies, there is a poem that can mean and do; a poem that conveys images and that uses form to convey to the reader that there is something just out of the periphery of the poem—something that can be understood emotionally, but not in content.

The central project of “Vignettes and Havensville Farm” is one of latency, and more specifically, of violences past that imprint on the nouns of the present. Each poem has a dream consciousness it desperately tries to excavate. The poems’ fought histories of violence come out only barely in the content—in the few moments of admission—but are largely performed by the terseness of the verse itself. When Susan Howe and Anne Carson used found texts to reconcile grief (*That This* and *Nox* respectively), the loss for words present throughout the grieving process is exemplified in their loss for their own words. Likewise, when I show violence imprinted on my landscapes and speakers, the unspeakable is hinted at through the form. To get at the reason my poems share a project of latent violence, I need to realize that I am not writing in a vacuum. The deep scar crossing my impacted nose comes from an accident I cannot remember, the 13 pounds of wheelchair I’ve placed in and out of my mother’s car for more than a decade is an image that hints to a violent accident that happened before I was a thought in my parents’ minds. My grandmother’s resistance to my Japanese immersion education informed by the empty chairs in her 1945 classrooms; her view of our family tree informed by her Robert e. Lee bookends. These images have become so natural to me that their violence has moved into the latent realm: my head looks like my head, scar and all; my grandmother falls into the canon of being “stuck in her ways;” I’ve only ever seen my mom in her chair. However, my poems have shown that these images I’m accustomed to have not been resolved in my mind. “Vignettes and Havensville Farm,” by accident, works at expressing a repression. Regardless of them not being

traditionally “confessional,” my poems are able to excavate a truer version of myself, largely through cathartic reactions to what takes place in my character’s terse and minimal lives.

VIGNETTES

happening upon
his shame

the crunching sound

rag

sodden red
soil

granite blanched

and wind thick
like travesty

to assure
he opens the bulb

a thing nearing born

he, boyish
or livid

lost and hungry in peony

he, pretending
like a child

it was a hard childhood

he, pretending
his hands

are dark animals

whose mouth
of cave

is always this empty

on bruise,
a fleck of wet

violent shapes in sand

dyad of pin
and pin-prick

dad's imprint on the pillow

train,
fallen tree

he, teeming

the exact bedpost
and an etching

deep as dragging the river

behind the cabin,
a car backfires

again and again

HAVENSVILLE FARM

THE VERGE

The night-black porch
and toes, thick
like an ivy-mantled
fence

The Farmer waits all night
for the cornstalks
to part
but they don't part

From his porch
he smells a rotting trout,
then steps inside
to eat it

THE DUSKING

Trains pass, whistleless—
a black flower

The Farmer braids
the straw he's ripped
from a nest

to chew

Between a searchlight
and the now rising moon
a scarecrow casts two shadows

THE PICNIC

A crystal glass
of pond water

his hand tracing
to find
the scar,
it face-shaped
and begging for privacy

he waits
in his picnic

of one orange

THE COLD

The Farmer carries a bag of soil
to his newest plot

He touches the pregnant ground
(cold, stillborn)

He beats down
to wake it

He caresses
to comfort it

It slumbers
to forget

The gutter, ivy mantled,
bends downward toward them

THE LIGHTNING

barn owl
blackened

HAVENSVILLE FARM

Between corn husks, webs bending—
silkworm on a welcome mat

The ceiling
bows,
its lantern,
so close

is moth-full

armrest
and a history
of fingernails

and layers
of soot
that mix
with his breath

Upstairs, a caged heron—

clipped wings flapping like plants in the wind

THE STIRRING

The black heads of flowers

The spots of black mulch
on his hands and face
and zipper

THE BEGINNING

The porch
is without the buzzing

He knows the outline
in the lantern
is a carcass

Somewhere hoof-steps
in a flurry
crushing leaves
in a path
right at him

THE STEP

A silk thread
on the light-switch
the Farmer
lets be

He watches
the breeze
take the
page

he leans forward
and is weightless
momentarily

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