

Cultural Daily

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Book Review: *Tricks of Light* by Thaddeus Rutkowski

John Brantingham · Wednesday, September 30th, 2020

What drew me into *Tricks of Light*, Thaddeus Rutkowski's newest collection, was how he  captures the universal sense of alienation that seems to be a part of human existence especially in this new age of COVID. That is, it felt universal, and it might be, or it might be that he's just that good a poet. Poem after poem drew me into a consciousness that felt apart from everyone else in the world, and I felt found by someone else who also had this sense of alienation.

Part of this is not universal. I will never know what it is to be a person of color in a society that is often defined by white supremacy. The raw experience of the othering he goes through is captured in a number of places including in "Foreign Fillings" where he experiences hostility when he is asked if he had his fillings done in a different country. He's confused by the question until he seems to realize that it is his face, not his fillings that the dental staff is asking about:

Maybe what looks different is my face,
as if I'm from a different country
and had my earlier dental work done there.

"What country do you mean?"
I ask the dentist and his assistant
because I can't quite figure out
what country they think I'm from.
Maybe they don't know;
maybe all they know is,
I don't look like they do.
I wait for their answer with my mouth open (31).

Here, where he is most vulnerable, he must face being valued as a person and these people deciding that he has come up short. This vulnerability works its way through the poems, and there is a sadness in the distance that he feels from the people around him.

The sense too that he is cut off from communication from the people around him informs the work as well. Perhaps the most memorable part to me was a three poem sequence about how he cannot fully comprehend or communicate with his turtle, and poems surrounding this sequence make the same kinds of observations about relationships with humans. In one poem, he describes how he feels about the emotional distance and worry that he has about his turtle:

When I don't see her, I worry.

I know she can hold her breath for hours.
 I don't want to wait that long for her to appear,
 so I tap on her basking shelf, and she stirs,
 pokes her head out of the water,
 torn between fear and the prospect of food (37).

I love the anxiety he has here for the animal that many people would not care for. It is human, and it also seems to be very much him. What I find interesting about it is the knowledge that he does not know what is going on with the turtle, and so he must do the worrying for both of them. The anxiety centers itself on the fact that he will never be able to know what's happening in her mind and body, and so he must check. But he seems to feel cut off from people in the same way that he is cut off from the turtle. In the previous poem, he writes about being hit by a cab.

I see the cab has stopped.
 Maybe the driver heard the impact, too,
 and wants to see if I'm all right,
 or maybe he has stopped for a traffic light (36).

As he doesn't understand how the turtle values life, he doesn't understand how people do. He, like so many of us, feels alienated and isolated, and the way he writes it, alienation becomes a strangely shared experience.

I recommend *Tricks of Light* highly. It is an exceptional collection.

VOTE!

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