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Life's Various Rings of Fire: A Not So Sad Review of All the Sad Angels

Lisa Segal · Tuesday, March 3rd, 2015

Thanks to the cover art on Jack Grapes's most recent book of poetry—a painting by Marc Chagall titled “The Circus”—you enter “the big top” just by holding the book in your hands. You can almost hear the music. The book opens with a photograph of Grapes having just tossed an apple into the air, the apple hanging just above his head. Following the last poem in the book is another photograph of Grapes and the apple. But this time the apple, still hanging in the air above his head, seems to be on its way down, with Grapes's hand open, ready to catch it. Thus is created the illusion that these poems were performed within the space of the toss of that apple. Grapes is an accomplished entertainer. In addition to writing and acting, he has performed magic tricks since his youth. Bookending the poems with those two photographs, Grapes invokes Robert Frost's well-known quote that “poetry is feats of performance and association.”

 This makes *All The Sad Angels* unlike any of Grapes's previous books of poems, but that's to be expected since he's not easily pigeonholed, and if one were to try to fit his work into a single mold, they would be dismissing the breadth and range of his work over the years. As Bill Mohr wrote in his afterword of Grapes's *The Naked Eye*: “The scope of Grapes's work, however, will prove to be the most daunting aspect for anyone who decides to make a foray into this extraordinary complex assemblage of poems. He has not made it easy for anyone to grasp the full measure of his artistic journey.”

What would be easy in speaking of *All The Sad Angels* would be to cherry-pick from it his typical narrative poems, filled as they are with both dark humor and playful sadness, and forego talking about his more complex and perplexing poems. Even his more accessible narrative poems run the gamut from slapstick action to misanthropic ruminations, from witty tongue-in-cheek observations to mordant jesting. But the poems that lie outside those narrative arcs are compelling in ways that defy simple critical analysis. They scoop up experiments in surrealism, language poetry, linguistic play, and academic discourse. The reader is nudged towards admitting that there's more to these poems than meets the eye. As a matter of fact, the cover graphic of *All the Sad Angels* gives the reader a hint of what's inside, of who these sad angels are. Reading this book from cover to cover is to enter the Big Top and experience a three ring circus of simultaneous poetic entertainments. Be prepared for all types of poems: juggler poems, acrobat poems, sword-swallowing poems, horses-jumping-through-hoops-of-fire poems, clowns-emerging-out-of-tiny-car poems, lion-tamer poems, trained-dogs-run-amuck poems, seals-rolling-on-rubber-balls poems, ballerinas-riding-ponies poems, not to mention poems that fly by you as if shot out of a canon.

 Photo by Alexis Rhone Fancher

All the Sad Angels is a little book, but inside its pages, it's a circus of poetry flying every which way. You can carry the book in your back pocket. You can slide it under the door. You can use it as a coaster for your cup of tea. You can throw it up into the air and it will sprout wings and fly around the moon. But as Grapes playfully announces in his dedication, this book is a "mere trifle." He quotes the Roman poet Catullus, a poet writing over 2,000 years ago, who described a book of his own poetry as such, as "a mere trifle". The allusion is not accidental. Anyone reading Catullus's book would discover that his "little book" is filled with a variety of poems; some narrative, some noted for language word play, some obscure and others—verging on kitchen gossip—caustic and witty. Grapes's alignment with Catullus is intentional. Catullus thumbed his nose at the established and safe forms of his day, and at the careful poets who hewed to them. But Grapes goes Catullus one better. Grapes doesn't thumb his nose at any of us. He invites us in to play along with him, to experience every kind of poem—rules and no rules—in this high-spirited assemblage.

When I read a book of poetry I might skip around because, too often, the poems are in some way interchangeable and offered in a too familiar style. It would be a mistake to jump around with this book, small though it may be, trifling though it may seem. I recommend this "trifling book" be read from beginning to end. Themes will emerge—abstraction made concrete, surreal made real, ordinary made cosmic. One encounters an acceptance of life, an open-armed and open-hearted containment of its diverse pains and pleasures, griefs and joys. As Grapes says in the closing lines of the last poem, "All Alone Shoe":

and I am unable
to teach you anything.
Like a blind man,
I put my hands out
in front of me
and expect everything
and am never disappointed.

The book closes, though, with a quote from Marc Chagall in which he describes another painting from his circus series:

My circus pitches its Big Top in the sky.
It performs among the clouds,
among the chairs,
or in the moon-reflecting windows.
In the streets a man goes by.
He puts out the lights
and lamps of the town.
The show is over.

With this statement, Grapes draws a line from Chagall to Catullus and back to Chagall. Inside this little circus are poems which navigate the high-wire of poetic discourse—sometimes simple, sometimes complex, sometimes comprehensible, often absurd—poems that tumble end over end.

One such acrobatic poem is “Lost Illusions” which references Charles Gleyre’s painting *Lost Illusions*, Van Gogh’s *Potato Eaters*, Jean Baptiste-Simon Charmin’s *Self-Portrait*, Rembrandt’s *Money Changer*, and Bruegel’s *Census at Bethlehem*. The opening line of this poem tells everything we need to know in order to understand some of what Grapes is attempting:

She painted cows as if they were chickens.
Artists can paint whatever they want.

On the one hand, this is a child-like voice. It expresses the initial wonder we should all experience when engaging with art. On the other hand, it’s a deep, philosophical tenant establishing an approach to art on a complex critical level. If one paints cows as if they were chickens, what else is the painter (or poet) rendering as if it were something else? And what are the boundaries of art? The child makes a simple observation: Artists can paint whatever they want. The adult must contend with the fact that an artist can’t be hemmed in by what the self-critic or the world expects her to do. This childlike point of view blends with intellectual commentary and weaves its way throughout the poems in this book.

The book’s a three-ring circus alright. It’s a complex spectacle that defies easy categorization and confounds critical judgment just when the narrative ride invites the reader to settle in. What to make of the short poem titled “Big Top,” one of many poems that allude to the circus of our ever-present need to balance our corporeal experiences with our emotional and spiritual ones:

body your cupped hands
resolution of anguish
expectation of grief
your mouth opened
to scream or be kissed
a 12% probability of rain

This is indeed the big top of the world with all the contradictions implicit in the image of bodying one’s cupped hands. The ambiguous open mouth will either receive a kiss or emit a scream. Most likely it will, in time, do both. And in its six lines, Grapes resolves such grandiose ideas as anguish and grief into the quotidian odds that today it will rain, and that whether we are in pleasure or pain, the rain either will, or won’t, fall. We are the performers. We are the audience, too, and we are only here until the lights are put out and the show, for us, is over.

This poem, then, illuminates “The Greatest Show on Earth”, the poem just a few poems prior. The first line announces its theme: “Care must be taken not to disturb the body.” Ah, yes, the greatest show on earth is death. Yet even in this poem, mordant jesterling abounds.

it bothers the mind
to stub an idea in the dark

How wonderful to compare the creative process to walking barefoot in the dark, stubbing one’s toe on a toy, or stubbing one’s mind on an idea. The poem ends with a final image of death, of a body lying on the stainless steel table in the morgue as the poet references the “providence in the fall of a sparrow” from Hamlet’s final soliloquy. Thus, as we are shot, in our final act, out of the canon of life, it’s with a sense of consolation we are reminded that—

there’s room for all of us

on the stainless steel table
 if we see our lives
 through the lens of providence
 the fall of which
 is neither elephant
 nor sparrow

And yet, with all his joy and play and jestering, Grapes is every bit as much drawn to sorrow. In the poem “Side Show,” the poet writes: “The heart finds more grief than it can imagine, sorrow piled so high it turns to laughter.” Here it’s more than just the title that alludes to the circus, for isn’t the poet part clown, part acrobat, part juggler, part dare-devil? Isn’t this how a poet offers a way through life’s various rings of fire? From “A Poem About Time”:

If help comes from outside,
 life is restored
 to the despairer.

And how do we trust this poet to offer this help? Later in the poem, he tells us that he knows time is:

a history of love and loss,
 each blip on the screen
 registering an event
 marked by sad longing
 or heartfelt expectation.

This poet has been at the intersection of sad longing and heartfelt expectation. In “One Kiss,” he asks us not to—

think of me like
 this so broken
 and misplaced
 bleeding from
 the inside

He knows what it takes to get through a day, as he says in “All Alone Shoe”—

before the world melts
 in my hands
 and the sky explodes on my lips

We read on because, as in “Secret Sauce,” he assures us of what we want to be true, and confirms what we already know—

Something new arises
 from fire
 as well as from love.

And then he goes on to say—

The heart banks on sorrow
in the worst of times.

In its original Latin meaning, passion means to suffer, and while sorrow isn't suffering, it carries a hint of loss and grief. On some level, one suffers one's sorrow. On another level, one's joys and pleasures aren't separate from one's sorrows and sadnesses. As he says in "One Kiss," Grapes is the poet as messenger "who lost his way, who wanted to lose his way in the mystical ecstasy of discursive language only to find the pen racing toward love as if it were a light." No wonder Grapes quotes Rumi on the back cover—

With passion pray.
With passion make love.
With passion eat and drink
and dance and play.
Why look like a dead fish
in this ocean of God?

But lest the reader think this is a nihilist notion, a book about sorrow disguised as play, the poet reminds us in the first poem "For All This Living" that we are here on this earth to celebrate love. "For all this living," he writes, "shouldn't I eat as much love as I can stomach?" The poet's choice of the word "stomach" has the added connotation that even love is difficult to take—sometimes it's a kiss, sometimes it's a scream—but like medicine that's good for us, we swallow it anyway. "We are," as Rumi says in a quote at the book's beginning, "the hidden treasure in this world of love."

The task in critical analysis, as Grapes writes at the end of "Lost Illusions", is to "bring to the surface what was once concealed"—a notion he suggests several times in different contexts throughout the poem, and which is quite a fair assessment of the purpose of art in the first place. In talking about Grapes's poetry, though, revealing the concealed is easier said than done. Thus, one is tempted, as I said earlier, to cherry-pick the more accessible narrative poems. To refer to Mohr's afterward again, he quotes Paul Valery who writes that "the best work is the one that keeps its secret longest. For a long while no one even suspects it has a secret." It's true to say there are probably more secrets in Grapes's poems than we would suspect, especially based on his more accessible narrative poems. It would be beyond the reach of this review to even attempt it. But if you link the last poem of this book and the Rumi quote that stands as an epigraph before the first poem with the word "because", the poet's code begins to crack.

I put my hands out
in front of me
and expect everything
and am never disappointed
because
in this world of love,
we are the hidden treasure.

Thus has Grapes brought us full circle. In the time it takes for that apple to fall back into his hand, Grapes has been our ringmaster and clown, juggler and acrobat, magician and dare-devil. He has transformed the magic tricks of his youth into the sleight of hand, the magic, of poetry. If you get a chance to hold *All the Sad Angels* in your hand, open it as you would a treasure chest filled with wondrous objects — some obvious, some mysterious, some puzzling, some magical, and many

tender and comforting.

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