BOOK REVIEWS

Cosmic Hotel

Russ Franklin. Soft Skull Press: Berkeley, California. 2016.

In his first novel, *Cosmic Hotel,* Russ Franklin masters the art of offering a full range of sensory details. This talent allows the reader to intensely and vividly experience the uniqueness of his story.

For example, reminiscing about childhood experiences in Florida's Wakulla County, protagonist Sandeep Sanghavi explains: "We played after supper in a family graveyard, our bellies full of grilled cow liver and fried doves, lying on graves listening for pursuers with flashlights."

And describing one of the many ancient hotels where he and his mother perform their consulting work Sandeep notes:

> *A business woman went past me with the deliberate speed of a traveler, luggage wheels humming on the orange carpet. . . . The walls had that dull lumpy look of over a hundred paint-overs. Even mulch in the planters was pale, bleached by the light. . . . [Everywhere were] leather couches on which people sat and worked and talked, a few men in ties, shoulders rounded and praying to cell phones.*

Sandeep's observations are always vivid. His clear eye gives the reader a window into a distinctly imagined universe.

Near the end of the novel, Sandeep gives a detailed and intense account of an accident:

> *[T]he seatbelt seemed to click angrily to lock me down. One tire screeched and the van spun. . . . We were floating before the noises began, only the yanking tug-of-war*

between gravity and the seatbelt. Gravity was a whirlpool and there was a boil of sparks vomiting through the van, which I could taste, . . . and the smell of steam and rubber.

Sandeep's mother is Elizabeth Sanghavi, an Indian woman immersed in her failing hotel-consulting business; his father, Van Ray, is an eccentric, American astronomer. Sandeep introduces himself: "I have some of my father's Caucasian features but Elizabeth's Indian color, which subconsciously registers as a tan and health." Franklin's main character tells his story surrounded by a bevy of relatives. Besides Elizabeth and Van Ray, there is a half-brother, Dubourg, a cousin, Ursula, an alien entity called Randolph, a former astronaut named Ruth, and a mysterious dog.

While the intricacies of the author's quirky tale sometimes create quite a complex narrative, his prose always impresses. The story begins when Sandeep's father calls with the news that he has made contact with another planet. He is, however, "between funding" and needs cash to pursue this mysterious project. Not long after this contact, the main character begins receiving phone calls from someone who plays Elvis tunes and refuses to speak. This strangeness is followed by a series of baffling texts. As the novel progresses, we learn that it's an alien who insists that he must contact Sandeep's father, Van Ray. In spite of the difficulty Sandeep and the alien have locating and communicating with Van Ray, the unconventional scientist eventually shows up, accompanied by his pregnant, ex-wife, a former astronaut.

As the novel progresses there are unexplainable disappearances, difficult periods for the main character involving a bout with a paralyzing ailment, an unusual connection with a microchipped dog, and an odd romance with his cousin, Ursula. The complications are many which always leave the reader anticipating the subplots' outcomes.

Cosmic Hotel should be on the must-read list for any booklover who relishes a unique tale of literary science-fiction. The novel powerfully combines the scientific search for aliens with the main character's struggle to resolve the many ins and outs of a family fraught with bizarre and thorny traits. Russ Franklin's debut novel is highly recommended for its intriguingly engrossing storytelling.

--Margaret Howard Trammell

Rough Knowledge

Christine Poreba, Anhinga Press: Tallahassee, Florida. 2016.

One of the jobs of poets is to unearth the nugget of wonder buried under the routine. Christine Poreba, in her poetry collection *Rough Knowledge*, winner of the 2014 Philip Levine Prize for Poetry (sponsored and administered by the M.F.A. Program in Creative Writing at California State University, Fresno) undertakes that task. She succeeds.

"And I want to know if everything happens / twice this way, ends, and starts again—" she states in a poem titled "Balcony," setting out one of the themes of the book, of events and their recurrence and transformation in memory. Also in Poreba's world, the natural world intersects with human memory, sometimes in disconcerting ways.

The opening poem is titled "Toward Home." The poem's speaker recalls a walk with her husband on a beach, where they spot a horseshoe crab flipped on its back. "Another dead thing," she thinks and remembers her childhood: "This is the ancient armor my father would pack / in plastic bags every August." But the creature is not dead, and it scuttles away once the husband flips it over "like a speeding turtle or a dusty shoe with legs." The crab's journey is toward its home in the sea; many of the poems of *Rough Knowledge* are about remembering home, making a home and returning home. And home is the people Poreba's character remembers: husband, grandparents and sibling, in a variety of settings, including her dreams.

Gardens, rain, rooms, and doors are recurring motifs in these poems, and especially doors, doing what doors do: acting as both barrier and way to enter or exit worlds and memories. In the poem "City of Doors," Poreba writes:

> In dreams, doors are never the point—air alone
>
> can keep you at as much a distance from your old love,
>
> who sits at a party on a patio and does not see you.
>
> . . . I grew up in a city guarded

by heavy glass doors with gold-plated handles you had
to use the force of your whole body to open. . .”

Doors appear again in the poem “Entry:” The way / our eyes in sleep open wide / the landing of our dreams, where doors / deceive us.”

Settings of the poems shift between New York City, where Poreba grew up, and Tallahassee, Florida. There are a number of poems detailing apartment living that contrast with poems about the remodeling of a house, the house of the marriage, a marriage for which gardening is the symbol. Poems give a glimpse of the speaker’s life as teacher, wife, daughter and grandchild.

Variations of stanza formatting—long- and short-lined couplets and quatrains, an ebb and flow of margins—add visual interest to this book. Most of the poems are free verse, but a few are not. Poreba presents pantoums where, of course, “everything happens twice” or more than twice and there is always return.

Rhyme exists like underwater rocks that shape the running of water. The poem “Courting, Paynes Prarie,” for example, is a melody of true and slant rhyme made less predictable by enjambment and variations on the lengths of the lines:

In the shadows of a palm grove,
I wait for him to move

closer. He has stumbled
to this bench like the wanderer who fumbled

from Poseidon’s wicked pocket
into the solace of an olive thicket.

Overall, Poreba’s imagery is delicate, more fine-pencil sketching than bold brush stroke. When an image does flash in detailed richness, it is even more striking in contrast—a sudden and memorable wash of color among fine lines. The book is titled *Rough Knowledge*, but very little

in this book is rough, not cadences, nor diction, nor the moves from present to past and back, with many a recurrence that "ends, and starts again."

--Melanie A. Rawls

Listening to the Sleep Talker

Lenny DellaRocca, NightBallet Press: Cleveland. 2015.

The twenty-one prose poems in Lenny DellaRocca's chapbook give life to the twilight between dream and wakefulness in a way that hasn't been done before. Instead of a flood of inchoate images we often associate with such a state, we are drawn into the rarified world of a child's imagination charged by a fresh simplicity utterly devoid of poetic wiles. For the child wizard to cast his spell on us we need to listen closely to the Sleep Talker, not only to remember the magic but become part of it.

Stripped of exhibitionism, these poems are neither emotional narratives nor cerebral puzzles—certainly not a theater of performing arts of the sort we see under construction in the poem "Strangers in a Grove," where imagination becomes industrialized as part of suburban sprawl. A jester with "bells a-jangle on his cap," "a woman with blue hair" and "a bare-breasted dwarf" have come to replace the poet who will always need an arbor and peace to dream. "Twilight Grove," the next poem, brings into stark relief the raucous circus freaks lining up for the theater of performing arts and the serenity of the boy and the old man resting under a poplar tree and "looking out at rows of mint and basil." The sentences are so rich in sensual imagery that we hear a soft refrain of sound that rises and falls as naturally as breathing. The old wizard is playing his wind instrument in his sleep. The strongest poems in the volume are about the "invisible child," free of the borders of memory, recharging little things, trivial objects, forgotten tastes, smells with a magical glow. And he has the ability to morph into just about anything: for example, a strange hummingbird, an anomalous creature who can only hum so no one understands him. This sound translates into mythical runes "made of letters from an alphabet learned from the barefoot lady who glowed like ice and sunlight on the other side of the fence in my backyard."

How does it happen? The morphing? Poet Denise Duhamel has remarked that like all good poets DellaRocca "steers into the skid." Could the "skid" be extending the metaphor into its blinding flash in a way that continues an oblique slide into the unknown until we become part of it? The agency of transformation into these half-dreams is through a window, a mirror, "shimmering puddles," a "spark," "glittering dust," "stars," "moonlight." They may be iconic in their familiarity as the stuff of fairy tales, but then there are images that are *absolute DellaRocca*, and it is this distinctive world that we are steered into, where the skid turns magical and where our eyes are opened to beauty in the making, and we see "sun-ripened tea," "burnt-glass," the shine of a "dull butter knife on an old wooden table." The outlines of the poet's image-scape have their own inviolable geometry: straight lines, triangles and rectangles (iPad?) ensnare the human spirit, not unlike the TV screen that children tap now and then "to tell them they are trapped." Curving objects, "circles," "melons," "raindrops," and "mangos" are not only benign but holy. But come twilight, circles may want to become triangles, the Little Dipper might slip through a window, and precisely at the intersection where angles and curves meet, it may be possible to catch an angel in flight, real enough to leave behind a tell-tale feather. The precious shape-shifty play of *angel* and *angle* is not lost on us.

In the poem "Gorging on Gorgeous," we are warned about becoming too precious, too cute or too obvious in obliqueness, in the torment of "bright acrylic" and "the corners of triangles": "The one-eyed children have no sorrow, or too much of it. They've had enough of our world, and so they wear us down with their delicious clichés. After a while, they make us sick."

The most ingenious of DellaRocca's inventions is a genie who is able to raise people from the dead, take from the rich and give to the poor, but as the power goes to his head, he morphs into a raging genie, then a vampyre ready to "sprinkle dead star dust, drink cold blood" and give everyone nightmares for having made fun of him. Another invention is "The Contraption" that can trap cosmic plasma through earphones shaped like rabbit ears. All sound ever uttered is recorded in intricate spider webs, including the chirping of extinct birds, "the sound of chalk on Einstein's blackboard, Mary Shelley's story," but only the Sleep Talker is privy to this cosmic virtual reality of sound. When he puts the earphones on his wife's head, she hears nothing. The noise abuzz in the "lunatic-genius" ear is "the laughter of all the fairy tales in the world."

The final poem, “The Man Who Teaches Children to Fly,” comes full circle back to the process of imagining. A man is under construction from “clicks of light” and “sparks from the eyes of children.” The poet tries to snap a picture of the fabulous artificer through the windows of a moving train only to see “the burnt glass of his gaze” and hear the far-off voice only children can hear. He follows imaginary footprints on the dusty floor of an empty house and moonlight on “shimmering puddles.” Once his workshop is dark and the stars come out, and the poet has made a puppet out of wood who can fall in love, invent a dreamer who can remake his maker and a Sleep Talker who can teach us how to fly, he serves him “tea with a touch of bergamot.”

--Peter Hargitai

Pelvis with Distance

Jessica Jacobs. White Pine Press: Buffalo, New York. 2015.

In *Pelvis with Distance* Jessica Jacobs brilliantly “re-visions” the biography genre as a poetry collection: these poems tell the story of Georgia O’Keeffe’s life through imagery as striking as the painter’s work. But more than an exploration of O’Keeffe’s life and art through academic research, Jacobs describes her own specific experience living in a primitive cabin in the New Mexico desert only a few miles from the painter’s modest hacienda in Abiquiu. The poet, like the artist, uses this barren yet striking landscape as inspiration to craft her work.

The book opens with an introduction to the narrator’s new desert home:

> *From the outside, the cabin is a small adobe butte: thick-walled and squat, with a roofed wooden deck that doubles its claim of desert. The shower, a black bag, dangles from a beam, and the outhouse, two minutes’ walk to the east, is a toilet on a platform with no walls. . . . There’s no electricity, no reception.*

As the poem lyrically captures the surrounding landscape, the narrator makes her connection to her subject:

Then sixteen miles of rutted dirt road, the flat top of Pedernal hovering above—the mountain Georgia O'Keeffe painted obsessively, half-joking that God told her if she painted it often enough it would be hers.

To write these poems, I've come to live in her backyard.

Jacob's book is not a straightforward, narrative re-telling of O'Keefe's life. Instead, the writer has gifted us with image-driven snippets that succinctly capture significant moments in the painter's career. Interspersed with these glimpses, composed as separate poems, Jacob's offers her own thoughts and inner struggles as she spends a month alone in the stark canyons and mountains of New Mexico. One of the great strengths of the collection is how the poet realizes her own connection to the land is as deep as O'Keefe's. The poem "In the Canyon IV (Reflections)" reveals:

My edges hazy as the noon desert,
salted as a body beneath that zenith sun, until I am prepared
to slot into the coal black hold of a moonless night.

And in the piece "Black Abstraction" the famous painter's obsession with the landscape is highlighted in these lines:

. . . I cross
into Texas where dusk ignites
marigold and smolders fast

to bone black. A hard right brings me
to desert. I stop. The air is cold but the car's
bonnet is warm beneath my shoulders.

So dark there is no horizon: all feels
like sky. . . .

The next afternoon, New Mexico.

Trees stoop, the earth reddens, houses
hug the ground. . . .

Another significant aspect of Jacob's collection is her poignant focus on the relationship between O'Keefe and her mentor and eventual husband, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz. The poems describe everything from their initial meeting in "Alfred Stieglitz at 291 (First Encounter)" ("—there he was: // a summer thunderstorm in that bricked-in / brownstone.") to her final letter to him in 1946 ("—I don't like to think of you being ill and / me not there—It bothers me"). Some of the book's pieces sing the narrative in either O'Keefe's or Stieglitz's voice reacting to a photograph or painting, and other works are actually found poems within the correspondence between the two artists. In either case, Jacob's neatly unfolds the intellectual and passionate side of their relationship.

Pelvis with Distance is a striking first collection by Jessica Jacobs. As she revels in and is inspired by the great modernist painter, the poems' lines passionately celebrate the love of place: "Every day this week / feels like Sunday. / From the roof, // I listen to Easter / until earth / and wall slip // their skins, / become one / ceaseless . . ." Jacob's debut will ceaselessly haunt any reader; we can only look forward to more.

--*Michael Trammell*