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The Real World

Without Fear

Ryan Van Winkle, *Tomorrow, We Will Live Here*

The poems in Ryan van Winkle's debut collection are disarmingly 'straight-talking'. An American now based in Edinburgh, his most obvious predecessor is Frost, though there is also a pointed engagement with Whitman. From Frost, Van Winkle brings the vocal technique of luring the reader into fraudulent comfort (then whipping the rug away); from Whitman, the ability to meditate, large-scale, on the traditions of 'westering' and self-invention. To both these staples of the North American diet he brings new and unnerving perspectives. This is not a book for the faint-hearted. But neither ought it to be.

Heaney has said there are two types of poem: one gives you the rosy glow of recognition, the other disorients, annuls your set coordinates. Van Winkle's poetry wears the garb of the former, but belongs in the latter category. He is not formally or stylistically experimental – while the poems are rarely in fixed forms, neither are they 'avant-garde' in the sense of being materially fragmented. They are, however, subversive, in that they tread where others fear to, and force the reader to admit complicity. It is not that the work inhabits 'unfamiliar' territory. Rather, it wallows in the dark and disregarded areas with which we strive to keep a silent truce.

A case in point is the startling first poem in the sequence 'Everybody Always Talking About Jesus', where we meet two children, a boy and a girl, engaged in sadistic activity in the attic of an all-American home:

I got a girl up in the attic
the summer I turned ten. Her shirt went damp
and we played a game where I'd strip and she'd slap

my calves with my dead grandma's cane.

Frequently, we are manipulated into filling the blanks of these scenarios, as in 'Hunter Boy & Girls at the Stream', which insinuates, but doesn't actually speak of, teenage incest. Or 'The First Time I Touched Her', a virtuoso display of sense evocation which, Browning-style, adopts a psychotic persona who both self-protects and wants his insalubrious doings to be known. Voice is key: like Frost, Van Winkle plays the 'everyman' to corner the unsuspecting and, perhaps more forcefully, to strip away the cladding of social pretence. Again, it's less that these characters are irregular guys posing as regular ones, than that, beneath the surface, there's no such thing as regular – not as we know it, anyway.

This is part of a wider debate conducted in the collection between opposing facets of America and of human nature in general. Put crudely, the

parties are divisible as follows: west versus east; the uncontrollable versus the ordered; hard-bitten versus 'soft'; regressive or static versus 'progressive'. As with all good workers of a binary, however, Van Winkle slips the noose when it comes to making hard and fast distinctions between polarities. Habitually, he sets up clear scenarios, then unpockets a stick to conjure murk. In 'I Was a Fat Boy', the stream-lined narrator is caught off guard: in the very midst of moralising ('I cannot imagine what it would be like to ride / up the hills I knew when I was fat') he stumbles on this astonishing realisation, which, we infer, propels him back into limitless gorging:

I am an empty house,
my face is nameless . . .
The world is not mine

Likewise, in 'Oregon Trail', what limbers up as nostalgic retrieval ends as a blankness in the face of which language falters and fails. As the ordered is infected by the wild in 'I Was a Fat Boy', so, here, the mythical west assumes the hue of third stage capitalism – of Cairns Craig's 'endless endlessness', beyond 'history', beyond destination or purpose:

We'll send colors:
postcards of nothing,

of range and empty pink.
Postcards of more west.

Wake and still October,
the west open. Pink.

Also a skilled reviser of the poetic sub-genre, van Winkle shines in poems like 'Babel' and, more seriously, 'The Day He Went to War', which manages, in eight lines, to capture an entire zeitgeist in relation to conflict. It does so, furthermore, with a touch that is dangerously light, resonant beyond mere poignancy, and profoundly, disturbingly accurate in its depiction of the place of war in contemporary society (no village gathering sending the boys off here; no torrent, but an endless, invisible trickle). This poem – it cannot be stated enough – is a huge risk: it breaks all the rules of engagement; it wholesale revises what a war poem can and ought to be in cultures where conflict is an industry, not an event. As with the rest of the poems, you may not like what it has to say. But that's its greatest recommendation: we don't live in an age when poetry should warm your heart.

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