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On Michael Ondaatje

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white, round mask of light
eclipsed, and now there is only this,
the plate, my hand, the clock, the owl,
and I caress it, as a blind man
the mirror.

("The Moon")

Perhaps it is Stafford's choice of subjects, or the measured cadence of
his lines; whatever the reason, these poems seem to carry an almost
fundamental message: slow down, watch and listen.

For me, the best poems in this book are the small (and not so small)
dramas, and what comes from them in poems like "The Moon,"
"Halfway Home," "Marriage," and "Inside the Fence." They work
something like knotholes in a construction barricade — we look in,
curious and happily amazed.

Lex Runciman

Coming Through Slaughter
Michael Ondaatje
House of Anansi Press Ltd.*
Toronto, Canada
4.95 paper

In the Pound tradition of history as a series of fragments woven by
highly lyrical prose and poetry, Ondaatje explores the inner thoughts
and emotions of jazz pioneer Buddy Bolden. The obsessive nature of
Bolden's creative energy produces a "landscape of suicide," an
inevitability of loss. Bolden's peripheral encounters with the
prostitutes of New Orleans, his two extended love affairs, a
mysterious friendship with Bellocq, the photographer of whores, and
those he groomed at his barber shop, are the backdrops for Bolden's
unsettled life.

With almost nothing important outside his music, Bolden attempts
to contribute a unique possibility to jazz. He talks about his
forerunners:

My fathers were those who put their bodies over barbed wire.
For me. To slide over into the region of hell. Through their
sacrifice they seduced me into the game. They showed me their
autographed pictures and told me about their women and they
told me even bigger names all over the country. My fathers
failing. Dead before they hit the wire.

Continuity is absent from everyone’s life. Reaching out to the
world often becomes a self-destructive gesture. As in Bolden’s return
to Nora, his wife, after two years away from music and New Orleans,
there is little peace in his homecoming.

Not enough blankets here . . . Found an old hunting jacket. I
sleep against its cloth full of hunter’s sweat . . . I went to sleep
as soon as I arrived and am awake now after midnight.
Scratch of suicide at the side of my brain.

But Bolden hates stasis, as other men “hate to see themselves change.”
This provides an impetus for his music. He continually seeks new
limits for his music, as well as the strained relationships with those
who loved him.

In a final and obsessive attempt to mirror music to the rhythms of
his world, Bolden blows his cornet to the flesh-dance of a woman
taunting and testing his music.

Notes more often now. She hitting each note with her body
before it is even out so I know what I do through her. God this
is what I wanted to play for, if no one else I always guessed
there would be this, this mirror somewhere.

It is this audience, this woman, who gives Boddy Bolden the energy,
the freedom to blow until blood comes, his mouth frozen to the
cornet.

Willy Cornesh catching him as he fell outward, covering him,
seeing the red on the white shirt thinking it is torn and the red
undershirt is showing and then lifting the horn sees the blood
spill out from it as he finally lifts the metal from the hard kiss
of the mouth.

It is energy Bolden needs, enough energy to go insane and finally gain
peace and freedom from the world. If nothing else, the clarity of
Bolden’s inevitable destruction gives us the risks of the creative process.

*Coming Through Slaughter is also available in America from the
“Asphodel Book Shop,” 17192 Ravenna Rd., Burton, Ohio, 44021.

Terry Nathan

Man In A Rowboat
Tom Rea
Copper Canyon Press
Port Townsend, Washington 1977
$2.50, paper

Dear Rick: I’m in Browning, travelling light.
The stars are closer here, nearer to all things,
even my backpack. Rick, we don’t need much:
One raincoat, an extra shirt (L.L. Bean), a can
of smoked salmon and Tom Rea’s book. You should
read it, friend, the poems are bright as a drum.
Each one unfolds quiet and quickly, the great way
of the photo album on Sunday evenings. But see,
these snapshots aren’t your regular fishing trips,
these here poems catch a lost strange land. Take
the opening Poem: “There were/ no words yet.” Or
High Plains, Wyoming: “But there was a time/ you
could float to the ocean in a month,/ just drift,
no portages, no falls.” Or even The Climber Takes
A Breather. There’s the man in the strange awkward
land, the one who (isn’t) “bred for ledges.” See,
even the title poem starts “There was a lake once,”
and flows on to be a love poem to the joy of living
More Uncle Ezra and Mr. Kawabata: these poems are elegies
to Wildtime, to pure and beautiful Mystery. Take the hard
poem The Wolfer or the sad sad Bear. These strong or
subtle violences toward the very wildness within us
must eventually cause our own imprisonment. “His cousin
is dying in the Denver zoo/ one cage down from the pool
where seals/ try anything for fun.” See, we are capable,