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Robert Hass, *Praise*

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It is difficult to speak briefly of Robert Hass' latest collection of poems, *Praise*. They are such considered poems and their concerns are so intricately woven that one feels almost destructive in isolating certain aspects to talk about. It's like going after fine silk with a machete. Yet there are threads of concern running through the poems in *Praise* that deserve to be looked at. The book is, I think, one of the best to come out in a long while.

These are poems of fear:

> Ah, love, this is fear. This is fear and syllables... ("Sunrise")

of loss:

> All the new thinking is about loss. In this way it resembles all the old thinking. The idea, for example, that each particular erases the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk of that black birch is, by his presence, some tragic falling away from a first world of undivided light. Or the other notion that because there is in this world no one thing to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds, a word is elegy to what it signifies... ("Meditation at Lagunitas")

of wonder and discovery. In "Meditation of Lagunitas" the very act of talking about loss conjures up a memory in the narrator's mind:

> There was a woman I made love to and I remembered how, holding her small shoulders in my hands sometimes, I felt a violent wonder at her presence like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat, muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish called *pumpkin seed.*
Most of all, these are poems of the “mensural polyphony” of desire. In fact, desire is at the center of these poems, the pivot on which “... we turn to each other and turn to each other/ in the mother air of what we want.” (Sunrise) Desire creates our feeling of loss: “Longing, we say, because desire is full/ of endless distances.” (“Meditation . . .”); and our fears:

Ah, love, this is fear. This is fear and syllables and the beginnings of beauty. We have walked the city, a flayed animal signifying death, a hybrid god who sings in the desolation of filth and money a song the heart is heavy to receive. We mourn otherwise. Otherwise the ranked monochromes, the death-teeth of that horizon, survive us as we survive pleasure. What a small hope. What a fierce small privacy of consolation. What a dazzle of petals for the poor meat. (“Sunrise”)

But desire is just as intimately connected to the sense of wonder and discovery. In “To a Reader” Hass says, “Having slept in wet meadows,/ I am not through desiring.” And in “Winter Morning in Charlottesville” he observes, “How sexual/ this morning is the otherwise/ quite plain/ white-crowned sparrow’s/ plumed head!” Desire is, to Hass, even more primal than these experiences. It is, at its most basic, simply motion:

She is first seen dancing which is a figure nor for art or prayer or the arousal of desire but for action simply... Though she draws us to her, like a harbor or a rivermouth she sends us away. (“The Origin of Cities”)

It is the primary impulse from which all action arises:

She dances, the ships go forth, slaves and peasants labor in the fields, maimed soldiers ape monkeys for coins outside the wineshops, the craftsmen work in bronze and gold, accounts are kept carefully, what goes out, what returns. (“The Origin of Cities”)

This sense of desire, though, is not so much Freud’s notion of sex as the source of psychic energy; rather it is more as George Seferis says in one of his diaries: “In essence, the poet has one theme: his live body.”
Desire brings us to our animal selves:

Blind, with eyes like stars, like astral flowers, from the purblind mating sickness of the beasts we rise, trout-shaken, in the gaping air, in terror, the scarlet sun-flash leaping from the pond’s imagination of a deadly sea. Fish, mole, we are the small stunned creatures inside these human resurrections . . .

(“Sunrise”)

The object of desire may be something as simple and flippant as a “Yellow Bicycle”:

*Her song to the yellow bicycle:*

The boats on the bay have nothing on you, my swan, my sleek one!

Or it might be

. . . the huge dark of sex, the sharp sweet light, light if it were water raveling, rancor, tenderness like rain.

(“Santa Lucia”)

In the end, though, desire has less to do with sex than with the quotidian, the commonplace:

I think the erotic is not sexual, only when you’re lucky. That’s where the path forks. It’s not the riddle of desire that interests me; it is the riddle of good hands, chervil in a windowbox, the white page of a book, someone says I’m tired, someone turning on the light.

(“Santa Lucia”)

“The first fact of the world is that it repeats itself,” says Hass in a recent article in *Antaeus* on form.¹ Our first sense of form, of shape to the world comes from experiencing as an infant the wonder and repetition of “. . . footsteps, a face, the smell of hair and tobacco, the cooing of syllables.” (330) From this repetition comes the discovery
that things repeat themselves, a promise of shapeliness to the world. Though most adults seem to lose it, the power of repetition is still fresh in children, as in the magic of setting the table:

That is mastery: spoon, knife, folded napkins, fork; glasses all around. The place for the plate is wholly imagined. Mother sits here and father sits there and this is your place and this is mine.

(“The Beginning of September”)

The promise of orderliness in the world, the repetition of days—that is what desire, in a sense, represents; the power of wonder:

. . . days that are the good flesh continuing.
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings, saying blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.

(“Meditation . . .”)

Repetition, however, is not always benevolent; it can easily lead to the mundane:

These are the dog days, unvaried except by accident. . . .

* * *

. . . the stunned days,
faceless, droning in the juice of rotten quince, the flies, the heat.

(“Songs to Survive the Summer”)

For Hass the quotidian is two-edged. It is, on the one hand, numbing:

. . . someone somewhere had set the old words to the old tune: we live by easy habit and it doesn’t hurt.

(“Old Dominion”)

The dullness of thoughtless repetition is ultimately death:

. . . every thing touched casually, lovers, the images
of saviors, books, the coin  
I carried in my pocket  
till it shone, it is  

all things lustered  
by the steady thoughtlessness  
of human use.  

("Songs to Survive the Summer")

On the other hand, there remains in Hass the child’s ability to extract wonder from the mundane, to discover magic in the “...thwack...thwack of tennis balls being hit...” ("Old Dominion") and

... to emerge, where the juniper  
is simply juniper and there is the smell  
of new shingle, a power saw outside  
and inside a woman in the bath,  
a scent of lemon and a drift of song,  
a heartfelt imitation of Bessie Smith.  

("Transparent Garments")

The ability to embrace the given.  
Part of the magic of these poems is Hass’ skill at turning repetition into ritual, the mundane into the sacred:

Here are some things to pray to in San Francisco: the bay, the mountain, the goddess of the city; remembrance, forgetting, sudden pleasure, loss; sunrise and sunset; salt; the tutelary gods of Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Basque, French, Italian and Mexican cooking; the solitude of coffee houses and museums; the virgin, mother and window moons; hilliness, vistas; John McClaren; Saint Francis; the Mother of Sorrows; the rhythm of any life still whole through three generations...

("The Beginning of September")

Praise, not only as a stance against fear, as the opening epigram suggests:

We asked the captain what course of action he proposed to take toward a beast so large, terrifying, and unpredictable. He hesitated to answer, and then said judiciously:  
"I think I shall praise it."

but also as a way of embracing the mundane:
A different order of religious awe:
agony & meat, everything plain afterwards.
("Santa Lucia")

Crucial to Hass' sense of wonder is his feeling for the importance of art and language. He believes that "... art (is) as humanly necessary as bread." (332) "Survival is the art around here" he says in "Not Going to New York: A Letter." In another poem he suggests that art, though it may be symbolic, is also very real:

The gate
with the three snakes is burning,
symbolically, which doesn't mean
the flames can't hurt you.
("Like Three Fair Branches from One Root Deriv'd")

Art has the power to help us overcome loss and fear:

Then I am cast down
into the terror of childhood,
into the mirror and the greasy knives,
the dark
woodpile under the fig trees
in the dark.

It is only
the malice of voices, the old horror
that is nothing, parents
quarreling, somebody
drunk.

I don't know how we survive it.
On this sunny morning
in my life as an adult, I am looking
at one clear pure peach
in a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe.
It is all the fullness that there is
in light . . .

A moment ago I felt so sick
and so cold
I could hardly move.
("Child Naming Flowers")

Literature too is a stay against fear. In "Songs to Survive the Summer," the narrator and his daughter
...hide together

in her books...

*  *  *

And when she finally is asleep

I try out Chekov's
tenderness to see
what it can save.

However, art and literature do us harm as well. The woman
speaking in "Santa Lucia" dislikes the sexual objectification
she finds in some art. She prefers instead the purity of the
commonplace:

Walking in the galleries at the Louvre,
I was, each moment, naked and possessed.
Tourists gorged on goosenecked Florentine girls
by Pallaiuolo. He sees me like a painter.
I hear his words for me: white, gold.
I'd rather walk the city in the rain.
Dog shit, traffic accidents. Whatever god
there is dismembered in his Chevy.

Though literature and art are at times soothing, they aren't saving.
They involve a certain loss as well:

The love of books
is for children
who glimpse in them

a life to come, but
I have come
to that life and

feel uneasy
with the love of books...

*  *  *

There is no other world.
("Songs to Survive the Summer")

The characters in literature
... cannot save me any more than I, weeping
over Great Russian Short

Stories in summer,
under the fatted figs,
saved you. Besides

it is winter there.
They are trying out
a new recipe for onion soup.

("Songs . . ")

Yes, the characters in literature and the imagery in art are real, but they too have their “separate fidelities.” Alone, they can’t save us any more than desire or the mundane or the sacred.

The crux of the matter in Hass’ work seems to be the power of words. Many of the poems in this collection are about language, the power of articulation to evoke fear, wonder, loss and discovery. These poems are, in a sense, talismans against the fear and loss. Words are all we really have and are as important to our existence as our body: “There are moments when the body is as numinous/ as words . . .” (“Meditation . . .”) Speech intrinsically connects us to both fear and beauty: “Ah, love, this is fear. This is fear and syllables/ and the beginnings of beauty.” (“Sunrise”) Though “. . . a word is elegy to what it signifies” (“Meditation . . .”), “. . . the word (also) originates its species . . .” (“Winter Morning in Charlottesville”).

More importantly, since this world is the only one there is, words help affirm the mundane. In “Weeds,” one of the loveliest poems in the book, Hass demonstrates this quality of words:

Horse is Lorca’s word, fierce as wind,
or melancholy, gorgeous, Andalusian:
    white horse grazing near the river dust;
and parsnip is hopeless,
    second cousin to the rhubarb
which is already second cousin
    to an apple pie. Marrying the words
to the coarse white umbels sprouting
    on the first of May is history
but conveys nothing; it is not the veined
    body of Queen Anne’s lace
I found, bored, in a spring classroom
from which I walked hands tingling
for the breasts that are meadows in New Jersey
in 1933; it is thick, shaggier, and the name
is absurd. It speaks of durable
unimaginative pleasures: reading Balzac,
fixing the window sash, rising
to a clean kitchen, the fact
that the car starts & driving to work
through hills where the roadside thickens
with the green ungainly stalks,
the bracts and bright white flowerets
of horse-parsnips.

“Words are abstract,” Hass says in “The Beginning of September,”
“but words are abstract is a dance, car crash, heart’s delight.” The
power of words for Hass lies in the shifting polyphony between sound
and sense, between what words mean and what they evoke. Poetry
arises from “. . . decay and a created/ radiance (which) lies hidden
inside words . . . (and) memory/ folds them into living.” (“Not Going
to New York: A Letter”) Utterance and memory—that is the power of
poetry. As he says of Pasternak, who is in the process of translating a
phrase from his native Russian:

He would have noticed the articles as a native speaker wouldn’t:
a bird, the haunch; and understood a little what persists
when, eyes half-closed, lattice shadow on his face,
he murmured the phrase in the dark vowels of his mother tongue.
(“Not Going to New York: A Letter”)

Yet, “there are limits to the imagination.” (Heroic Simile) There are
the “painted boundaries.” (“Old Dominion”) The imagination can
only do so much, as he suggests in talking of the two woodsmen in
“Heroic Simile”:

I don’t know
whether they’re Japanese or Mycenean
and there’s nothing I can do.
The path from here to that village
is not translated.

Limits must be set, form must be established:

The squalor of mind
is formlessness,
informis,
the Romans said of ugliness,
it has no form . . .
(“Songs . . .”)

“It’s all in/ shapeliness, give your/ fears a shape.” ("Songs . . .")
Here, perhaps, is Hass’ greatest achievement in this collection: the incredible range of material he manages to shape into coherent form. There are epigraphs, epigrams, anecdotes, dittys, prose pieces, haikus, recipes and passages lifted from Chekov. He is, as he says in his Antaeus essay, “. . . making form against all odds.” (373) Some poems are held together by association, others by repetition of key phrases, the unravelling of a central image or by a baroque-like layering of themes. These poems are

. . . stories,
songs, . . .

curiously shaped; they
are the frailest stay against
our fears.
(“Songs . . .”)

We must, Hass contends, “. . . find forms the imagination can inhabit . . .” (337) Hass has succeeded abundantly.

There is still much to say about Hass’ poems. I have yet to cleave and hold up sections concerned with food, urbanity, self-consciousness, morality. But before I put away my machete, let me lop off one last piece, this as an example of the humor that runs throughout Hass’ work. It is the epigraph that opens the book’s second section:

It’s funny, isn’t it, Karamazov,
all this grief and pancakes afterward . . .

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1Hass, Robert. “One Body: Some Notes on Form.” In Antaeus, No. 30/31, p. 329. Further references will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses following the quote.