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On Lex Runciman

Jack Heflin

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Luck

Lex Runciman

Owl Creek Press (1981)

Whether Lex Runciman is writing about the gooey salamander he pulls from the mud of an abandoned boat, the Oregon rain, or his unborn daughter, he always brings a high level of wonder and intensity to his poems. He has an eye for the unforgettable experiences we carry as charms in our pockets forever. The title poem, as much as any other in the book, demonstrates this quality.

Imagine imprisonment
in a tree

hemlock coastal spruce
sunlight taps the brown bark
and your fingers
pressing from the inside
feel a tapping

do not consider history
family the woman
you cannot name your children's

breathing
remember the cliff face
the pure calm
of falling and the solid
ledge your flesh fell into

remember that cold salt water
carrying you away strollers
watch from the beach
the sun
white on the faces

and here this morning
it is raining

it's an endless list

An endless list, yes. With another poet this line might seem unearned, but I have the feeling Runciman's consciousness has been focused on the lyric detail for a long time. I suppose it's what Stafford was talking about when he said "poetry . . . is not something one takes up and begins to do; it is something that everyone is caught up in early, and a few keep on doing."

Many of the poems in *Luck* are historical. "Seasonal," the poem which opens the book, honors the Scottish dead, his heritage.

Presbyterian, they are gone
from the bright personality of rooms
alone to strange countries.
Empty their houses and farms
in solid pictures, young
like no one ever young, the whin
out of season and the season
gone for kissing.

Gone any evidence they were
ever happy in this country,
or unhappy, grim
weeping in the rain.
Say they lived
and died without regret.
Stones mark the hillside
where they lay, their mythical figures
and whalebone whispering in the grass.

Throughout the poem, Runciman breaks the predominantly iambic rhythm by beginning sentences with trochees—"Gone the Scottish Women," "Gone shortbread and oatcakes," and so on. The poet is driven to statement, his technique forcing energy when there is no cultural energy left, only memory. And if that memory is not recorded there will be no monuments for the dead.

These connections with the past place the poet in a continuum that allows him to take himself out of time. But he is always part of that landscape he inhabits. "The Oregon Rain" ends,

And the next day
when it rains, as it must
as everyone believes it will,
let us say we shall be ready—
our slickers and particular hats—
and become as natural as mosses
and one-celled swimmers,
as natural as the color green,
at home in this climate.

With an ear capable of producing the gorgeous internal rhyme of "our slickers and particular hats," Runciman will be writing poems long after this first book is out of print. I hope the book moves outside the regional audience he has already gathered.

Jack Heflin