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Complex Sleep by Tony Tost

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TONY TOST

Complex Sleep (Kuhl House Poets, 2007)

Tony Tost's *Complex Sleep* is a fugue-like arrangement riffing on such disparate themes as semiotics, nature, technology, power, and the project of writing itself. Tost invokes figures as diverse as Isaiah, Socrates, and Orpheus. The reader, in danger of becoming lost in the fragmentary nature of these compositions, is constantly rescued by the writer's many returns to the thematic scaffolding. This may be due in part to the recursive nature of the project. In a footnote to the title poem, Tost writes:

"Complex Sleep" is an index of alphabetically arranged sentences and significant syntactical units (presented in sentence form) that made up a prose poem called "Complex Sleep" which was written between August of 2004 and February of 2005 and was intended as a reconsideration of statements, assumptions and values embedded in previously written pieces. For instance, the sentence "Two swing sets are nearly touching" from my book *Invisible Bride* was rewritten in *Complex Sleep* as "Two sentences are nearly touching." Most of the sentences however, diverged much more distinctly from a seed sentence or line.

The result is anaphora—a litany of lines wherein the alphabetical repetition of words becomes an expansive meditation on the multivalence of the words themselves: "A voice in the body / drowns a voice in the mind. A voice / invested with power makes me white with desire." The meditation is quickly broken as the alphabetical progression moves forward, disorienting the reader: "A wiener dog on the way home (judging the dead) eating a possum." The method of composition undercuts our conventional notions of context and asks us to consider the ultimate arbitrariness of those notions.

A similar style of formal constraint rules "Squint." Each line is constructed of four short phrasal units separated by commas, creating

a rhythm that builds steam with each added modification. Content-wise, the phrases have less to do with description or elaboration of meaning than with how the juxtaposition of ambiguous words with more concretely signifying words creates meaning. For instance, in the phrase “one is often its child,” “child” is the only unambiguous unit—every other word relies solely on context to reveal its purpose. The entire line reads, “The goal is far distant, it becomes the wind, one is often its child, of its inner eye.” Again, the line itself is abstract rather than specific and also relies on its context to give it meaning. Unfortunately for meaning junkies, the poem as a whole isn’t necessarily forthcoming. I am reminded of William S. Burroughs’ cut-up method of composition. If one were to cut the poem in quarters and rearrange the phrasal units according to a set pattern, the assumptions and values involved would remain intact and the form would be maintained.

This is not to say that *Complex Sleep* is devoid of meaning. It is to say that, for some of these poems, meaning is in evidence more in the form than in the words themselves. In “World Jelly” (the title of which, we are told in a note, was derived from the Guided By Voices Song Title Generator), the reader is treated to a number of lines that seem humorous at first blush: “Prom king grill work,” “Up upon night / with Rufus Iscariot / eating meat like / there was a stalking” or “Asshole serpent / write this down.” But this is hardly a whimsical poem. Other couplets serve as interludes of gravity: “Compare notes / with the beaten animal” and “Words taken / away from families.”

These are themes that crop up throughout the book—intimacy and isolation from the natural world, the loss of the ability to speak—and they mark a dark progression in the poem that leads us through negation and acts of cruelty. We are never comfortably in one tonal space before the terms have shifted. The speaker says, “Sun I do not / want you on my back” and asks, “When can I / be cruel again.” But the speaker does not appear to be wholly without conscience or feeling, “Desire for brethren / was not prompted / accept the light / where no light is due / The affect of our happiness / and so easily supplied / form is evidence / of the lonesome rhythm.” In presenting these contradictions so starkly,

Tost creates an almost unbridgeable dichotomy between the desire for brethren and loneliness to disturbing effect.

So it is with some relief that we reach the untitled prose poem preceding "An Emperor's Nostalgia." The justified lines are some visual comfort, as is the fairy-tale-like narrative wherein an emperor effectively wreaks havoc upon his kingdom as he spreads decrees (which are more like poetic declamations than orders; he tells his subjects "we are the currency of heaven") by word of mouth. What ensues is like the parlor game "telephone," as the decree alters through repeated tellings. "In the North, for instance, his subjects believe that, as in Heaven, the kingdom's new currency is art." It is a particularly telling translation on the subject's part and the kingdom disintegrates as artistic works are traded for commodities. To fix the mess he's made, the emperor "composes the story of his kingdom, which becomes, miraculously, his means of buying it back." There is much to be inferred here—the relative value of speech vs. writing, the absurdity of the emperor engaging in the very same economy that has ruined his kingdom as a means of imposing order, the power the Word has over people.

"An Emperor's Nostalgia," then, is the incantatory antidote to the mistakes made in the prose piece. Whereas the prose closes in the terror of the kingdom, the speaker of this poem proclaims, "This is the end of terror." A twelve-part romantic address ostensibly set in a domestic context (with house/home ripe for interpretation), "An Emperor's Nostalgia" is the emotional center of the book and, as such, is worth the price of admission.

In a mere 122 pages, *Complex Sleep* manages to hit an impossibly wide variety of registers, and that alone is a feat to be reckoned with. There is one characteristic, however, that is absolutely consistent: Even in a sequence of non sequiturs, the writing is lyrically breathtaking. Perhaps it can be taken as the compliment I mean it to be when I say that I was exhausted as I turned the last page of the book. Tost asks the reader to do a considerable amount of work in order to engage his poems. Once engaged, though, I couldn't help but be caught up in the milieu.

Reviewed by Laurie White