on Terry Stokes

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CRIMES OF PASSION
Poems by Terry Stokes
Alfred A. Knopf, paperback, $1.95

"The poet . . . makes up value as he goes along. The process of employing all the devices of craft in order to discover significant experience becomes a prime part of the texture of the work. Nothing is then left out, and the audience is compelled to undergo the experience that the artist suffered, is asked to endure with the artist the pain and wonder of creation."—Thomas Parkinson

"Got a little poison, got a little gun . . ."—John Berryman

1.

Reading over the present crop of poems in our little magazines, I keep returning to the idea, not wanting to listen to it, of course, but thinking it anyway, that poem after poem might have been written by the same person. After blaming myself for bad reading, for somehow missing the subtleties of texture and, you know, meaning, I begin to believe that something may be wrong and look for reasons. Among them: the wave of Spanish translations now serving as models for young poets; the relative ease of having poems published, hence, certified "good enough" (in one cover letter I saved this year, a young poet listed 88 magazines, newspapers and anthologies he'd been in during the past nine months); and, in what James Wright rightly sees as an absence of a workable criticism of our own work, a situation where anything is allowed to constitute a poem. It's this last item that's the most troublesome. Of course, anything can be a poem if the imagination makes it one. But we are getting too much undigested grist these days, too much of the self-evident "I am now going to the window, folks, and here's what I'm seeing" school, also, too much of the arbitrary "artichoke on the fire hydrant" school. It is a failure that shows up in the voice of the poem. We've begun to settle for bland, monotonous voices, voices which seem to indicate, amazingly, boredom on the part of the poet. We forget that poems have something to do with human utterance. Finding a strong voice is a joy, and if it's true that we are in a temporary holding pattern on critical standards, it seems that, if not the best, this is at least the most accessible test for authenticity. Which brings us to Terry Stokes.

In Crimes of Passion Terry Stokes hits his best broken-field stride. The flashes of genius and irreverence that kept popping up in his first
book (*Natural Disasters, 1971*) like nasty little windows into teen-age heaven, erupt now into a barrage of poems that pepper the emotions. It’s not that this book contains any more than the few fully successful poems that any good book does, but Stokes understands the difference between emotional precision and the perfect poem. Even his failures are worth listening to.

Unlike the followers of Merwin who believe language and image ought to be skinnied down to the faintest gesture, Stokes’ imagination is inclusive, open to the intrigues of endlessly occurring possibilities, as he writes in “All Morning”: “I will shelter anyone / who needs it, it’s always been / my problem.” We remember what Emerson said about poets *naming* things. Stokes realizes that the names for emotions are never easy words, that, in fact, emotions are elusive and damn complicated, that the whole poem, with all its internal collisions, is the name.

As the title suggests, most of the poems work on that region of the heart where love and hate fuse, where the tail feathers of small birds twitch in your ear “like soft razor blades,” where collision is inevitable, dreaded and desperately sought after at once: “All of us / have tripped into dark rooms, banging / into still objects, sweating, & / there she was—Mother.” In Stokes’ poems all values and perceptions invert rapidly. Focus on one thing, suddenly it is another, then another, the imagination darting closer and closer to the irresistible flame:

*I WON’T EXPLAIN*

The car is not big enough to be a home, 
so, I took off the wheels, nosed & decked it, painted it panther black, I won’t explain. I filled it full of water, & gave the water plenty of large pink salmon, 
I put the windshield wipers on, & planted the whole thing in the snow. At night, the interior lights hot, the children circle, saying small prayers, as if they were speaking to their lovely, but lost, mother.

He is not afraid to reach into anybody’s black bag for an image. We find: “an airplane glowing like fried mucus,” “some heather just / sitting around forever gnawing on / warm gooseberry tendons,” or “I am so greasy, I slide / down windows & only / slip back in time / to fill teenage faces with blackheads, / the night of the big dance.” But even the most outrageous images are not arbitrary and the poems do not read like surrealism as it is being practiced these days. They are often excessive, but excessive imagining is a product of the process of the poems, and more than that, it is also frequently their subject. We feel the speaker hugging the edge, beyond which insanity becomes unmanageable, recalling Berryman—a strong influence on Stokes: “I’m scared a only one thing, which is me . . .”
In his best work there is an emotional core inside each poem, to which the farthest images are still connected, as if by rubber bands strung to the breaking point. Both language and syntax are made to react quickly. We hear the weird music of these resonating tendrils of the imagination. Scenes change against a manic landscape; faces become grotesque, lovely, unfamiliar; desires become obsessions, come true, satiate themselves, turn into revulsion. Yet through all this we worm nearer and nearer to the precise, inexplicable vibration level of an emotion, for instance, the loneliness of “A Man All Grown Up Is Supposed To”:

The anger rises with metal filings &
I will not see the ground as rock &
the stones will not carry my rubber spirit.
I have hit nothing in months & the candle
stuffed in my stomach flaps fire, flaps
smoke, goes out. I have no money, I am
very sorry about that, it would make things
easier, I suppose. A man all grown up is
supposed to have a pocket full wherever he
is, & feed his woman & kiss the teeth of
the fire & dance with the trucks & pitch
pennies with the soft children.

* * * * * * *

He sighed with the moths, & asked the
linoleum, for god’s sake, forgive, his
fingers rolled around in the sink under
the hard water, & her eyes were a deer
carcass out in the woods, no one around,
no one ever there when you need them.

Or from “Dreary Tides, The Vast Hot House Of The Mind”:

The mailbox is frozen
for the duration. & the goldfish died,
how can you talk about a goldfish, white,
lying on its side, & light splintering
its skin, & the one spot where its
breathing sac is/was, red, & the breaks
in your life, frozen goldfish snapped in
half by small fingers, not meaning to
break anything...
floor, the bruised trailing off into the night looking for a soft home. But there are others, as he notes earlier in this magazine, where a character is chosen, "& he simply speaks his one song." In the remarkable jacket-blurb to *Natural Disasters*, he adds: "You adopt a persona, or you adopt your own persona in order to comprehend; to reconcile the terror of the particular day, week, year. Some days you sit back and say, 'Hmmm, the terror for the day was rather humorous,' or you say, 'Hmmm, that terror was like swallowing barbed wire.' " *Crimes of Passion* has many of these voice poems, and by and large, they work well, at turns, entertaining, frightening, illuminating, cajoling, obscene. Stokes has an impeccable ear for character, for giving a voice to some of our most desperate urges. Listen to the fine gauze of terror in the Crimes of Passion poems. "The Phone Caller":

No, no, don't please,  
oh my warm chicken, do  
not be upset, & do not  
hang up, what I wish to  
say can only be spoken  
in low tones, no, tonight  
I won't groan, I groan only when I am unhappy, do you understand? If I throw a kiss into your ears, who knows? & who cares? That is the problem, what you learn of loneliness, I teach, & I teach it slowly, so you will understand fully.

Or in "The Slasher" when he apprehends his victim stepping onto a bus:

The nylons  
flare like hot butter, & as that  
thigh bulges slightly, & then taut, I gently nudge her  
& with the razor blade, one side taped, as if a finger were lovingly running from the back of the knee toward the buttocks. She will sometimes turn & smile, feeling some part of herself freed, only hours later does she learn how deep my passion runs . . .

There are dangers in all voice poems. In the solo variety, it is like being cornered by anyone you don't like—either out of boredom or fear: you stop listening. Form betraying content. In the harmonic variety, there is the chance of creating a structure that will collapse on the poet when asked to carry too many stories; of mixing colors until the hue of macrobiotic lentil soup is achieved. What Stokes proves in
Crimes of Passion, is that the risk is worth taking. Wallace Stevens once criticized surrealists because there was “too much invention without discovery”; and yet, there cannot be discovery without risk; nothing buys you nothing. Stokes’ poems bristle with things discovered, and these things are taken to heart, even though they still may be harboring a stiletto, a hook, or a kiss that drives you mad. No question that Stokes is sometimes a quirky, difficult poet. But then, who wants an easy poet?

—David Long

WINGING IT

TO BE OF USE
poems by Marge Piercy
Doubleday Paperback  $2.95

CRUELTY
poems by Ai
Houghton Mifflin Paperback  $2.95

FEAR OF FLYING
a novel by Erica Jong
Holt, Rinehart & Winston  $6.95

One of the most important changes that could come from the Woman’s Movement is the appearance of a brand-new consciousness—a whole segment of humanity discovering and articulating itself. These three books pull it off. In each one a female voice literally sings from the page, free from the comfortable definitions and restrictions of male art. Not evolution from the masculine, it’s a revolution.

No surprise, then, that Marge Piercy is a sixties revolutionary too, as her early novel (Dance the Eagle to Sleep) and poems (Breaking Camp) demonstrated. But right up front in To Be of Use is a section of poetry called “A just anger” which deals mostly with what Piercy elsewhere calls her “third movement,” feminism. In poems like “In the men’s room(s)” and “Right thinking man” Piercy stabs with clear perception into the personality of an oppressor who is both the male chauvinist and Government The Father.