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On Anthony Ostroff and Kim Robert Stafford

Lex Runciman
The role and importance of "place" in a poet's work is much discussed these days. Seminars are held, and magazines devote entire issues to exploring the question. But where a poet lives is not half as important as how a poet uses (or does not use) place in his work.

Anthony Ostroff's *A Fall In Mexico* is set in a far place. Ostroff is a northwesterner (he lives in Portland), and the Mexico he finds is almost the direct opposite of home. It is hot, timeless, "waterless":

This is a place. Beer,
a leaking toilet, a radio song.
Men waste in chairs, dreaming wages,
sweaty women, rooms, travel.
A rusted wheel outside the door
absorbs the glare. All day it's noon.
("Traveling")

But what comes through in these carefully crafted poems is not just a sense of place, there is also a sense of the life found there. What comes through is a sense of life which is uneven at best, often grim, and which accepts that grimness as the simple order of things:

When you ask about the beggars
those who do not beg
shrug.
They say: *Los probres.*

When you ask about the beggars
they say, *Por que?*
Why do you ask?
("Asking About The Beggars")
What Ostroff presents in this book is not a mere collection of discrete poems, but rather a book length sequence; each poem like another panel in a carefully ordered succession. If there is any fault in this technique, it is the feeling that some poems are almost fillers, placed merely to control the pacing of the sequence as a whole.

But weighed against the best pieces in this book, that's a small complaint. *A Fall In Mexico* is full of fine individual poems, “In Puerto Vallarta,” “Iguanas,” and “Yucatan” among others. Equally as satisfying are the prose sections, under the general title “Notebook.” “At San Blas, the Jungle River Trip” is one of the best of these. Quoted here are two sections, one from near the beginning, and the other from near the end:

Juan pulls the cord. The motor starts at once. His friend eases us away from the bank. We head upstream. My wife's hands, clutching the gunwales on either side of her, are white. Our small son — he is six — sits very straight. He will not tip the boat. I am thinking this is not quite a dream, but it is not quite real either. We have arrived in an automobile, from a paved, modern highway. We are only three days' drive from our destination, the border, the United States, sanitation, safety, pure food and drugs, all the machineries of convenience and distant war. And here we enter the jungle.

Yet somewhere only an hour from here, our boatman swears, the river springs full-size from the mountain-side, wells up in a great crystal shock and fills a pool so wide it shows the sky. In the pool's cool transparencies huge fish, like jeweled kings, fare in stately leisure forth and back, white, black, lavender, unblinking and big-eyed. They are the spirits of all quest. One hour more, he says, across this dark, sliding face to that — which must be what but Death's most beautiful face?

“*The Bougainvillaea,*” the final poem in the sequence, is almost the book itself, in miniature. At 165 lines, it is at once a recasting and a summing up:

These Mexicos that live for us in flickerings of lost hope, neither unreal nor real, steep as our first carrion-filled ravine, high as the condor's flight, are seen from a kind of sleep. They are the truths we guess.

Richard Eberhart, in what is meant as a laudatory comment, calls *A Fall In Mexico* “in effect a poetic tour guide to ancient Mexico.” Ostroff's concerns are far more important than that. His intent, I
think, is to show us how we look at the world, by giving us both the
world and the looking. *A Fall In Mexico* does what all changes in
locale are meant to do. It offers new windows on a world that is old
everywhere, so that in that context (which is both new and not new)
we might feel we have discovered something genuine about that
world and our particular places in it.

On the surface, almost everything about Kim Stafford's book in is
contrast of Ostroff's; everything but the quality. *A Gypsy's History of
the World* is not a sequence in the way Ostroff's is, nor is it so
consistently concerned with a particular locale. Stafford too is a
northwesterner, and while some poems depend on particular places
("Orchias Island," for instance), Stafford's place is more likely to be
wherever he finds himself:

A dream flips me into the daylight.
I pry my way back:
a door opens, I enter, never
escape; the jailor sings by morning
duets through the bars with me.
I wake and out my window
by dawn a blackbird sings and
listens, sings and listens.
(“Duets”)

Yet, in spite of their clear differences, these books are not that far
apart. If Ostroff's book is, in several different ways, a sort of travel
diary in a foreign country, then *Gypsy's History* is a diary in time,
with individual moments and perceptions caught whole and forever.

For the most part, Stafford's voice is quiet, his ear faultless,
rhythms unforced. It is a deceptive quiet, for there are stunning
effects, absolutely accurate descriptions:

God's misspent dime climbs slowly
from its dark pocket in the hills.
An owl briefly knits song to silence,
the measured voice, the inner face
speaking breath to bone.

Inside, I am washing the dishes.
The power fails, lights flutter dark.
The plate I hold is all, single
link to the world, wet, smooth,
warm.
I know it like the moon,
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.*
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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