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Where Trees do their Witchy Dance

August Kleinzahler

Sleeping it Off in Rapid City: Poems, New and Selected

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In an arresting poem called "Meat," August Kleinzahler wonders:

How much meat moves
Into the city each night
The decks of its bridges tremble
In the liquefaction of sodium light
And the moon a chemical orange

The monstrous "Semitrailers strain[ing] their axles" as they "take the long curve / Over warehouses and lofts" to pour their guts into Manhattan, clog "the city's shimmering membrane" with "tons of dead lamb / Bone and flesh and offal." Garbage in, garbage out: the city where this cycle takes place is "A giant breathing cell / Exhaling its waste / From the stacks by the river / And feeding through the night."

Compared to the sheer, unrelieved ugliness of Kleinzahler's bulemic New York, the London of Eliot's *Waste Land* seems almost pastoral. In his recent *Paris Review* interview, Kleinzahler declares himself to be indebted to Basil Bunting, and, behind Bunting, to those great modernists Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. But neither Pound at his most vituperative nor Williams, surveying the "waste of broad, muddy fields" of New Jersey (his

native state as it is Kleinzahler's) have produced a body of writing in which disgust, nastiness, and revulsion loom as large as they do in poems like 'Meat,' or, for that matter, in Kleinzahler's prose memoir *Cutty, One Rock* (2005).

Take the following prose statement from Kleinzahler's devastating send-up of Garrison Keillor's *Writer's Almanac*:

But I, for one, have never in my lifetime seen the situation of poetry in this country more dire or desperate. Nor is the future promising. Cultural and economic forces only suggest further devastation of any sort of vital literary culture. . . . What little of real originality is out there is drowning in the waste products spewing from graduate writing programs like the hog farm waste that recently overflowed its holding tanks in the wake of Hurricane Isabel, fouling the Carolina countryside and poisoning everything in its path.

Waste products again. Never mind that Kleinzahler has himself held visiting professorships in some of these graduate writing programs. In principle, he is allergic to such institutions, as he is to the memory of his suburban childhood, dominated by Mother, a "frightful snob," who "didn't like children, least of all her own," Father, whose "job was to make money, then lose it, make it again, except when he was reading the paper, which was filled with information on how to make money," and such other relatives as Great-Uncle Ja-Ja, who "resembled an engorged frog with thick, black-rimmed glasses and smelled of gherkins," and Grandmother Nanny Farbisseneh, "a tiny dour creature originally from a bog outside of Kiev." In this "vomitorium," "It was the dog who raised me . . . the dog who watched me through countless hours with the sagacity and bearing of a Ugandan tribal chief."

Family life, and later the poet's sexual escapades, are described with irritation, absurdist relish and a measure of macho preening. But there are moments of great tenderness and even love in this memoir, especially for August's idolized older brother—a self-destructive, alcoholic, drug-addicted gambler, who squandered his great mental gifts, committing suicide when he was twenty-seven. Kleinzahler writes especially acutely about fellow poets like Thom Gunn and Allen Ginsberg: the latter's curious mixture of generosity and self-absorption, insight and humorlessness, exuberance and lassitude--all contributing to his need for endless distraction-- is recorded tellingly, if cruelly, in "Lunching with Ginsberg." "The frenzy, the self-aggrandizement, and all the rest," writes Kleinzahler, "seemed a long destructive war that had laid waste his poetry and, probably, any chance of emotional equilibrium or peace."

In his prose, Kleinzahler backs up such harsh judgments with telling examples. In the lyric poetry, on the other hand, the disgust is often unmotivated. Take "San Francisco/New York," a bitter-sweet evening-walk poem, written in five-by-five stanzas (five lines of predominantly iambic pentameter) in which the poet addresses the woman he has just taken to the San Francisco airport, picturing to himself her arrival on the other coast, where the moon "lighting the slopes of Mount Diablo / and the charred eucalyptus in the Oakland hills," must now be "shimmering over Bensonhurst, over Jackson Heights"—the neighborhoods through which limos pass on their way from JFK into Manhattan. Kleinzahler's elegy for lost connections culminates in an apostrophe to the moonlight "boom[ing] down on us tonight, / with the sky so clear, / and through us / as if these were ruins, as if we were ghosts." But en route to that ghost-like moment, the poet gives us a tour of San Francisco's used bookshops:

We pass the shop of used mystery books

with its ferrety customers and proprietress
behind her desk, a swollen arachnid
surrounded by murder and the dried-out glue
of old paperback bindings.

What is more touching
than a used book store on Saturday night,

dowdy clientele haunting the aisles
the girl with bad skin, the man with a tic,
some chronic ass at the counter giving his art speech?

What this predictable catalogue lacks is the particularity that makes poems like Frank O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died" (whose middle section, like Kleinzahler's, is a tour of bookshops, each image and action subtly anticipating the final revelation of Billie Holiday's death) so arresting. To call the used bookshop's clientele "dowdy" and "ferrety" (weasel-like) or its proprietress a "swollen arachnid," to remark on a girl's bad skin and a man's tic: such dismissive gestures are themselves tics: we miss what Pound called "luminous detail"—the image as "radiant node or cluster from which or into which ideas are constantly rushing." Wouldn't it be interesting, for example, if there were a moment of erotic eye contact between poet and proprietress, in the vein, say, of Baudelaire's "A une passante"?

The title poem (originally published in the *London Review of Books*) has a similar predictability. The poem makes much of the basic paradox that Rapid City, South Dakota, built on a "700 foot thick shelf of Cretaceous pink sandstone" in "the middle of the middle of the heart of this great land," "the exact center of the Oglala known universe," is now the site of schlocky hotels, kitschy souvenir shops, tasteless billboards, and "Semis grind[ing] it out on the Interstate / Hauling toothpaste, wheels of Muenster, rapeseed

oil." As the poet—a poet rather too obviously "nel mezzo" of his own life, making his way through his Dantean "selva oscura"-- finds himself in what the brochures call "the hotel of the century," he marvels at the juxtaposition, in this, "the exact dead center of America" between past and present, nature and culture, between nearby Mt. Rushmore's "Great White Fathers . . . blasted out of granite" and souvenirs of Custer's Last Stand at the Battle of Bighorn. After a few more pages in this vein, the free-verse travelogue ends on a note of overkill: "Here, yes, here/ The dead solid center of the universe / At the heart of the heart of America."

Kleinzahler's facility—for example, his carefully wrought staircase stanza and use of chemical vocabulary in "4-phenylcyclohexane"—is impressive, but in such realistic poetry, the devil must be in the details, and the details here are largely clichés. Or again, in "Retard Spoilage," a kind of post-9/11 "Dover Beach," in which the lover urges his girl to "sleep, my angel, sleep," her "inviolable sweetness" uncontaminated by all that "vile&writhing&smells"—specifically, all the food that is or might be rotting in the fridge, catalogued, in a bravura sequence of tercets, made up of bio-chemical speak --"mephitic flora," "ladders of polysaccharides," "fetor of broken proteins"—so as to define the "sour reechiness" which is, as in "Meat" accepted as our inevitable human condition.

More satisfying than these forays into cultural critique are the shorter lyrics and songs in which Kleinzahler can display his remarkable gift for rhythmic variation, syncopation, and taut stanzaic structure. Take "Sunday Nocturne," which captures, in its minimalist lines and spacing—a visual prosody that recalls Williams-- the terrible isolation of airplane travel, especially the moment of arrival late at night. The poem opens:

Red pulse the big jet's lights
in descent.

The aerial

On the plumber's duplex shakes.

Every sound (a careful orchestration of voiceless stops and liquids and modulation of short *e's* and *u's*) and word has a place: "pulse" (both verb and noun) unite plane and passenger, even as air and earth meet in the "aerial" on the building's roof. A late arrival at Newark Airport ("Along these palisades the crowded / grids subside") when even the pizza parlors are closed, prompts the weary traveller to contemplate "the foothills of reverie," even as "still more jets, / dipping / From Dakar, /Akron and Samoa" fly overhead. One resigns oneself, it seems, to the displacement constant travel brings. But in the last stanza, the reverie nicely turns outward:

A gentleman

in Italian loafers

disembarks.

Tomorrow at 1 he will bring

profound good news

to a steak joint in Moonachie.

Here empathy replaces Kleinzahler's more usual spleen: the traveling salesman, getting a brief night's sleep in the local motel, before bringing his gospel to the nondescript towns of Bergen County, is a sympathetic figure. No harvest moon for this "gentleman / in Italian loafers"—only, in a pun, the "moon-ache" that accompanies our incessant arrivals and departures.

"Sunday Nocturne" was first published in 1985. The short poems of this period—"Blue at 4 P.M.," "Poetics," "Pinned" (none of them, unaccountably, dated)--are among Kleinzahler's best, as is "A History of Western Music," whose "chapters" Kleinzahler has been writing for years. The most recent

variant is a “simple” but delectable song (“I took a trip on a plane / And I thought about you. . .”) after Johnny Mercer in memory of Kleinzahler’s great friend Thom Gunn, who died in 2004. Another recent ballad is “Portrait of my Mother in January,” which Kleinzahler has recorded for the Farrar Straus website:

Mother dozes in her chair,
awakes awhile and reads her book
then dozes off again.
Wind makes a rush at the house
and, like a tide, recedes. The trees are sere.

Afternoons are the most difficult.
They seem to have no end,
No end and no one there.
Outside, the trees do their witchy dance.
Mother grows smaller in her chair.

This low-key elegiac poem, with its rocking-chair rhythm and closural rhyme, is a far cry from those nasty, hilarious, often cruel portrayals of Mother in the prose of *Cutty, One Rock*. At one level, the poem is hackneyed, what with its reliance on the pathetic fallacy. But Kleinzahler has carefully set up the contrast between external motion—“Wind makes a rush at the house”; “Outside, the trees do their witchy dance”—and inner vacuum. The chiming of “awakes” with “awhile” suggests that sleep is imminent.

Here is the Kleinzahler I prefer—not the nasty spoiler, bragging about his exploits or badmouthing his acquaintance, nor the expert, showing off his technical vocabulary, but the poet of simple, stark recognition. Death, beginning with that terrible suicide of August’s brother, is Kleinzahler’s compelling subject. “Death’s visits,” we read in a short address to the Muse

("Goddess"), "threatened never to end." The rest—the cleverly observed "high-gloss kitsch / the Big Enchilada loves you to hate"— is rendered with a fine polish that has become rather too familiar. "Distracted?" the poet admits to his Muse, "To be sure."