

POEM AS PRISM

Orlando Ricardo Menes. *Fetish*. University of Nebraska Press, 2013.

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If Cuba and Miami are the *places* most evoked in Menes' previous two books (as well as Peru and, to a lesser degree, Spain), this particular poem, "St. Joseph River" (p.49), a nod to the body of water that flows through southern Michigan and northern Indiana, is part of a group of poems that stakes new ground in Orlando Ricardo Menes latest book, winner of the 2012 Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Poetry. "St. Joseph River" functions as a prism-like emblem when considering the poems in *Fetish* where the city of South Bend or, in this case, the river that runs through it, occupies a more central place:

Compared to the Amazon, an overgrown brook,
 Servile to industry, timid flooder, flows that skein
 In shimmers, river that zigzags the shale plain
 Like my late aunt's blind stitching when she took
 Cognac for cramps. Downtown, a sharp crook
 North toward the lake, weathered docks, the bane
 Of gutted factories, boarded storefronts, that eyestrain
 I get driving on rust-belt roads that overlook

There's an interesting alchemy here: on the one hand, it reads like a vivid if gentle, almost playful, put down of this regional river with its bleak palette of descriptors. And yet it opens with an ABBA quatrain followed by an identical one, where the rhymes (brook/took/crook/look; skein/plain/bane/eyestrain) are concerned—establishing, if you will, a rhyming octave: a song of sorts for roughly the first half of the poem.

Readers of Menes' work in the last decade would be mistaken, however, to think these end-rhymes (along with those present in a good number of the pieces in *Fetish*) mark something new in his work. In 1994, Menes published an award-winning chapbook, *Borderland with Angels*, that included two poems—"Saint Rose of Lima," a persona poem, and "I Tend My Own," an homage to Andrew Wyeth, the visual artist—that employ consonant end-rhymes throughout. It's as if the poet, in this early work, is taking a stab at consonant rhyme, but then opts to put this tool away for twenty or so years—at least in terms of book publication—bringing it back today in this, his latest collection. Moving on: after these opening eight lines, the pattern

begins to alter:

The coal-gray drifts, an occasional floater gored
 By willow tusks, the last oak leaves taking flight, spun
 In gusts, their tumultuous glide on lathing eddies,
 Sawtooth ripples that portend more snow, the sword

In other words, this particular quatrain abandons—where *sound* is concerned—the BB of the strict ABBA rhyme scheme of the first eight lines. And yet, it's fascinating to note that the two words in question ("spun/eddies") rhyme *conceptually*. Even so, an *ambiance* of rhyme continues to prevail in this stanza's soundscape. There's the assonant internal, and slant, rhyme of "coal/floater/oak"; the soft internal assonance of "tusks/spun/gusts"; the assonant slant rhyme in "flight/glide; and the internal assonance in "portend/more," to name a few. But what creates an interesting tension, for me, is that while there seems to be an abundance of this delicate echoing, the two strict consonant end-rhymes ("gored/sword")—that is, the hint of violence embedded in these words—seem to portend something more ominous than snowfall. The poem continues:

Of ice rusting out iron piles, bridge where Adrian,
 My son, fed the geese, then one day slid as if on skis,
 Spring's blustery sprees,

Truth be told, in addition to the presence of South Bend in "the group of poems" referred to from the start, Menes' two children are also evoked—in six of them: the rhymed sonnets "Birthing Adrian" (p. 43), "Tantrums" (p. 44), "Pyx" (p.47), "Adderall" (p. 48) "Ashes" (p. 50) and the 20-lined "St. Joseph River" (p. 48) that occupies us here. And so the appearance of his son and daughter in these poems is the other "news" to report, where the evolution of Menes' work is concerned.

If the rhyme-scheme in "St. Joseph River" begins to alter in the third quartet (lines 9-12) of the poem, it shifts decidedly with the introduction of "Adrian." On the one hand, we have the name itself *not* rhyming with anything in its vicinity (unless we consider "spun" three lines above). And it's precisely this *non-rhyme* that seems key. It's an instance where *form* (the absence of a consonant end-rhyme) is crucially in sync with *meaning*: the speaker's child ("My son") nearly slides into the St. Joseph River. In other words, by *not* having his son's name rhyme with anything that comes immediately before, or immediately after, the poem is signaling the child's

uniqueness—the magnitude of this barely avoided tragedy:

Adrian

My son, fed the geese, then one day slid as if on skis,
 Spring's blustery sprees,
 Yet I quick enough, Thank God, to catch him before
 The plank's edge. Late by one second, would tragedy's door
 Have burst open, the floor

“Adrian,” then, in addition to being the heart of the poem, also serves as a *hinge*. After “Adrian,” the manner in which the poem rhymes doesn't resemble, at all, the ABBA rhyming that came before: instead, we have, in succession: a rhymed couplet (“skis”/“sprees”), a rhymed tercet (“before”/“door”/“floor”), and a concluding couplet:

of normalcy caving? Job would laugh at such a thing,
Like moths we hover over chaos, our lifeline a silk string.

What starts as a song-like poem about a particular Midwestern landscape assumes a certain gravitas as the piece progresses, using rhyme, the absence of rhyme and, I would say, a modest dosage of faith, to make its point.

Which is not to say that readers of Menes' work accustomed to well-wrought poems about Cuba and Peru, will be disappointed by *Fetish*. There are plenty of those, and fine ones at that, in this his third full-length book. But the work set in South Bend, particularly those poems that include his children, adds another layer to an already compelling body of work.