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Oblige the Light by Danuta E. Kosk-Kosicka

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Torque. The tendency of a force to rotate an object about an axis, fulcrum, or pivot. Just as a force is a push or a pull, a torque can be thought of as a twist to an object.

Oh, she torques everything, this poet. Takes the slightest notion and applies the slant force of her refined perception until that concept's twisted into the sudden, the astonishing. The new. And then there's the voice, the syntax foregoing expected articles and growing forceful with clipped descriptors:

*Cooing. Pigeons. Moscow hotel. The dream.
I am waking up in my green room to the cooing
of doves in the crabapple tree and the scent
of hot cocoa topped with froth of egg whites.
Sunday breakfast treat of my Polish childhood.
It's the day of the giant whale. The whale,
talk of the land-locked town. Blue circus tent,
people pushing alongside something huge, dark.*

A barrage of concision, lists of things presented without affectation, things piled on things piled on things until an impression is born of itself, almost immaculately:

*Smell of fried fish, packed parking, swinging doors,
crunchy peanut shells scattered on the floor,*

*license plates on the walls. General
Zapata, Coca-Cola girl. Beer, cold.
Outside low windows, slow-swaying tall grass.
Inside, the waiters at low tide: long wait
for our main course. Clatter, laughter, thick air.
Ceiling fan splits and reassembles waves.*

The ideas in the poems are unforced. They paint themselves. Dabs of pastel, often – then one flat stroke of black. And painterly as Gauguin:

*On the pillow of light
lies the darkness of her head.*

Such a subversively remote voice. It's not grounded against a particularly American backdrop. Nor any other. Prepare, then, to tour the killing fields and violent byways of a multinational landscape, the Polish streets and a chamber of death. Prepare to slide from the dark waters of Noah's Ark to the rise of the Red River in North Dakota, prepare for a surge through the aorta that carries us to the Milky Way. Prepare for sweetness, too:

*Freed of all money we walked for one hour
to our neighborhood park where on a bench
we set them between us: unstrung, unwrapped,
specks of orange peel glistening in the glaze,
scent of rose marmalade in their heart.
We bit in, one by one.*

Prepare to munch on delights you won't find in your local pastry shop, arranged in rows, "wrapped with crisp paper, secured with a yellow string, a gold-lettered Blikle seal . . ." Prepare for a lucky last-moment leap onto a freight car that saves a young soldier from certain death. (No poems at all if not for that leap. Her father.)

Prepare for an abundance of iterations, sketches blunt and precise, waterfalls of description, the steady tat tat tat of images spit from the machine gun of the imaginatively observed. Kosk-Kosicka's simple syllabics hit with the force of the plosives that make up her hyphenated surname.

No particular theory of poetry drives any of this. Just dream, just paradox, the free float of imagination you might find in a painting by Chagall:

*A village. Houses upside down. A green cow,
pink air. Onion-domed church, a synagogue.
A groom, a bride, a long white dress.
They float, they dance. A fiddler.
A blue goat playing a violin.*

Just the slight, deceptively urgent and faintly ambiguous voice of the artist.

Oblige the Light is a fine primer on the fidelities that can be achieved with the soft small near-selfless voice, the voice that bears witness, a bald loyalty to worldly detail, yet somehow truer to the imagined than to the merely observed. A frugal voice. Ruthless in the name of the Spartan, the spare. Champion of the unadorned.

Every serious poet deserves a receptive reader, an active participant in the art. Every serious poem deserves an open and inquisitive initial reading and at least one informed re-reading; worthy poems deserve much more. Danuta Kosk-Kosicka's work, for all its simplicity, demands not mere attention, but vigilance. The poems, brief as they are, refuse to yield, most of them, without the reader's energy and persistence – but then, upon repeated readings, the cryptic succumbs to that torrent of the understated, that gush of meaning.

All of which would lead one to expect that these pieces might share very little with, say, the art of Billy Collins, whose work may be disrobed with the tug of a slender strap; yet, unpredictably, delightfully, Kosk-Kosicka's "The Train That Leaves" employs a different lexicon, runs the rails as though it has just pulled out of Collins's station:

*Remember the math problem about two trains
leaving at the same time from two cities, A and B,
coming toward each other at different speeds?*

*"Let's get on the train," Alice says to her friend,
"you at the main station in B, I at the station in A."
She starts the calculations.*

It is precisely 10 o'clock; the train is about to pull away.

*Alice rushes onto the platform. The big hand
moves slightly. She is late.*

*She takes off her high heels and runs,
holding tight her books, her purse and shoes.
People begin shouting warnings or advice.*

And so it goes. Will Alice make it into the carriage? The poem takes its metaphysical turn; beyond that non-spoiler, you'll have to read it to find out what happens. (In fairness, it should be noted that while a Collins poem is generally eager to reveal its charms, fifty readings of his better ones yield fifty deeper shades of virtuosity. Part of the charm of poetry, in fact, is that a Danuta, a Billy – even a Bukowski – can share a shelf quite congenially.)

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After drafting this short appreciation, I turned, at last, to the front matter of *Oblige the Light*, a fine and generous foreword by Michael Salcman, Harriss Prize Series Editor and 2014's contest judge; I didn't want to be influenced, in my reflections, by his commentary.

And right there, on the eighth line of the first paragraph, third word in, the boom dropped. Yes, that word. That word popped up.

Unexpectedly, but, on reflection, no real surprise, very like a dear family friend dropping by at dinnertime, and very welcome at this particular table –

Torque.

Bruce Sager lives in Westminster, Maryland. His work has won publication through contests judged by Billy Collins, Dick Allen and William Stafford. Several new books (short stories and poetry) are forthcoming in late 2016 and early 2017 (via Hyperborea Publishing and BrickHouse Books).