

A Review of Robin Behn's *The Red Hour* Tom Hansen

THE LONG SENTENCES of these poems wind their way down the page, trying to find out where they are going, trying to put where they have been behind them, trying to bury the dead they still embrace.

One of these ghosts, perhaps the most insistent, occupies the opening poem. "Ten Years After Your Deliberate Drowning" is the first of eight, in this collection of thirty-four poems, in which suicide figures. It begins, "Since then, I work at night," and later says, "Days I don't come with flowers, // please think of these white petals. . . ." A decade after his death, she still, many days, brings flowers of remembrance to his grave; yet she still works nights to forget him. At night, at "the red, bad-news hour," when the work of the day is done and the unoccupied mind is most susceptible to assault from without and within, she works—as a kind of self-defense.

This young woman, the nameless "I" who inhabits many of these poems, has been scarred by what she has survived: an alcoholic father the very thought of whom she and her sister years ago drowned out with their hymn singing ("Those Unitarian Sundays"); a mother who became physically abusive following that father's death ("Five O'Clock In Your Childhood"); the madness of D., to whom "its face—it *had* a face" appeared in a vision ("The Summons"); the subsequent suicide of D. ("Our Mutual Friend In Heaven"); the earlier death—by suicide?—of the nerdy bassoonist she and others in the high school chamber group ousted from their quintet ("The Bassoonist"); the apparition of her now-grown-up child who died—abortion? miscarriage?—before birth ("Vision Near Ice"). . . . Clearly an imagination of disaster, a survivor whose wounds have not yet healed, speaks to us in *The Red Hour*.

"Slow Movement In G," inscribed "For H.," typifies Behn's integration of several of these elements—the long (twenty lines, in this instance) opening sentence feeling its way toward whatever truth its downward journey reveals, the insistent ghost from the past, the half-healed survivor,

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and also, as important as any of these, the all but saving grace of music (a frequent motif in this book):

Like the masseuse who never lifts her hand
from the fever only you know
your body has turned into, like

the body you are giving her, inch by
deeper inch. . . .

.

You
liquify and liquify

your wrist to draw the bow
and quiver (stunned spider)
on the suddenly exterior guts.

“Playing” it’s called but over
whose body whose
womanly wooden body whose notes

stop short at G but who
makes you hum, love, you hum you
help us bear it the

healing holohedral Halleluia Hallelloo . . .

Like other poems in this collection, “Slow Movement In G” transcends the private and personal, the merely confessional, from which it derives. Edward Hirsch says, in his comment on the back cover, that this “is a book of elegies and love poems, of crisis lyrics and spiritual lamentations, of losses transmuted into deep song.” It is probably no accident that the verb of transformation Hirsch uses is “transmuted”—a word recalling the *transmutatio* of medieval alchemists. We have begun to realize, thanks to Jung and others who followed his lead, that the gold alchemists sought was not *aurum vulgi*, the vulgar or common gold so highly prized by the world, but *aurum philosophicum*, *aurum nostrum*, *aurum non vulgi*—that is, the

philosophical, healing, exalted “gold” of the transformed spirit disentangled from all that entraps and diminishes it. The outer, pseudochemical transmutation of lead into gold was little more than a public allegory for the privately pursued spiritual *transmutatio*. Similarly, in these poems Behn transforms the base metal of human experience—deaths and devastations—into a kind of music.

As various medieval alchemical texts indicate, perhaps most notably the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, this exaltation of the mundane (the base metal of lead, the ever-hungering/ever-decaying human body) into a state of luminous transfiguration (the noble metal of gold, the body somehow spiritualized without having to be atomized) is accomplished by a linked series of hermetic operations performed not by *artifex* (the alchemist-artisan) acting alone, but by the concerted actions and linked psychic projections of *artifex* and *soror mystica* (mystical or spiritual sister).

The struggle of these poems is that the music they make is not born of such a union. “He” is gone, having opted out of corporeal existence. “She,” Behn’s lyric “I,” is left alone to be both *artifex* and *soror mystica*. No wonder the deep song of these poems is so somber.

It is also, on rare occasions, not well sung. The music is weakest in Behn’s two fixed form poems—villanelle (“Midwestern”) and sestina (“Etiquette”)—and in her poem of seven rhyming couplets (“Windy Popples, Late October”). These three seem to falter as language strains to shape itself to the relatively inflexible demands of form. In “Midwestern,” for example, combined irregularities of meter and line length call attention to themselves—as if the language of the poem were too mechanically accommodating itself to those demands. “Midwestern” begins:

Lately, where my body ends, yours begins.
Or so I keep thinking, although you are far.
It’s hard to say, sometimes, just what has been.

To reconstruct the feel of it, give me some men
—all strangers, please—to synchronize the bar
stool’s twirling: when the one called *me* winds
down you begin

to stir the afternoon. . . .

In the remaining poems, music and form are discovered rather than appropriated. In “Aubade,” for example, its single sentence, composed of a series of parallel adverbial clauses introduced by “after”; its heavily trochaic yet highly varied meter; its short patches of sudden alliteration; its apparently arbitrary stanza pattern whose line breaks are keys to how the poem should be read aloud—these, combined with subtler effects, help create the music of this poem:

After the sadness of apples in August
gone secretly soft
inside their gorgeous, high-tech skins,
after the thumbprints I left on them
multiplied
in the slanting wall of mirrors above the produce bin,

after they lay still, languishing,
looked at
by someone not-quite-you,
after they were sold to make pies
not love,

.....
morning
broke
the truth back into us,
it split us to the core

of what we each had been.

In most of these poems, the music is more muted: not so much a matter of orchestrating sounds into patterns we can isolate and name (parallel adverbial clauses, trochaic meter, sudden alliteration, etc.); more a matter of singing in an ordinary voice—off-key, perhaps, or in no identifiable key at all—out of the wreckage of our ordinary lives. As the headnote to this book—quoting Theodore Roethke—says, “The spirit moves, but not always upward.” We do not transcend the base metal (decay, despair, death) of our common humanity.

Hirsch refers to this book as Behn's breakthrough collection. It breaks through loss and grief into music, not by outgrowing grief and loss, but simply by growing out of them. This is the *transmutatio* of *The Red Hour*.