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The Edible Heart: Obliteration and Awe in the Poetry of Barbara Ras

Barbara Ras is the author of three books: *Bite Every Sorrow* (winner of the Walt Whitman Prize and the Kate Tufts Discovery Award), *One Hidden Stuff,* and *The Last Skin*. In his citation for the Whitman, C. K. Williams praised Ras's poems for being "informed by a metaphysically erudite and whimsical intelligence." David Kirby suggested that the "long, beautiful sentences" of *One Hidden Stuff* "weave the miraculous and mundane into a single, luminous tapestry." Donna Seaman described the poems in *The Last Skin* as "witty and ardent," "compassionate and generous," and "sonorous and enrapturing." One couldn't be faulted for imagining a body of work so stuffed with wonders, so all-encompassing in its reach that it exists in a state only perceivable through superlative interpolation.

While Ras herself isn't averse to juggling similarly ephemeral abstractions (in "Bad Hair," she suggests that her subject measures "single-strandedly the breadth between righteousness and force, / targeting the distance between worship and terror"), even a cursory reading of her work reveals the granular particularity with which she approaches the world. In one poem, light strikes the Bay Bridge, "turning the ironwork at sunset into waffles." In another, "a cow chews lugubriously, and I'm almost close / enough to hear its stomach drumming / out of beat with the thumping of its edible heart, and the breath / rushing in and out of lungs the size of small tents." At a party, grasshoppers "tasted stale, the flavor of seeds / retired from making music in very old gourds." These poems are the labors of a meticulous hand, but one clad in a clown's glove. They exhibit a vision of and an appreciation for the world that is half

prayer, half suplex. Ras's poems don't simply observe—they grapple. If there is an edible heart in her poetry, it is the world's—and it's one she's already taken a huge bite out of.

But to what end? Why does a poet write as maximally as Ras does, testing the limits of syntax, of breath, and of a reader's patience with all this linguistic and imagistic megatonnage? Why do her critics spend so many column inches on her swashbuckling syntax and too few on the raw nerviness such sentences expose? Perhaps unfairly, I worry that the superficiality of such praise risks framing the poems as equally shallow. A more earnest read would reveal not only the pleasures apparent in such praise, but also sketch out what lies at the center of her best poems—an emotional and psychological vulnerability only partially obscured by (and one that often obliterates) the poems' abundance.

Fittingly enough, "Abundancia" is the best poem in her first book. It is relentless: six sentences in forty-plus lines zoom the length of the page in ramshackle assemblages of pyrotechnic wordplay and exacting imagery. It begins:

> On the train as it rolls in and out of stations,
> abundancia underground,
> abundancia above, the sequence constant,
> dark dark light, dark dark light,
> then the longest dark, abundancia under the bay,
> and abundancia
> in the mother combing her son's hair, pulling the
> ten-cent comb
> again and again through the already yielding strands,
> and in the bending of the boy's head abundancia as he
> holds still for the part,
> his hair obeying the invisible line she makes on his
> head.

The train is an apt image for Ras's project (as one review of her second book noted, "the small pleasures of these poems speed by like scenery in a train window"). The velocity, all of those moving parts working in unison, and the marvel

of the machine gliding effortlessly against the horizon have clear analogues in her work. This one zips beneath the San Francisco Bay into Oakland, and offers glimpses of the lives it passes. Sometimes these glimpses are tangible, as in "the quick step / of the hobo crossing the highway at dusk with his dog," or the friend who offers a recipe for "leeks and mushrooms with polenta." Others are less so: the "heart's many holes each fill with grief," the speaker says, and "morning light will shine like faithfulness / on the papaya and lime." Despite its profusion, there is pressure on the poem to faithfully maintain that "sequence constant," to "obey the invisible line."

But this is also a poem of longing, of distances that cannot be traversed. No train can carry us wholly into our memories. And so the poem concludes, with the speaker's desire:

> I long to get back to Anna,
> our occasional wild dancing in the kitchen and abundancia
> in the way she loves to be dipped, her head thrown back
> until her hair brushes the floor, home to Alfred,
> who once in the dark of an island house unwrapped a small talisman
> of peeled garlic he held in his hand, and later
> after he wrapped the buds back into their tiny cloth bundle, we slept
> under the open window, his elbow on my arm, a sweet anchor
> in the deep blue abundancia of the ocean
> rushing around us.

Though the poem's final lines are freighted with gravity and rooted in place—family intimacies in dark houses, anchors in an ocean of adoration—we are suspended in that unfulfilled ache from which the end of the poem emanates: "I long."

Nostos has regularly been the poet's subject, overt or otherwise. What else can a poem be but an attempt to

reassemble that which eludes us? Why else recall memories other than to backfill that which is irretrievable? Inevitably, trains pass. Pages turn. Lives go on. And what life, what train—for that matter, what poem—doesn't face the threat of derailment? This is the essential tension in Ras's work; hers is a poetics that actively embraces collision. The poems are nimble enough, but there are few close calls. Accidents abound. She recognizes it will sometimes be necessary to sift the wreckage, and that often we can find in it something worth putting back together. Except when we can't.

One Hidden Stuff (2006) exhibits much of the acrobatic virtuosity of its predecessor. But it is also a departure from many of the first collection's excesses. While *Stuff* maintains the widescreen ecstatic vision of the first book, those landscapes are often more somber. There are horizons, but they are "inconsolable." Ras softens the language, leaving it flattened at times, affectless. The surety of the first book's refrains are replaced with conditionals: "You can" gives way to "Maybe"s and "If"s (even the steadier "Of course" that anchors the poem "History" ironically begs the question in order to undermine the poem's depictions of systemic, unjustifiable suffering). This is a collection riven by grief. It is a book of can't:

> Over and over the waves break on the gleaming sand
> while a gull diving in and out
> of the perfect again and again
> draws a thread between the air and the water
> sewing together their beautiful blues
> as if to mend the wound of the world. ("Song")

Alongside the obvious aesthetic pleasures—the repetition of "over and over" and "again and again," the subtle burble of assonance and internal rhyme, the dutiful work of the gull weaving those "miraculous and mundane" tapestries described by David Kirby—there is a paralyzing futility. The poem opens with a "What if," and halfway through, "I could be far from the rinky-dink, the hullabaloo, far even / from the headlongingness of water rushing forward / and sloshing

back, like desire." The poem's persistent conditionality should remind us of "Abundancia," and that book's perpetual longing: what if I could, indeed? We may be tempted to read the final line's "As if" as hopeful. But we should also recognize that this idealized mending stems from a need to see agency and purpose in that which lacks both. It it a human hope, written on the world, not a natural inevitability. It too is a "maybe," and an increasingly unlikely one. In that sense, rather than mend, "as if" pries open the final line like a seam ripper.

There is in this collection a greater sense of responsibility for such wounding. It would be a stretch to call these poems bucolic. But there is in them a rootedness, and a cultivation of stillness that allows the poet to withdraw from the presumably civilizing velocities of the first book. She describes a fawn, "its ears like pearly shells, so thin / they let through morning light as mauve." In "Dream Kisses," "Slender leaves are kissing up to the sky, rustling the trees. / Breezes swing and sway and blow a touch of fever / down every street in your body." "Clouds" begins on "an afternoon of blue skies, white clouds, big dollops of coconut mousse, / as if some giant kept dishing it out like there was no tomorrow."

But balancing the bucolic are more overtly political gestures. The poems of *Stuff* both bear witness to and admit culpability for our nations' geopolitical and environmental ravaging. As such, that "no tomorrow" goes off like an air raid siren. Ras's more idyllic sentiments are perpetually undercut in this collection, their stillness rent by the intrusion of harm and dissolution. In the same poem, those clouds "have started to pile vertically / into the kind of billowings that could only be called atomic." What follows is a revision of that landscape into one "where poisons / from all the tests in the middle of somebody's idea of nowhere / tend to pool." It is easy (and tempting) to ostrich ourselves when faced with such responsibility. But Ras does not allow herself—or her readers—an easy escape into the safety of the "apolitical" aesthetic experience. Every beautifully made

thing comes with a cost. We cannot consciously uncouple ourselves from what we make, or what is done in our name. As she says in "Remorse the Color of Lavender," a poem that explores the vicissitudes of the seemingly endless War on Terror: "And back at the paint factory, I'll be naming Terror / the color of many people, all of us on our knees, begging for our lives."

The book's last section is undoubtedly its strongest. It is difficult to write of these final ten poems without wanting to retype them here in full. Deeply elegiac, these poems are haunted by the loss of a mother, and other attendant losses, as in "Elsewhere":

> I wanted to write myself out of grief, dig out
> To a place washed by heaven-haunted light,
> The way a mad painter tunneled from his thatched hut
> Under the street to paint a Venezuelan beach.

There is still the desire, the longing for departure and escape. And again, there is that thwarting of such desire: art cannot completely mend what hurts in us and what we've hurt. The penultimate stanza is a single line, an unanswered question, flanked by gulfs of white space:

> Where is elsewhere?

These poems remind us again of the abundance of Ras's work, but that such profusion also demands absence and emptiness, which know "nothing / of the silence of bones and skulls, / the last of me, the last of you." Her technical virtuosity often operates like armor or insulation, but the poems in *Stuff* are also more exposed, stripped of what protects. They remind a reader that a life is not fashioned from separate spheres one shuttles between, but is instead composed of interpenetrating experiences (those collisions and derailments, again) in which we are suspended. The book's last poem concludes:

Nothing can replace the sea breezes you were born to.
Nothing can stay the shy ache in the palm
You hold out to the fortune-teller.
The concrete lions on her steps go on
Making bloodless journeys, they go on
Hunting in air longer than any of you will live to
watch,
Hunting still after your futures become all irises
And blamelessness.

The Last Skin, published in 2010, picks up, in both subject and tone, where *One Hidden Stuff* left off (the former is dedicated in memoriam to the the poet's mother). Many of Ras's predilections reappear: the poems often depend on rhetorical and syntactic repetition and echo. Familiar obsessions—grief, terror, landscape, nostalgia—remain present, and vital. And it is impossible not to appreciate the shambolic mastery required to construct poems like "Pigeons, a Love Poem" and "Sweet Glue," both of which are poems of a single sentence, or "Blue Door," which fills the page in three. But there are significant changes in this latest iteration of her project. Many of the poems here barely make it halfway down a single page. A handful are in tightly wound couplets. Others are aired-out, each line its own stanza. Some crouch close to the left-hand margin, as if the only warmth is found in the book's gutters.

Part of the reason is that these shifts aren't merely structural; they are proof of an evolution in both the work and the perspective that shapes said work. For every instance in which we see a familiar figure—the incantatory anaphora of "Exercising a Verb Seldom Used in the First Person," let's say—there are others that I can't help but read as commentary on the preceding two volumes. In these iterative evolutions, and by muting familiar gestures, Ras is "wrenching beauty from the iron of severance" ("Nothing Was Ever Better than Before").

We might expect (or at least hope) that a good poet will recognize when a method becomes a manner; that she will seek innovation not for its own sake, but for what the

language when yoked to emotion requires. But Ras is nothing if not self-conscious about such risks, and the poems are no less adroit than their forebears. Furthermore, throughout the book she reminds her readers of those earlier books' truths, while expanding upon them. History (and its violence) remains yoked to the present like "the Civil War double cannon on the lawn / of a city hall in the deep south, twinned so that two cannonballs / chained together kill two at a time" ("Dark Thirty"). Writing itself may still serve as a bridge between now and then, between gulfs of emotion: "If I had a pencil, I would have broken it / in two and left one half on the grave of a mother, the other / on the grave of a child" ("Sitka Cemetery"). There is no better illustration of this carrying than the last volume's title poem, which ends:

> My mother has been gone for years, and I begin to see,
> in the spots on the backs of my hands, in the shelf
> my cheekbones make for my cheeks, in the way I hold
> my mouth against gravity's pull, that I carry her
> with me, my skin, her skin,
> her last skin.

We might say that the poems in *The Last Skin*, much like the poet herself, exist on a continuum. But perhaps it's more fitting to suggest that such existence occurs on a track; the engine of our making pulls behind it a long string of cars that bear the freight of our experiences, and our great losses. In this way the present's propulsion is linked to the past, the inertia of which is required to ascend the next rise.

In the collection's final poem, "Washing the Elephant," Ras describes the younger version of herself stunned by a priest's admission about heaven:

> What if Father Quinn had said, "Of course you'll
> recognize
> your parents in heaven," instead of
> "Being one with God will make your mother and
> father
> pointless."

We may be tempted to read that pointlessness as evidence of futility, and in it, an echo of the earlier work. Here, it is the futility of a child's naiveté, of the need to grasp a concept for which no earthly experience or understanding can prepare us. This is again a poem of longing:

> It takes more than half a century to figure out who they were,
> The few real loves-of-your-life and how much of the rest—
> The mad breaking-heart stickiness—falls away, slowly, unnoticed

But what if we read into the "pointless" falling away not a futile, irreducible separation? What if instead we read "pointless" as being without fixture, as that which cannot be plotted on the Cartesian axes of existence? What if instead it suggests that parts of us exist in some oscillating state of possibility rather than fixity? If such possibilities do exist, what Ras describes here is not merely nostalgia, or grief, but instead an awareness that this falling away, while inevitable, is not the loss we imagine it to be. Better I think to read into these moments and these poems a freedom, one of unfettered release. In this release from the confines of a particular moment, or a body, or an experience, Ras allows us see more clearly the connections between each.

There is in her work an obliteration of limits and distinctions, a dissolution of geographical, temporal, and emotional boundaries. It is a form of annihilation that has haunted her work since the beginning. We see it in the restlessness of her imagination, and in the meticulous inventorying of the world and those who live in it. Such freedom is even found in the poems' tendency to motor-mouth across the page, resisting even the slightest censure or surcease of end punctuation. In doing so, she illuminates the possibility (recalling that first poem in *Bite Every Sorrow*) of having it all, despite limitations to the contrary. A deeply metaphysical poet, and one of the best lyric poets writing today, Barbara Ras reminds us

that the best answer to the world's impossible questions is "all of the above," with abundance, and with awe.

Sources include:

Bite Every Sorrow. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1998. 92 pages. $18.95

One Hidden Stuff. New York: Penguin, 2006. 94 pages. $16.00

The Last Skin. New York: Penguin, 2010. 80 pages. $18.00