

like this throughout, when a telling scrap of evidence exposes the vicissitudes of history.

In the center of the swirl of public and private, of paradox and irony, is Marjorie—a change of name she made at thirteen in an attempt to sound more American. The rest is education in fine institutions and in the heights of native *kitsch*, to which the transplanted Austrian feels no aversion. She marries, works briefly as a writer of subtitles at MGM (a funny episode), and navigates the treacherous waters of graduate school and an early professorship. We see, humbly handled, the development of Perloff's wide-ranging, life-loving mind, which has been on display for years in her critical work. To have this memoir now is a boon, a more personal critical fugue.

—Andrew DuBois

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Facts for Visitors by Srikanth Reddy, University of California Press, 2004, \$16.95 paper, ISBN 0520240448.

Readers of Srikanth Reddy's impressive first collection might heed his advice: "It may be useful to think of a patterned carpet made up of repeating units of the same design." Skillful repetition is one way that Reddy creates the strange landscapes—material and moral—of *Facts for Visitors*. But where in the world are we? And where in time? There are gardens and courtyards, oceans, crows, coins, boots; the poems are peopled by a bizarre hierarchy—serfs and houseboys, foot soldiers and rag-pickers, a servant, a king, a viceroy, a governor's wife. Here there be monsters—"Centaur" and "Gryphon"—and dusty words: aqueduct, amulet, harlequin, welkin.

The book's centerpiece is "Fundamentals of Esperanto," a poem part manual and part meditation that considers an invented language that borrows roots from several European languages, and is meant to be not only universal but eternal: "Esperanto is among the languages currently sailing into deep space/on board the Voyager spacecraft."

The poem, unlike others in the book, makes contemporary references (*Life* magazine, a used copy of *Leaves of Grass*) and names specific locations (a train station in Warsaw, a man from Quebec who builds houses for martins). But for Reddy there are no TVs or uncles or pianos or Buicks or twin towers; he keeps coming back to "scarecrow," "chariot," "ink," and "eclipse." His is a realm at once timeless and anachronistic; as with Esperanto, the elements are primary and general, though the poems evoke a rich, particular world.

Take the pastoral, "Scarecrow Eclogue," in which a poet leaves a poem in a field. The poet is Reddy, perhaps, but also a universal or historical poet; the field, though alive with details, remains unplaced:

Then I took the poem in my hand & walked out
past the well & three levelled acres
to where the sugarcane built itself slowly to the songs of
immature goats
& there at the field's shimmering center

I inserted the page
into the delicately-woven grass of the scarecrow's upraised hand
where it began to shine & give a little in the gentle
unremitting breeze sent over from the east.

When the poet steps back to observe what he's done, the ink seems to fade from the page. And ink is endangered elsewhere in *Facts for Visitors*; in "Corruption," the history of ink "is rapidly coming to an end." Reddy seems to want to counteract this movement through a diction that gestures toward permanence, and because the poems are accomplished, one welcomes the attempt, which feels genuine.

The speaker of these poems borrows from philosophers—Augustine, W. G. Sebald, and Simone Weil—and alludes more subtly to poets: echoes of Whitman's and Stevens' anaphora, a villanelle that nods to Roethke, a Bishop-like fish gutting. All this delivered by a voice that's distanced, authoritative:

Fame & famine must spring from one root. From salt comes our
soldier. While one tribe makes merry, another invents the wheeled
chariot & alas nothing can stop it. Modern man walks in the garden
of its turbulence.

The poems are most often constructed of series of subject-verb sentences arranged in blocks of prose, in lines of syntactical units ("A wind comes worrying the candle-tip./Our servant's teeth flicker./His jawbone flickers.") or, most successfully, worked into subtly enjambed lines, as in "On Difficulty": ". . . Pagodas/in traffic lights, birds within birds/without end. When she left, she left me/this note on the table./I can't make anything of it." (The antepenultimate line makes a kind of Mobius Strip, a loop of the struggle the poem depicts.)

Reddy also takes up the struggle of the damned in a series of poems that "obliquely revisit the ethical landscape of Dante's *Inferno*." Though there are intimations of the prodigal, the gluttonous, and though some of the poems are written in deft terza rima, the sequence feels more a part of Reddy's landscape than Dante's, and might have been more fully realized outside of the "Third Circle" or "Eighth Circle."

But this impulse—to align the poems with literature's greatest vision of hell—may also have been an effort toward timelessness. When in "Fundamentals of Esperanto" Reddy calls for an Esperanto epic, he says: "Of course, there's a journey/& inside that journey, an implicit voyage/through the underworld." The good fortune for readers is that Reddy's reach is as admirable as it is ambitious. Rarely does a first book have such depth and heft.

—Maggie Dietz

The Eloquent Short Story: An Anthology of Narrative Styles, edited by Lucy Rosenthal, Persea Books, 2004, \$14.95 paper, ISBN 0892552921.

Some time ago, while looking in the back pages of the *Best American Essays 1999*, I discovered that my story "The Wolf," which had been published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* the year before, was cited as a notable essay. I was dumbfounded. The editors had seen my story as an essay and had read it, obviously, as autobiographical.

Rosenthal, who teaches writing at Columbia and NYU, intersperses this collection of some of the best American writing of the last twenty years with commentary that sorts out the differences between the essay, the memoir, and the short story. Thus, in her chapter on "The Story as Essay," she writes, "Stories that take the form of an essay or commentary serve to illustrate—or to demonstrate—a point. In contrast to the model of memoir or confession, here the narrative builds or unfolds an argument filtered through the characters' individual voices or deeds."

Other chapter headings include: "The Story as Memoir or Confession," "The Story as Compressed Novel," "The Story as Prose Poem," and "The Story as Letters." To illustrate each chapter, Rosenthal includes writings from some of our best writers, including Beattie, O'Brien, Bambara, Moody, Updike, Moore, and many others. Hers is an interesting approach, one that we can learn from while rereading some of our favorite stories.

Who can forget Rick Moody's "Demonology," a reminiscence about the death of his sister, whose children "came in bursts of fertility when the bar drinking or the home-grown dope smoking or bed hopping had lost its lustre." On Halloween, she suffers a terrifying seizure and then mitral valve prolapse, which Moody calls a "technical feature of her broken heart" that

was here engendering an arrhythmia and now, if not already, she began to hemorrhage internally. Her son stood in the doorway, in his pajamas, shifting from one foot to the other (there was a draft in

the hall). Her daughter knelt at the foot of the bed, staring, and my sister's boyfriend watched as my poor sister shook and he held her hand, and then changed his mind and bolted for the door.

Moody's tale is in the category of "Story as Memoir or Confession," in which "the narrator entrusts us with an account of intimate personal experience, suggesting that storytelling itself can be redemptive." John Updike's "Playing with Dynamite," however, is listed under the "Story as Compressed Novel," and he begins in his usual ineluctable way with a rumination on aging: "As he felt the logic of decay tightening its grip on his body, he saw that perhaps an object could travel faster than the speed of light and we each have an immortal soul. It didn't matter, terribly. Even the end of the world, strange to say, wouldn't be the end of the world."

In "Story as Character Study," we have Ward Just's essay "About Boston" with its devastating critique of Boston as

an indolent city. It is racist to the bone and in obvious political decline, at times both peevish and arrogant. It is a city without civility or civic spirit or Jews. The Jews with their prodigious energies, have tucked themselves away in Brookline as the old aristocrats with their memories and trust funds are on the lam on the North Shore.

These are stories that you want to make copies of and distribute to friends. Lorrie Moore's "How to Become a Writer" should be in everyone's possession, with its wonderful opening line, "First, try to be something, anything else." Tim O'Brien's "On the Rainy River," about a young man trying to decide whether to report to his draft board or to head to Canada, is already a classic of war literature about Vietnam. Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's," about a young boy's Indian babysitter, is unforgettable, and last but not least, Ian Frazier's essay/story called "Laws Concerning Food and Drink, Household Principles; Lamentations of the Father"—a hilarious send-up of Deuteronomy, includes passages like this:

When you chew your food, keep your mouth closed until you have swallowed and do not open it to show your brother or your sister what is within; I say to you, do not do so, even if your brother or sister has done the same to you. Eat your food only, do not eat that which is not food; neither seize the table between your jaws, nor use the raiment of the table to wipe your lips. I say again to you do not touch it, but leave it as it is. And though the pieces of broccoli are