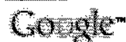

Strange Relations

DeSales Harrison

March Book
Jesse Ball
Grove Press, $13 (paper)

The Clerk's Tale
Spencer Reece
Mariner Books, $12 (paper)

Facts for Visitors
Srikanth Reddy
University of California Press, $16.95 (paper)

However prone to reinvention or experimentation a poet may be, the strangeness of his first book can never be recaptured in future volumes. In a sense, first books manifest both the privileges and vulnerabilities of childhood. Their accents, like the accents of children, bear the inflections not of a different language but of the grappling and tribulation from which new speech is wrested. In the most triumphant circumstances—*Prufrock and Other Observations, Harmonium, Some Trees, The Colossus and Other Poems*— this accent asserts itself as the first blossom of a new and vital talent. But these famous examples are heroic performances, and however suave or subtle their technique, they betray an ardor to seize new territory by force. There is another scenario, in which the poet can acknowledge, more or less directly, the unfamiliarity and awkwardness inherent in his task. In this variety of work, the poet can exercise a special freedom—not the freedom to insist on special or new authority but the freedom to reflect upon the fragility and pallor of work cultivated outside the illumination of public acknowledgment. Among the many striking things about the three first books reviewed here is their willingness—sometimes avowed, sometimes more grudgingly embraced—to let this fragility display its own kind of beauty.

The poems in Jesse Ball's *March Book* arrive on the scene like strangers from unknown lands, not so much ill at ease as out of context, exhibiting a decorum as peculiar as it is refined. Ball displays an otherworldly virtuosity in rendering the uncanny. But while his poems' characters, stories, and settings resemble those of fairy tales, they only resemble them; the poems are too oblique to lay claim to a single moral, and instead they stand as fragments of an imaginary world unassimilable into the proprieties of coherent narrative.

If what Ball writes are allegories, they are allegories like those crafted by Franz Kafka and Pieter Breughel the Elder (from whose drawing on the book cover masked, hooded beekeepers facelessly peer). Rather than indicating the nature toward which humankind

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could strive, they illustrate the darker forces and negotiations that have their place in our psyches and societies. So a characteristic Ball poem is perhaps less an allegory than what remains of the allegorical once its referents, its insistence upon one interpretation or another, have been burned or pared away. What is left is a residuum of precise, elemental, iconic detail, not detail rendered to make manifest the thingly specificity of the world, but detail both concrete and bizarre, the sort of detail from which our dreams are compounded.

> For the sound a mouth makes
> is twofold—
>
> bent in arriving, stooped in the hall
>
> in a corridor of doorways, each sound
> is the servant not of the will alone,
> not of will, but of the quieted
> intents we have forgotten, that left us
> at the moment of waking,
> making their way, in cold determination, along the
> brittle roads of our sharpest sight.

What is to be revealed in such a poetry are not the identities and relations of these forgotten "quieted intents" but the pressure they exert, the cold determinations they enforce—inexplicable, creepy, unflinching—from the borders of rational consciousness.

If it is true, as Yeats said, that "in dreams begins responsibility," what remains to be established in Ball's work is a sense of what responsibilities his luminous, arresting, uncanny dreamscapes call the reader toward. Ball's work will reach its full power—already precociously anticipated in this rich, overflowing volume—when it addresses the pressing question of what sort of ethical objective is implied by the coolly seductive and skillfully wrought objects he has made.

* * *

The fraught marriage of the aesthetic and the ethical is the focus of much of Spencer Reece's startling, scrupulously uncertain debut. While the poems in *The Clerk's Tale* overflow with brilliant, even dazzling figures of speech, what fascinates Reece is the potential of the brilliant gesture not so much to impress but to amaze in the literal sense—to dazzle and confuse. For Reece, the vigor and beauty of words always threaten to work at cross purposes with the vigor and beauty of the world. "Morbidezza," the title of the book's final poem, is the felicitous term for this complex rendering; denoting delicacy or softness in the representation of the flesh, the word suggests great technical skill but also—by virtue of its idolatrous fidelity to a physical, transient reality—brims with risk and mortal danger. In the poem, an unnamed other, presumably the speaker's lover, returns from a garden bedewed and bejeweled with Reece's breathless descriptions: "The clouds drop; the sky goes blueberry blue. / You hear the night push her plausive voice, / glistering with perfumeries." Is this too much? It is, but precisely because it is too much, the poem cuts all the more brutally athwart its own enthusiasm in its final gestures. In the poem's abrupt coda

the entire history of beauty and loss (it seems) must content itself to be made known in the diminished silhouette of flowers while somewhere else the beloved sinks into a stertorous slumber:

> You place the irises in a vase on the hutch.
> The irises' beards
> purple and sweat while you go
> off to sleep,
>
> your gorgeous middle-aged torso yielding,
> your nostrils drumming like
> dove chests.
> Have I added too many strokes? I want
> so much
> to make you real, to get it
> right.

What one feels in Reece's work is the coercion and the force entailed in making things real, the cost, and the fact that the real is only made real somewhat against its will.

When in "Bestiary" Reece describes a cat's skull as "a terrarium of regrets" or has an elephant ask "Which one of you / unscrewed me / from the blue jungle / like a chandelier / and placed me here?" he vaunts his flair for spectacularly felicitous display. But it is in Reece's awkwardness, his deflations, his retractions, and his sudden shifts midstream that his poems renounce the intoxications of bravura in favor of something darker and stirringly ungoverned. At times this lamination of irony and sincerity, of awkwardness and awe, creates a distracting warp or blister in the work's surface; at other times a reach for astringent dissonance veers toward the portentous or bathetic. But even these missteps lend credibility to Reece's suspicion of beauty and its seductions. This suspicion abides even while Reece knows himself to be susceptible to beauty's ravishments, not only in its sublime natural and artistic manifestations (the ocean, irises, Caravaggio)—but in its debased and corrupted commercial forms as well.

Reece's word for the place where the beautiful casts such an unsavory, mercantile shadow is "Florida." While Florida is in fact where Reece lives and makes his living, the Florida of the poems is as much the embodiment of a state of mind or a cultural predicament—the condition of someone, anyone, simultaneously enraptured and compromised by a place of such *unnatural* beauty:

> smell the vias heavy with hibiscus, gardenias and
> grapettes,
> this is America, this is Florida,
> where history is rarely exact and the seduction of
> beauty is all,
> feel the city gather on your skin—
> the dirt, the exhaust, the laundry steam, the brine,
> let the tip of your tongue taste the ruined domes
> of the churches corroded by the Atlantic . . .
> and if a new friend should take your armÇ
> do not define the gesture, no,
> let the moon spread her shampoo all over you,
> allow the palm trees with their shallow roots

to lull you down the broad avenue.

This Florida is a place of endless sensuous promises, but also a place (as he writes in "Addresses") ravaged by the depredations of profit and loss: "who ruined it with deeds / house after house and all the butterflies and parrotfish gone." But rather than solicit the usual inoculations of genteel outrage and contented contempt, this atmosphere of departure and diminishment holds out its own allure: that the soul could survive (like, say, a palmetto bug subsisting on the glue of a canceled stamp) on the residue of our departed Floridian dreams.

* * *

Whereas Reece's book makes real a sense of place simultaneously ravishing and painful, Srikanth Reddy's first book, *Facts for Visitors*, dismantles any sense of locale or belonging and lays out as its territory a region of radical unlikeness. The world, or worlds, of these poems is one seen from above, or below, or in parts, and not as experienced by persons or personae, but rather as registered by isolated and disembodied zones of consciousness. In this sense, the psyche—as Reddy perceives it—is a thing of protean, Pynchonian variability. But this variability is not, much to Reddy's credit, what the book is meant to demonstrate. Rather, Reddy takes it as the starting point of his volume, seeking to show how a fragmented life never ceases, in Wallace Stevens's phrase, to "[pierce] us with strange relation." This apprehension of strange relations imbues Reddy's poems with fecundity. In "Jungle Book" the speaker, like most of Reddy's speakers, stares fixedly, even obsessively, at a concrete object of attention. The object in this case is a seed, which, split open, reveals a tiny tree inside, a tree that in turn bursts forth in myriad blossoms. This moment is one of amazement, an encounter with eternity in a grain of sand, the awed encounter with (as Philip Larkin wrote) "the million-petalled flower / Of being here," but the point for Reddy is not register this wonder but to make note of its utter elusiveness: "when I started to speak," he writes, the blossoms "blew everywhere."

Inspiration and disorientation likewise travel hand in hand through Reddy's worlds. The muse figure in the book—Reddy's Beatrice (a number of the poems refer to Dante's progress through the inferno)—is a figure called Ursula, although she is less a person than a presence, appearing at one moment as a dancing bear (or, rather more disturbingly, as a person disguised as a dancing bear) and at a next moment as the Little Bear, Ursa Minor, the constellation whose tail tip is Polaris, the orienting star. In this way, the sublime and the absurd alternate, but ultimately Reddy's firmament is less a fixed heaven than a welter of waste and starlight through which the earth careens. What survives of us will survive, Reddy insists, with the beautiful, delicate, doomed absurdity of the Voyager spacecraft, outliving the 57 languages recorded on its gold disk, and perhaps even the planet of its origin. "Lately, I have taken an interest in words like 'here,'" Reddy writes in "Corruption (II)", the Rilkean and Stevensian heft of "here" well disguised beneath his sanguine tone:

Here was a chapel, for instance. Here is a footprint
filling with rain. Here might be enough. Could not the

> same be said of elsewhere? Yes, I suppose. But I know
> precious little of elsewhere.

"Precious little of elsewhere"? Don't believe it. Facts for Visitors is, in part, an extended and triumphant attempt to write from no place but elsewhere, at times the cultural and political elsewhere of a half-imaginary colonial and postcolonial India, but most often from the point of view of someone at home nowhere, someone whose mother tongue could be a wholly artificial language, as Reddy suggests in "Fundamentals of Esperanto." But the complexity of these lines inheres in that delicate, painful "precious little." "Elsewhere," to Reddy, is that place about which we never know enough. We pick up its signal in snatches of extinct, invented, or arcane dialect. Reddy's mastery—astonishing in its emotional depth, rhetorical facility, formal control, and lightness of touch—inheres in his marshalling of these snatches and bursts into fresh and unforgettable art. ■

DeSales Harrison is a visiting assistant professor of poetry at Oberlin College and the author of *The End of the Mind: The Edge of the Intelligible in Hardy, Stevens, Larkin, Plath, and Glück.*

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