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On Richard Meier's
Shelley Gave Jane a Guitar

Shelley Gave Jane a Guitar by Richard Meier. Seattle, WA: Wave Books, 2006.

In his second book, *Shelley Gave Jane a Guitar*, Richard Meier takes his title from Percy Bysshe Shelley's gift of a poem and guitar to Jane Williams shortly before he died at sea. In Shelley's poem, a guitar waits for the gentle reader/musician to play it; it stands in for both the poem and the giver. By evoking Shelley in his title, Meier renders the myth of poetry and the poet inherent to Shelley's name and also suggests something about the transfer of experience into language and the gift of language to another.

Yet, read as a sentence, rather than as a title to a book of poetry, "Shelley gave Jane a guitar" is a simple phrase, and this simplicity resounds just as thoroughly in the book as does the romanticism suggested in the title. In other words, jettisoning the phrase outside of its historical and canonical context, even, perhaps, reading "Shelley" without its second *e*, the perfectly logical sentence undercuts all of the myth it makes. The poem in which this line occurs, "Your Dream Redaction," further transforms the prettiness of the line, its syntax made suddenly flippant with a dash and an exclamation mark:

And the most terrible rainstorm there began with dust,
where you bit a peach, in the shade of the Temple of Hera
where Shelley gave Jane—a guitar!

The title suggests that this poem is a dream redacted into a poem. The syntax of the lines contributes to this as they meld particularity into particularity without orientation or suggestion of relationship.

He's inside you, she answered, redaction
of the sky into a child, the sea, peach, tile
ascending like the sea wall into puppets
on all our hands the child watched and waited

as the musician can accommodate his voice to the sound of
the guitar I gave you from a great distance
by seeing the bodiless mind of the peach pit floating
in eclipse of the winding sheets of light
in which the sea appeared as the edge gone dark
from the forge, a thing (no song!) which can be touched.

In other words, the dream becomes a poem (a thing!) not only in its articulation but by way of lineation as revision. Of course, a dream also tends to become particularly nonsensical in redaction while the experience of it makes perfect sense. This is one way to read Meier's poetry—to experience it, to accept its disorientation.

The poems can be disorienting because they contain so many compelling images and allusions; one is led to follow these allusions through as if the poem is part of a universal Poem like the singular dream manifests from a collective subconscious. Yet to think of these allusions as traces that connote produces an experiential reading framed by certain discourses rather than made absolute by them.

The abecedarian acrostic poems (there are three) exemplify a kind of redaction in the constraint of the form. They are highly allusive, witty, and tender in their confines. The form produces these ideas. This is one example of Meier's translation of Shelley's Prometheus, in which letters or the fragments of words are fashioned into significance. Another example, even lovelier in its conflict between matter and spirit, is the poem "My Secret Life" in the first section of the book. Dream life appears here as "lack of consciousness" rather than as the poet's cognizant desire for an Ideal, as in the following lines:

made by the world into something beautiful, the name
that rings in the ear in sleep and is your own and someone else's,
though no one said it—because of that—at least not consciously.
That lack of consciousness has always seemed to signal
something true, like a plate with a flower painted on it
emerges from the dirt floor of an abandoned house.

While the poet is no Prometheus, he is (perhaps more like Adonais) at the call of beauty. Beauty in these lines is banal and mucked over by the conscious present, but it is no less true or precious.

Let us reduce the dream to this: it is a sincerity of emotion built with images, issuing from and existing within the mind of the dreamer yet also bifurcating the dreamer into an other. Thematically, bifurca-

tion is a point of negotiation throughout the book. In "My Secret Life," it develops in the internal/external dialectic as in those images made to spatialize contingency: phrenology's ceramic head, the photograph, footprints in snow. In an image reminiscent of Bede's, in which a sparrow flies through a banquet hall like the soul passes through life momentarily, consciousness is frail and haphazard:

a real out-of-body experience
that began inside the head, placing the ecstasy in how it got
out, shaken
as the bird that doesn't, for once, hit the window
but flies straight into the house, confused and shaken,
wrapped in a sheet through which a hand feels
its heart beating, and lets it go, the person surprised and
laughing
a little to have remained

Meier evokes the will-to-power in allusions to Zarathustra and Plato's cave. And continually undercuts the deliberateness represented in these figures with images that suggest randomness and absurdity, as well as time and change. These are revelations not unlike those in Shelley's "Ozymandias." For instance, in "The Pursuit" the poem begins with the lines, "I left them both there, stepping out of the kitchen as a cave,/ into the afternoon sun and an ever-greater multitude of shadows" and continues:

and daily life with its fictions (change has passed like rust
scraped from the stakes and covered with rust-resistant
paint the color of rust, to be driven in the ground
beside the young
trees that have grown so and taken on leaves as to almost
have become sails, thus subject to the wind) and true

unhappiness (the shadows of the leaves are flat on the wall
of the cave that is the surface of the Earth to the visible,
as hair lies down around the face in spring curls
dark and lively with August humidity) can't advance
into the sublime evening canyon of every night

The parentheses in these lines and the images they propose as metaphors advocate a lyric space—in which internal and external and truth

and fiction are neither mutually exclusive nor so-called conditions of reality one must simply accept. It would be naïve to say that there is a truer world or an ideal way of experiencing the world, but Meier's book would figure the poet (and anyone who will speak) as progenitor with the capability of making art out of the image-dump that is the world, and in this way, Meier's more contemporary influence, at least philosophically, is Wallace Stevens. Yet Stevens's gaze was toward the weather, while Meier's is keenly focused on the minutia down here. For instance, these lines from "Without That Inside You":

But it's the past you look forward to:
just today a hummingbird flew from the center of the road,
leaving an empty space where a bright green leaf had lain
forlornly.
I don't think I can say it more plainly.

For all of the criticism directed toward it, there is nothing intrinsically problematic about reaching toward the canon of Western literature. In fact, so much attention in the independent press and experimental poetry community seems drawn to "the now" that reminders of what has been are in order, if for no other reason than as an investigation of how modes of production construct the poet and her poetry. Subtly, this interrogation presents itself in Meier's book—in the sparseness of the book cover, its lack of blurbs and author photo, for instance. Importantly, the book is smart, but it is not cerebral. The poetry is vested in the world and in looking carefully even if this means losing its bearings. It is sensual and lyrical as awkward love poems, showing a self-awareness tempered by self-effacement, and it is lovely for this humility.