

ERIK NOONAN

The Apostasy of Speech: On Kerri Webster's *Grand & Arsenal*

Grand & Arsenal, by Kerri Webster. Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2012.

There's a phase in the life of a poet when reading contends with writing, from which great disillusionment ensues, as isolated pleasures give way to the demands of composition. The poet pulls a double shift, so to speak, casting private life in terms that anyone might grasp, if they only tried. And really, wherever there are words, metaphor shows up too. Which is what Kerri Webster means, I think, by the phrase "the apostasy of speech" ("Ecophilia") in her new book *Grand & Arsenal*: in an environment full of people cowed into the role of mere language-receivers, a person who decides to say her piece had better do so in the full knowledge of the consequences.

Webster describes her personal fall from poetic grace as a dark night of the soul, with icy humor and a feminist critique:

And so there appeared in the appointed place at the appointed time
a plaster angel. And the angel said I don't believe in girls but I saw
one once. ("Atomic Clock")

There's a lot of enjoyment to be gotten in *Grand & Arsenal*, not only because we see how it is with the poet, but also because we recognize moments from our own reading life, for example above, in her rueful farewell to youth by way of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Losing your way in poetry, and then finding it, takes a toll on human intimacy and warmth. The poet counts the cost, dissociative in tone, yet bound up by a predicament all the same:

When he says what he means
to do to my body, the sky
sinks into rangeland.
All the hotels in the universe

cannot raise it.
Having made my loneliness
my privacy, I don't remember
what to do with men.
Do you bathe them?
He says what he says about my inner thighs.
They still exist. ("Polysemy")

The helpless realization that "The world is the world's own eidolon" ("Seed Vault") leaves us no less adrift, needing to get our bearings, ensnared meanwhile by stale correspondences we can only enumerate until something better comes along: "Who's to say what's more like a temple, windshield glass or full-throated ease?" ("Atomic Clock")
What you state is a real thing.

And yet, that last line quoted above, by including words from John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," reveals the poetic and non-religious nature of Kerri Webster's effort in *Grand & Arsenal*. Her monks and prophets and cherubs, even her God, are all figures for parts of a drama which only takes place in the creative life of a working artist; and there isn't an acknowledged vocabulary for that, luckily. So, since making art means contending with an artist's materials, this poet waxes most expressive about her quest when she lets on about what she thinks those materials are. Having no choice, she sizes up the poetry of the past, and sees that she's well on her way in the art, even as stumbling-blocks assert themselves.

Webster's aggressive cultural fluency registers as an imposing sophistication. The poems describe a wilderness that's no copout; it's an exposé:

wondering just who the seeds are being saved for, far north, encased
below the permafrost.

The desert a flash flood,
a bewilderment;

the desert a lost key,
an astonishment

On a trip West, porn in the hotel room. I can take it or leave it. The climax that puts me in the seats? World's end. Hail or locusts, freeze or thaw, I'm not picky. Like: last week I was late for lunch because I didn't want to miss the conflagration, fire rolling behind the credits. Eating everything. ("Seed Vault")

For all its religiose obsessions, *Grand & Arsenal's* finest moments leave monotheistic paradigms behind and foreground the sophistication I mentioned before, as if words could occur to someone in the same way the ghost of a smile might flit across a somber mask out on good behavior, unawares:

so came

the equator. I walked its pencil line with arms outstretched, unencumbered by husband or child, unmortgaged, tethered to a certain region but otherwise content to land—wherever. And I landed in a brickwork city where she dwelled discontent; she, whose fabulations centered on land with proximity to water, grand houses, and the scouting of real estate, wiping grime off leaded panes to see flocked wallpaper. I have never owned most variety of kitchen implements; at the time of this writing, own exactly none. My needs were met with admirable precision by an old riverman back West, and by the mountains, which showed me up as foolish whenever I thought of linear time. ("Little Ornaments")

Here, anxiety has briefly passed, and a charming world-weariness takes over, delightful.

Lyric poetry in this book meets a human need that isn't writ large across any surface. With a story to stick to, the *Metamorphoses*, for instance, earns Webster's mild dispraise, as if all myths, like that of the city of Thebes, whose story Ovid retells, only reap debris and waste:

A crop of men and arms. A crop of alley glass!
A crop of bug husks. I think this is meant
for small song. ("Make of her Peril a Figure")

On the other hand, a line from Oppen or Yeats, intimate to our condition, proves companionable, restorative, consoling:

When I taste fear I take a pill, or call my friend, or recite something in my head, *carpenter, carpenter*, the world bucks and shifts, *tattered coat upon a stick*, the nor-adrenaline kicks in. ("Atomic Clock")

A poetry which proposes one sort of writing as more able than other sorts to handle the exigencies of contemporary life, and lets us in on the poet's reasoning, opens out onto a view of our predicament that doesn't squander the reader's attention.

Stationing themselves amidst poetry, rather than within object-relations, or between articles of faith, these poems ask to be judged according to their proper standard. It comes as no surprise to read in "Letter to a Young Poet" the lines "I love incandescence the way / some women love God": Webster's imagery, even her prosody, favor the clear over the obscure; they partake of a poetic strain that's been borrowing its terms from Christian cosmology since the Medieval period. The brightness of that outlook, the illumination which banishes darkness, and bathes things and ideas in its glow, showing how parts of our experience stand one to another, has proved valuable over the centuries during eras of unrest, and during moments of confusion in individual lives. What makes Webster's sort of light-imagery particularly post-Christian is worth asking, and I think the answer is that an ethical judgment accompanies the sensual presence. It's a demonstration, often implied, but always there:

Scrapmetal drags along
the highway and the county conflagrates, my silence
metallurgical, signal seared away till what's left shines
like pyrite scavenged in old mining towns, green-gold
and daft. ("All the Way from Here")

Since poets have a choice in everything except the given, it would be ungenerous to expect fine gradations of feeling in poems about a human universe largely abandoned by the light. What's valuable in the lines above, however, what lends them clarity, is their starkness. And such strict moral assessment, a dualist view abstracted from the welter of emotion, before words, is the strength and repose of Webster's book.

As sure as some lame comeuppance is bound to rear its head courtesy of this or that orthodoxy whenever the poem appears, the scarce points of reference at which Webster has arrived nevertheless make for coordinates with which to locate ourselves. This poet offers us one way to tell the profane from the divine: in her work, where the latter is absent, the former cries out for it, with a voice she hears as no one else has. Winner of the 2011 Iowa Poetry Prize, *Grand & Arsenal* offers our common everyday experience as a test of poetry's worth.