Dorothy Barrisi: On Don't Let Me Be Lonely

[A poet herself in the baby-boom generation (born between 1946 and 1964), Dorothy Barrisi includes Claudia Rankine’s Don’t Let Me Be Lonely in a review-essay that considers poets in that generation as possessing a special relation to iconic nostalgia? which she defines richly: Simultaneously hip and told as unreconstructed yearning, iconic nostalgia rejects the constraints of prior social constructions (Sinatra, Monroe) while remaining half in love with their dashed glamour, and then it inserts Jimi Hendrix or Pol Pot (and always ourselves) at the center of an ever-more-distant galaxy of shared historical experiences and long-drawn-out sighs, even as we reassert our cool.? Barrisi proposes that the baby-boom poets work within an alienation that isn?t aloof, as figures ?no longer at the center of popular culture, shaping it,? and therefore ?de facto, an analyst, an observer rejecting or making sense of change.? While Barrisi notes that the trade-off is to gain institutional power but lose revolutionary street cool,? not everyone inhabits this ?rather complicated place? in the same way, as she shows Rankine?s speaker demonstrating in her role as an ?anxious but astute naïf, ? death-obsessed as she muses about race, terror, television, and American violence in the age of dread, ? a collector and a connector of uneasy moments strung like oddly lit pearls on the book?s irregular prose line.]

? Rankine intercuts these vignettes with poorly resolved black-and-white photographs and simple graphics (the Do Not Resuscitate sign used on hospital charts, television screens filled with ?snow?). Taken together, words and images are meant to be speculative; they enlarge the discourse in order to dislocate it. But Rankine’s speaker only seems lost in the flood of data. Her shrewd observations of public and private events and feelings suggest that everything is connected in the post-modern world. Ultimately she challenges us to stay focused, despite ample cultural distractions, on the crucial topics at hand: our loneliness, our spiritual vacancy (note the empty billboard bearing the book?s title on the cover), our fear. ?Or one begins asking oneself that same question differently. Am I dead?? She does not use mass-culture allusions to reinvigorate her membership in a particular group (no nostalgic/iconic secret handshakes here) but to illustrate the ways virtual and media ?realities? displace individual belief until we no longer recognize ourselves or our purpose in the world. ?As the days pass I begin to watch myself closely,? she writes. ? ?Do I like who I am becoming? Is this me? Fear in phlegm. Fear airborne. Fear foreign.?

In the most powerful passages in Don?t Let Me Be Lonely, Rankine confronts that fear with what she calls ?IMH, The Inability to Maintain Hope.? Clarifying, she observes that ?Cornel West says this is what is wrong with black people today?too nihilistic. Too scarred by hope to hope, too experienced to experience, too close to dead is what I think.? Pitting acuity against despair, her speaker notices everything. She participates in the accreting impulse described in the 1983 essay ?The Rejection of Closure,? in which Lyn Hejinian argues that ?language is one of the principal forms our curiosity takes.? Striving to enact as much open-ended ?curiosity? as possible (because perception itself lacks closure) within the necessary boundedness of form, Rankine’s post-modern aesthetic presupposes this: every raw detail is revelatory, and in context, every detail holds the seeds for future, as-yet-unknown revelations. To this end Rankine juxtaposes her mother’s long ago miscarriage; a friend’s misdiagnosed and now terminal breast cancer; the shooting of Amadou Diallo; the lynching of James Byrd.
Jr.; the simultaneity of life and death in Sam Peckinpah’s The Wild Bunch; Timothy McVeigh’s execution (this detail is an especially brilliant stroke if we recall that the bombing in Oklahoma City was first thought to be the work of Middle Eastern extremists; when it was learned that the perpetrator was an American fanatic, there was, it seemed, an appalled sigh of national relief, as though we had been granted a temporary reprieve); the rain falling on still-smoldering Ground Zero; Derrida’s definition of forgiveness; Cornel West’s distinction between hope and blind “American optimism”; the lilies her parents send her for her fortieth birthday; the latest anti-depressant her editor takes. Information itself is presented as a kind of drug we take unawares, and Jean Baudrillard’s notion that the media itself is an effector of ideology (and that our response is already constructed), underpins much of the book’s anxiety and resistance.

In the end, the act of remembering and writing creates the possibility of purpose for the speaker of Don’t Let Me Be Lonely, who tries “to fit language into the shape of usefulness.” Paying attention is political engagement, the first form of protest registered against our numbing daily dose of undifferentiated information. ?What alerts, alters,? Rankine reminds us. But Rankine also speculates that only the combination of attention and real human connection can reawaken her?and us, the numbed-out walking wounded. ? Don’t Let Me Be Lonely concludes with syntax marked by the stress of the author’s uncertainty: ?Paul Celan said that the poem was no different from a handshake. ? The handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another. ? this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive?

It is the tentativeness of Rankine’s rapprochement with hope in Don’t Let Me Be Lonely that sums up the zeitgeist for baby boom poets today. During his presidential campaign, Barack Obama’s instantly famous red and blue poster bore his likeness and an unlikely political slogan: “Hope.” Perhaps it also announces the complicated renegotiation with hope we make as poets in 2009. How much hope will we allow ourselves to feel? To write? Do we believe?as we did decades ago?that hope-engendered action might heal the present (since there is no healing the past)? Will we permit ourselves the consoling (but currently unfashionable) belief in language’s ability to communicate these ideas?

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