

Continuity Girl by Chris Tysh (United Artists, 2000)

Review in Poetry Project Newsletter, Nov/Dec 2000.

The propelling thing about Chris Tysh's new book, and life in general, is that everything, every atom, every word, sentence, paragraph, action, image is poignantly present and almost graspable and then, it slips away. As I read these poems, I begin to make sense and then I instantly lose ground as the syntax trips me up or an image leaves me empty in the space of the margin. But I continue, swerving along this sexy, frightening path of meaning-making, and it is nothing like the way we learned to read in school. No, this is an experience of reading the Real as it rests hidden beneath a glimmering text with fractures and errors of syntax that allow me the unexpected freedom of looking through a crevice or over an edge.

Behind every poem, there is at least one particular photograph, painting, poem, philosophical treatise, translation, noir film, or news report. But they are not pinned down, named or conveniently included beside the text. As soon as I am certain of the reference, uncertainty arrives. Even though "Columbine" is the title of one poem, this is not reportage. ("petty pettish fetish unvest/saucy sweetheart to the rescue/almost has eyes pewter made/to gutter tears, the largeness of her pores/usurps my position as either outside./tantara! travelling hands shore up/...) The slippery nature of language and reference (and the inherent violence) is Tysh's subject and she takes the reader on a journey into the linguistic unexpected. Woven throughout are the structures and thoughts of the French and German postmodern philosophers and theorists, especially Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridian differance. If you have a smattering of knowledge in these area, these structures and ideas will glimmer through the poems as if they are the translucent bones of language, and perhaps they are. If your reading is more lyrical or objectivist, the skin of the body will be enough.

And/in/one/orgasm/they/came/undone//below/the elastic/lexicon/of/baby/and/bath.  
(catherinewheel)

or

his clit here , my guess-. We cake the ice and leak  
the files in a fit of pique with split infinitive, bullwhip  
pronouns on the hoof. (from Dear X)

I'm especially moved by the twenty poems in the "Continuity Girl" section of the book which address the problems with identity and representation, especially related to gender, with the myriad of positions we take about and around the he and the she. For example, "adam's apple" (something women don't have but lead men toward):

why she ain't had meat yet when some had  
gravy as well

he asked in the visiting hours' inquisitive  
whine. Suck job & sandwiches later she turns

a corner wraps one  
demures. Her sense of debt to larger doubts

carries speed pocket knife to shadow in the blue  
archive between shifts  
no tatter tale to read on the arm so tipped it sinks

in the lay of summer this openhouse of stress syllables  
about to slap  
a square canvas she'd take to trick the eye

A very intelligent, political and word delicious book. Tysh articulates how we make/can't make meaning hold with sex or with sentences; words and bodies slip apart and away, on a continual swerving path to who knows where (slippery and unstable as is the rest of our knowledge), but perhaps it can be linguistically/poetically charted or trailed - and it is, beautifully, here, in *Continuity Girl*.