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“Then My Eyes Got Hungry”: On Diane Seuss’s “Memory Fed Me until It Didn’t”

Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl. Diane Seuss. Graywolf, 2018. $16.00 (paper).

In a netted hammock in my partner’s backyard, between two greening oaks whose crowns almost but never touched, I reopened Diane Seuss’s *Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl* to a random page. In those early days of the COVID-19 lockdown, I wanted poems like I wanted slices of cake—cut with the intensity with which Judith beheads Holofernes in Artemisia Gentileschi’s early seventeenth-century painting. That’s the intensity I always expect of Seuss.

The poem to which I opened begins its first divulgence in the title only to continue it in its first line, a maneuver I believe Matthea Harvey, in a lecture I heard way back in 2012, called an “on-ramp.” I’ve always felt delightfully bewildered by such a beginning to a poem, as if I’d expected something on “GO!” but got it on “3!” Seuss writes:

> MEMORY FED ME UNTIL IT DIDN’T
>
> Then the erotic charge turned off like a light switch.
> I think the last fire got peed on in that hotel outside Lansing.
> Peed on and sizzled and then a welcome and lasting silence.

The title alone doesn’t define what memory entails for this speaker here. Rather, we require the first line’s correlative elucidation to understand that it’s memory of erotics that “fed” (i.e., sustained) the speaker. What did it feed though? A fire, and then an electrical charge—with which the act of feeding or being fed doesn’t seem quite compatible—and, lastly, something noisy, loud, or, in my partner’s first language of Spanish, *ruídoso*.[1] To be able to successfully mix

1. This Spanish adjective has always struck me as more bombastic than its English translations, more evocative of *ruin* (at least to my ear, whose taproot is English). Of course, *ruin* and *ruído* (the

metaphors, the way that Seuss has done here and does with extraordinary panache across her oeuvre, requires the mixology skills of a bartender in a basement bar marketed as a "speakeasy" by its hipster owners. Perfect proportions, the right tools, and the requisite charm, with just a hint of impropriety.

The poem's next four stanzas shift the poem's direction:

> Then my eyes got hungry.
> They looked at bowls and barn owls and paper clips,
> panoramic lavender fields and a single purple spear,
>
> and it was good but not good enough.
> My eyes were hungry for paint, like I used to imagine
> a horse could taste the green in its mouth
>
> before its lips found the grass.
> Then I woke to the words "still life," not as the after-image
> of a dream but as the body wakes and knows it needs
>
> mince pie before the mind has come to claim it.
> I craved paint like the pregnant body craves pomegranates
> or hasenpfeffer or that sauerbraten made with gingersnaps.

The speaker's "erotic . . . fire" that was peed on (figuratively, yes, but one can't say for certain there wasn't a literal component in that hotel outside Lansing, Michigan) is replaced by a hunger—not exactly a literal one, not in the way I crave the numbing sensation, almost like very fast and tiny tremors, of the Szechuan peppercorn. Instead, Seuss's hunger for paint is more figurative, even if it is described by literal hungers: the horse's hunger for the grass, the sleeper's craving for mince pie, or the pregnant body's desire for pomegranates, hasenpfeffer, and sauerbraten.

What's most interesting about the poem up to this point is how it's leveraging its line breaks to create tension. The first four lines end in periods—this is end-stopping at its most pure. Perhaps these lines suggest a kind of end of that "erotic charge." As the speaker begins to look at objects in the world (e.g.,

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noun form of *ruídoso/a*) are false cognates: "ruin" comes into English from Middle French's *ruine*, which was formed from the Latin *ruina*, a nominalization of the verb *ruere* ("to fall"). However, as the Real Academic Española Spanish dictionary notes, *ruído* comes from the Latin *rugītus*, which can mean either "the roaring of lions" or a "rumbling of the bowels," according to Olivetti Media Communication's online Latin dictionary. But I digress, which is, I suppose, what footnotes are for.

“bowls and barn owls”), the lines remain end-stopped but less confidently so, with commas that conclude clauses but not the sentences to which they belong. Once desire—or, rather, hunger—is reignited, however, the lines begin to break midsentence, against the grammar, as in the following three lines:

> My eyes were hungry for paint, like I used to imagine
> a horse could taste the green in its mouth
>
> before its lips found the grass.

If one understands line breaks as functioning not only to illustrate the relationships between lines but also to reveal a distinct signification of the language within the line from the language within the sentence, one can have a field day with Seuss’s breaks here. Imagine for a moment that there was a period at the end of the first line in the passage above: “My eyes were hungry for paint, like I used to imagine.” The speaker once imagined the eyes being hungry for paint, and now that past act of imagination has become true. “A horse could taste the green in its mouth” suggests that the animal can taste the color green—as if colors themselves can be tasted!—not just in a metonymic figuration of the grass. The stanza break also serves a mimetic function of implying a “before” and “after.”

Associatively, Seuss connects all this talk of a hunger for paint to the art the speaker eventually devours by introducing “the myth of van Gogh” eating paint. “I ate van Gogh,” she writes, “the still lifes of old boots and thick-tongued / irises.” She goes on to list all the artists at which she looked—Dürer, Chardin, Baugin, and more—in a swift, leaping catalog that reminds this reader of perusing a market, all of its stalls, unable to decide what to buy. Seuss ends the poem with Pieter Aertsen’s *Butcher’s Stall with the Flight into Egypt* (1551), which is held by the North Carolina Museum of Art, about an hour and fifteen minutes up the road from that hammock in my partner’s backyard. Ironic that the poem’s final still life (which comes from the Dutch word *stilleven*) includes the “flight”—something entirely active, not “still” at all—of the Christian Holy Family.

Seuss describes the dead[2] objects in the foreground:

2. “Still life” in Italian is *natura morta* (literally, “dead nature”), which, unlike the English and Dutch words for this art genre, place emphasis on death instead of life. Two subgenres of still lifes—*vanitas* (Latin for “vanity”) and *memento mori* (“remember you die”) have intersecting but not perfectly overlapping subjects and symbolic meanings. *Memento mori*s tend to feature images of skulls or skeletons, reminding the viewer that they one day will die, whereas *vanitas* paintings, despite likewise featuring skulls often, tend to suggest that beauty and wealth are ephemeral. This seems more encapsulated in *natura morta* than “still life.”

loaded with gaudy carnage,
a vat of lard, a pig's head hung by the snout, cascades
of sausages, strangled hens, and yawning sides of beef.

The huge gory head of a cow is front and center,
directly below the cool blues of the miniature Virgin Mary
handing out alms to the poor. The cow's cold nose

is so close it makes my eyes water.

I could obsess over the phrase "gaudy carnage" for the length of this entire essay! *Gaudy*, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means "brilliantly fine or colourful, highly ornate, showy. Now chiefly in disparaging sense: Excessively or glaringly showy, tastelessly fine or colourful." It defines *carnage* as "the slaughter of a great number, esp. of men; butchery, massacre." The idea of carnage being brilliant in color feels literal, but the idea of them being "[e]xcessively or glaringly showy" or even "tastelessly . . . colourful" excites me because it's a minor moment of editorialization on behalf of the speaker. The words arrive from the Anglo-Norman and French, respectively, suggesting that, in their juxtaposition, they have a kind of complementary filigree. Secondly, for American speakers, the *au* in *gaudy* either makes a /ɔ/ sound, what is described as a "lax mid back rounded vowel" by a University of Pennsylvania site on phonetic symbols, not unlike the vowel in *dog* for many speakers, or an /ɑ/ sound, a "low back unrounded vowel" as in *spa*. The first *a* in *carnage* produces an /ɑ/ sound, thereby making the two words assonant or slant assonant, depending on pronunciation. Secondly, the words are both two syllables, with the stress falling on the first syllable, making their discrete pairing trochaic. Sense, subtext, sound, and meter emerge to create an eccentric image that has a lot of what sommeliers might call heavy-bodiedness in the mouth.

Beyond that phrase, there is so much to ogle, diction wise, in this passage: those "cascades / of sausages," the "yawning sides of beef." These are not mere ekphrastic descriptions but images of the kind that Ellen Bryant Voigt writes about in *The Flexible Lyric*: "Image can supply not only what the writer-as-camera uncovers in the empirical world, or what the writer-as-ecstatic isolates and articulates from the whirl of the individual psyche, but the moment when both are fused in objects seen, heard, smelled, and rendered with human response still clinging to them." That is, image attaches observation to the observer, their "individual psyche," so that it becomes a kind of effigy of their

internal lives, subjective thought, and extemporaneous emotion, which is the very gesture of Seuss's poem's final sentence:

> Its watery eye
> gazes back at me and I fall in love. I fall in love again.

Let's turn back to that word *erotic* with which the poem began. The word, you may know, comes from the Greek *eros*, which Sappho, as Anne Carson reminds us in *Eros the Bittersweet*, described as *glukupikron*, a compound word meaning, literally, "sweetbitter." Carson goes on to write: "Many a lover's experience would validate such a chronology, especially in poetry, where most love ends badly. But it is unlikely that this is what Sappho means. Her poem begins with a dramatic localization of the erotic situation in time (*dēute*) and fixes the erotic action in the present indicative tense (*donei*). She is not recording the history of a love affair but the instant of desire. . . . A simultaneity of pleasure and pain is at issue. The pleasant aspect is named first, we may presume, because it is less surprising." From where does that bittersweetness creep upon the speaker of Seuss's poem? The art itself? Somewhere else? Can we read *eros* into the word *love*, repeated twice in this final line? It is often translated as such, and the poem's concluding word *again* suggests as much, as if it is the reconnection of the "erotic charge" in the first stanza. It is desire and horror, in one—perhaps like sex.

As I finished reading "Memory Fed Me until It Didn't," there in that hammock, in the midst of a quarantine, I, too, wanted to see *specifically* everything. Perhaps I was in the midst of falling in love with the world as well, exactly because it was what I desired, now that I was limited to a small acreage of it, and because I could not have it, because it pained me, because I knew now that it was being ruined, because it was a living *vanitas* of itself, painted in the gaudy carnage of spring.