

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

The Thin Wall Martha Rhodes. University of Pittsburg Press 53 pages. ISBN 13: 978-0-8229-6453-7.

Review By Ed Meek

NICHOLAS KRISTOF, the liberal columnist for the New York Times, ran a poetry contest recently asking for poems about President Trump. He then printed the winners.

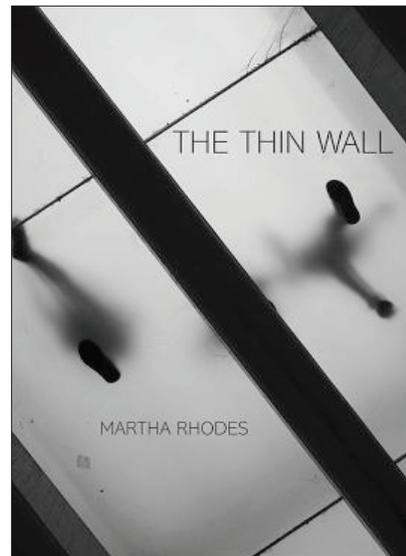
Here is one he chose: "If God has made men in his image/Please explain our new President's visage." The poem continues with the rest of the limerick. Apparently clever, rhymed limericks is what Mr. Kristof thinks of as good poetry and Mr. Kristof is a well-educated person.

In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, a well-meaning English teacher laments the fact that he doesn't teach poetry in his classes; he would like to if only he had time. I taught high school for a number of years and I was surprised to learn that few of my colleagues taught poetry in their classes. They confessed they didn't understand the poetry in *The New Yorker* and didn't know what made poetry good anymore. Instead they read novels and memoirs and drama in their classes and on their own.

I bring this up to point out that poetry today is kind of a mess. There isn't much agreement on what poetry is. Instead there are many different types of poetry or schools of poetry, created by universities and academics and beyond those schools, there is poetry outside the academy and beyond that, there is poetry that is popular with readers and fans. There is also rap, and spoken word. There are sites like "Hello Poetry" where people post poetry that is shared. "I love poetry/ an easy way to express/ my innermost thoughts." Then there are rhymed religious poems read by funeral directors and poems written by best men at weddings. That is, there is an immense range, and quite a divide between what the public thinks of as good poetry and what the academy considers good poetry. The latest trend of blackout or erasure poetry is, on the one hand kind of interesting, on the other, a sign of creative bankruptcy.

In the last twenty years MFA Programs have surged and multiplied (hundreds of programs and thousands of yearly grads) and have become more academic. In fact, many writers who get MFAs now go on to get PhDs. In any case, academics, when they can, aim to control and define the arts. This happened with fiction back in the 1970s and 80s, but by the 90s, the public got fed up with all those post-modern pseudo-intellectual novels full of narrators talking about the novel and novels with multiple endings or with no endings at all and fiction returned to what it does best: telling stories that are well-written because those are the stories that sell and get made into movies.

Unfortunately, poetry doesn't sell and doesn't get made into movies. Poetry is more like painting and sculpture except it doesn't look so good



Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

on your wall or in le jardin. But since there are so many MFA Programs, publishers figured out that they could sell books of poems to all those MFA grads. At the same time publishing and printing have evolved so that publishers can print on demand and no longer have to invest in a few thousand copies of a book before putting it on sale so that it is much easier now to get a book published by a small, independent press or even to publish it yourself. The result is that we have thousands of books flooding the market. Yet there are few critics of poetry who have been able to define the poetry of our age. In fact, for the most part, no one even criticizes poetry. Instead, people just write positive reviews of poetry that they like. This creates an odd situation where there are a number of poets who write prose that is merely broken into lines. And there are poets whose poetry really is aimed at an academic audience. The T.S. Eliot's of our day.

Martha Rhodes is a prominent figure in the landscape of contemporary poetry. She teaches at Sarah Lawrence and in the MFA Program at Warren Wilson College; she is the Director of Four Way Books in New York. Her new book, *The Thin Wall*, has been published by Pittsburg Press. It is a slim volume of 53 pages divided into three sections, each with a number of poems, usually one to a page, with no titles. The sections are: (Burden of Inheritance), (Yard Fire), and (Looking Down). Those section titles are in parentheses. Why are they in parentheses? It seems a bit self-conscious, doesn't it? Here is the first poem:

*There are apples,
buckets of
and heads wet from the dunking.
A witch 'round every corner.
Ladders.
Jury and judge.
A pond of bodies bobbing, condemned.
And nineteen nooses wait.
That seven-gabled house.
Girls run the streets accusing
the accused. In Salem Village,
Goody Proctor bears her child in jail.
Our party pays to tour the next grey house.*

This is the most successful poem in the first section. This is our inheritance here in New England: the witchcraft and the hangings. Throw them in the pond to see if they float and if they do, they must be witches! The narrator sees this in her mind as she is on a tour. There's wit in the last line—that we should pay to see this past of ours. And the self-conscious use of language shows up again. Why “buckets of” as a separate line rather than: There are buckets of apples. The off-rhyme with judge is there either way. Why isn't it titled “That seven-gabled house” rather than insinuating that line in the middle of the poem awkwardly just to set up the last line?

Other poems in the first section are not so resonant. One poem begins: “The air was heavy with blood. /The boys washed off in the Merrimack.” That's a little too heavy handed. So too another poem that begins: “Both of us under one boy or another./That's how we spent our senior year.” That

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

sounds like the beginning of a Chelsea Manning confession in Vogue. I don't actually believe that anyone spent her senior year under one boy or another. Here's how another poem begins: "Boys, girls, some of them siblings,/spawning in bathtubs all over town./ Drown them?" It sounds like The Beans of Egypt Maine where kids crawled under the porches and no one knew to whom they belonged. There's a kind of condescension at work here, assuming personas that do not ring true.

The second section is called (Yard Fire). It is about relationships. The first poem is about loss:

*A crow at my mouth.
The bread from me*

*it stole. I felt
like a flour sack,*

*pecked, consumed,
scattered. Enough dust*

to dust. You, just gone.

That certainly captures the feeling of devastation when someone dies—the hour of lead, Emily Dickenson called it. Of course Emily's poems were written before God died. Now there is no recourse. Nice sequence at the end of the poem with all that assonance.

The last section is called (Looking Down). In a couple of poems the narrator is in fact looking down at another or another's body. There's humor in this section. One poem begins: "Your dog's dinner. /What you feed the chickens. /The mud at the bottom of the Charles. /I'm what washes up on the Merrimack's shore." The poet is personifying all that's rejected and cast off. "I'm everyone's former friend. /I'm his former wife."

In the final poem of the book, the title comes up: "Nothing is the thin wall of glass (as thin as skin)/ just over there...nothing grabs us all, good or bad, boy/girl popular, un-, you..." So, when you read that, you might agree, Yes! It really does. Or you might not. Apparently, the publishers at Pittsburg Press think, Yes! "Nothing" separates and gets to us all. But can the word "nothing" when used as the subject of a sentence have agency? "Something there is that doesn't love a wall..." Frost said and maybe Rhodes is playing off the Frost line.

There's clearly an aesthetic and a worldview at work in these poems and if you identify with her sensibility, you will enjoy them. Martha Rhodes is widely published and, by just about any measure, quite successful as a poet. The fact that University of Pittsburg Press and a number of highly respected magazines publish her work is testimony to a particular type of poetry, "furious and viral," Susan Wheeler calls it although I don't know where these poems would ever go viral. There's a psychic distance between the poet and her subjects that undermines her authenticity. Rick Barot says, "demanding as they are beautiful." Beauty, and the appreciation of it, seems pretty rare in this collection.

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

In a recent interview in *The Paris Review*, Ben Lerner talks about a problem he sees as endemic to poetry.

The main demand associated with lyric poetry is that an individual poet can or must produce both a song that's irreducibly individual—it's the expression of their specific humanity, because it's this intense, internal experience—and that is also shareable by everyone, because it can be intelligible to all social persons, so it can unite a community in its difference. And that demand... is impossible.

Of course it is not impossible. It is difficult, particularly today in our fragmented world. Whitman said, "to have great poets, there must be great audiences."

We seem to be in a transition period for poetry. Here's hoping that the recent popularity of writing, reading and performing poetry leads to a better sense of what good poetry is and what it is good for. Literary magazines call for poetry that pushes the boundaries; we would be better off with poetry that makes connections with tradition but reflects our age. Too much of what appears in our literary magazines today works too hard to break with traditional poetry and results in either not being poetry at all or in being self-conscious and awkward under the auspices of the experimental. Maybe a few great poets will create great audiences.