

Theune Reviews “Smokes” by Susan Wheeler

Michael Theune

Susan Wheeler. *Smokes*. Marshalfield, Mass.: Four Way Books, 1999.

Much of the attraction of Susan Wheeler’s first collection of poems, *Bag o’ Diamonds*, results from her ability both to find and to fabricate. For example, in “Settings,” the first section of “The Rudiments of Baublery,” an early poem from *Bag o’ Diamonds*, Wheeler writes, “A certain fascination with others’ undressing / persists for years. Yours, for instance, / husks from a green stalk, / Everyone counts down. Everyone looks for / the signs of denouement. / Everyone is more the mystery you lack.” The lines orient the reader by suggesting a situation at once archetypal—this particular fascination has been around awhile—and utterly new, since Wheeler is one of the first to bring that fascination so blatantly forth. From such sudden and graceful starts, Wheeler’s earlier poems could accrue and take shape—almost any shape—and still miraculously and convincingly approximate precise and glimmering gems.

At first glance Wheeler’s second book—a collection of surreal pop/ nostalgic poems roughly hewn and polished, roughly, from and in the Ashbery vein—might seem a continuation of her first book’s inventive proceedings; however, in *Smokes* Wheeler largely parts with invention and enters the more anxious and hopeful realms of experimentation. Rather than of vocabulary and syntactic liberties, many of Wheeler’s new poems—now decked out with various dialects and levels of diction—swing immediately into song. After *Smokes*’s initial poem (which ends, “The youngest starts the song”) the multi-sectioned second poem, “Rehearsal for *The Breaks*,” launches into lyric:

He was WHACKED with religion.
And he was trying yea so mightily
not to sound spoon-fed, he,
a cynical man,
educated at 30.

I GOT no ongoing circumstances.
He sinks upon the velvet seat
and codes the program back
in Dribbling s’rows.
A burning fire shut up in my bones—

Because no seductive instant holds the poem together, the subjects and the music of “Rehearsal for *The Breaks*” seem slightly divided. But perhaps this is to be expected. Aware that her sonic experiments require some support, Wheeler turns to distant but dependable canonical subjects—one detects often the death of god and the hero’s obsolescence—and to literary predecessors. Anxiety about her songs’ success reveals itself most obviously in her poems’ conclusions, where often the language switches gear in order to seem especially dire or funny—or both: pathetically prophetic. “The Dogwood and the The” includes samples both from R. Kelly’s music and from Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* in an odd mix of images, including “[t]he dazzling platters of the manyarmed man” and “[a] stun gun”; however, the last line settles—and sits the reader—down to report: “There has been a casualty. The bereaved will have their needs.” Such a poem ends up spoon-feeding the reader while trying yea so mightily not to sound so.

Yet, of course, mismatching of sound and sense in Wheeler’s poems can also function to great effect, comic and otherwise. “Shanked on the Red Bed” begins,

The perch was on the roof, the puck was in the air.
The diffident were driving, and the daunted didn’t care.
When I came out to search for you the lauded hit the breeze
On detonated packages the bard had built to please.

“The diffident” and “the daunted” seem to be the postmodern ancestors of “the best” and “the worst” of Yeats’s “The Second Coming.” Employing such regular rhythm and rhyme in a postmodern narrative of the search for the other lets the poem itself wonderfully detonate and please. While Wheeler’s experimentation presents and plays with contemporary voices and tones that need more exposure in poetry—as in “The Homewrecker (in 7/4)” and in “Landscaping for Privac,” which seems to be spoken by a slightly insane Martha Stewart—her strongest writing often is elegiac, writing in that mode where the utterly decorous and the absolutely vertiginous meet. “Song for the Spirit of Natalie Going,” an elegy for an infant, makes its way through a catalogue of brief wonders—“spacey, resplendent, / in seersucker bib. overalled, astonished, in dazzling fix / on the small crawling fights in their spaceship of night and the / plug and the cord and the big one’s delight”—to a final, fitting cry: “Such a sharp love there is! Such a loud / love there beats! Such a filled hole you leave, in the dusk of the room, / in the wobbling hours of what has refuged, your future in me.”

Though a little bluster and the occasional crackle of creaking props can be detected in *Smokes*, one can also hear the strains of a vital, experimental music in which something new is being made up. Wheeler’s experiments provide various interesting results and look forward to future inventions.