
Mira Rosenthal, *The Local World* (Kent State University Press, 2011), 72 pp., \$15. Reviewed by Susan DeFreitas.

Beauty as Passport: The Local World

In *The Local World*, Mira Rosenthal's debut collection, the personal is a place. It's California fruit country in high season, or a hospital trauma ward. It's a train car in Hungary, or the site of a loved one's incision. It's a place to return to, like the family farm, after the passage of years—and a place of departure, necessarily, for the whole wide world beyond.

Rosenthal's fine collection, which won the 2010 Stan and Tom Wick Poetry Prize, reveals the ways that wounds heal, sometimes right over the shrapnel that imposed them. Here you'll find narrative poems shot through with italicized, stream-of-consciousness interjections; lyrical poems built around the tricky ways that words crystallize into images; poems centered on moments of genuine revelation, or sorrow, or estrangement. The collection kicks off with the section titled *Salvage and Tarweed*. In these poems, we are introduced to the speaker's sister and stepfather, *respectively* the points of connect and disconnect, in the family constellation.

But this is not the kind of generic triangulation that could have taken place anywhere to anyone. The specificity of the setting is what makes the personal real, as in the poem "Work," in which both sisters, in their own ways, work to undo the damage done to them as children: "she's watching her mind holding on / to anger, looking for emotion like an ant / for traction up the branch to the peach / to pierce its blushing skin, begin the wound. / 'Excruciating,' she says, of our family fictions, / as if there is sap in her veins, slowing / her heart down."

This emotional line reaches its apex in "Curtain", which the poet Maggie Anderson (who judged the 2010 Stan and Tom Wick Poetry Prize) called "perhaps the best poem I have ever read about standing by as a helpless witness to the pain of a loved one." Here that loved one is the speaker's sister who must undergo the painful process of a skin graft. The speaker wishes she could be there for her sister, help to ease the pain when the bandage is ripped off her wound, to keep it fresh for grafting.

As in the family fictions of “Work”, the position of the helpless witness is excruciating but must be borne—even as one final trip to the family farm must be borne, and to the manipulative stepfather who twisted so many words and concepts for both sisters in “Salvage and Tarweed”:

But tarweed’s taproot

goes down into land’s flesh, deeper
than turkey mullein or vinegar weed
or any other native grass, just as language
goes deeper than skin—which is why
it survives....”

The second section, *Necessary Travel*, is a departure from this deeply familiar landscape. Here the speaker becomes an open eye, erased in some ways of personal history, but in other ways circumscribed by it in every foreign landscape she traverses. These are restless, searching poems, ranging in setting from a French restaurant in New York City to the Langtang Valley of Nepal; from the Okefenokee Swamp of the southeastern U.S. to the Ganges River; and straddling several liminal states in between—borders, airports, customs.

The best of these, exemplified by the “Foreign in a Foreign Country” series, recall another recent prize-winning debut, Kara Candito’s *Taste of Cherry*. Like Candito’s, these poems of travel explore various states of longing, the shock of the unexpected, and the mysterious hieroglyphs of unknown cultures.

In the third and final section of *The Local World*, we see the necessary dislocation of travel circling around to provide new maps of familiar internal landscapes. The poem that lends this final leg its title is one of the most startling of the collection, venturing further into the lyric than those solid stories of hearth and home and heartache, but informing them just the same:

As children we were warned not to whistle at night for fear
of evil spirits.

Dangerous animals become even more
sinister and uncanny in the dark.

A snake was never called by its name at night because it would hear.

It was called a string.

A beetle the size of child's fist was never pointed out to have pinchers.

It was called a button.

A string, a button, a clothespin, a child's discarded winter jacket—these household objects conceal a host of dangers bespeaking the domesticity of a childhood shot through with twisted fictions.

In the prose poem "Chore", the circularity of such memories asserts itself via domestic routines: "room after room my task is to wipe clean, clean as a business transaction with a maid hired for wage, wage verbal war and then resort to a stapler, stapler with heft like the old-fashioned kind, kind words accumulating and unused after, after chores are done you can go out of your mind."

And yet, there's a hopefulness in the closing forms of this collection—a hope all the more convincing because it does not shy away from pain. Time and again, the speaker leans close enough to snatch the insight from the underworld, so to speak, but not so close as to fall. Because the ground on which this speaker stands is solid, borne of effort and inquiry and that small but sure measure of grace given to those who open themselves to the breaking and establish a path for others to do the same.

The final poem, "Sunflower", leaves us some clear signposts on that journey: "what was once said is no longer real: O, never-resting mind... / the past is the past: O, petulant vine... / you can give back. // And abandon the dead surf of childhood: Say, beauty... Your beauty...O, fine sword..."