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From the Selected Works of Michael Theune

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Miranda Field's *Swallow*

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On New Books

SWALLOW, by Miranda Field. Houghton Mifflin, 2002

In a foreword to *Swallow*, Carol Muske-Dukes (the judge who awarded *Swallow* the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference Bakeless Prize for a first book of poetry) praises the book for its images and music, for their "dazzling" effect. So dazzled, Muske-Dukes writes, "Miranda Field would be called promising if she hadn't already fulfilled promise in these stunning poems.... Here is a beginning that has the feeling of beginning, middle, end—all stages of maturation of expression." Muske-Dukes' assessment would be right if image and music were the sum total of expression. But there is so much more to poetry, including deep curiosity, structure, and precision. From this expanded view of what it takes to make good poetry, *Swallow*, while a good book, seems less like an apotheosis and much more like a solid beginning.

The world of *Swallow* is a gothic world, a dark fairy tale realm, replete with gardens, magic apples (Eve's, Atalanta's, and Beauty's), beasts, and familiars. Even the poems that occur in the putative present keep this fantastic feel; in them, birth and death are life's central activities; whatever happens in-between seems a fitful sleeplessness plagued with restless visions and nightmares. One is subject to odd states and beings: the strange magic, the suspended animation, of a natural history museum, the mad (who might or might not be touched by God), strange family connections, odd relations of blood. In Field's modern world, superstition still reigns. "Birthmark" tells of how a pregnant woman's cravings for, and consumption of, certain foods can affect the growing child; the speaker's desire for blackcurrants turned into a birthmark on her son's foot. The speaker, who desperately wants to have a daughter, fears for her daughter and warns her daughter that she will consume anything, risk any monstrosity, to have her.

Swallow presents a woman's world. In it, men are constant problems. A boy pisses "on each thing / growing in his mother's garden—like a little dog." A husband is a "[p]ilferer, rifler, filcher." Women tend to suffer, but survive by banding together, gaining strength from community, or by turning the tables, by becoming aggressors. "Bestial," which opens, "A child will stray, will strain against the leashes of the story," itself strains against story; in this poem, it is the girl who is the beast. Preying on a boy who, in Freudian fashion, is separated from his mother, the girl controls the, typically, masculine gaze, and at poem's end, she is instructed to use it: "Break him / a tiny bit. Look into him hard enough to wound him. A tiny bit. I mean: / Let the eye's stillness magnify the rigor of appraisal. He will not win. / Burn him with your look, his lovely skin."

If Field's general project, the reappraisal and rewriting of fairy tale, is

similar to Anne Sexton's work in *Transformations*, her specific tactics are more like those of that other grim sister, Sylvia Plath, and, more specifically, like Plath in her terrifying last poem, "Edge." Though Field often employs narrative to lend a background pattern to her poems, her lush and complex language is mainly a treasure trove, a glittering minefield, of images. *Swallow* is full of singular acts of stunning description. In "Housefire," bicycles lean "broken-antlered in the dark." "The Lost Head" creates a disorienting, negative, fantasy space: "...[Y]ou cross the doorsill without stopping. / And your shadow precedes you, inverted train / of black ermine or black weightless lace." "Tumultuous Stillness," a poem that takes place during, meditating on, the failed end of a rescue attempt to save a man buried alive, is a baroque assemblage of images, a nightmarish phantasmagoria. The poem is aware of this, opening:

The sky arrests like one of those phantasmagoric fabrics
cinquecento angels wear: citron and rose with gold in the folds,
pinholes the color of rubies, and tearing, mended in places:

several kinds of weather stitched together.

This awareness is clear, as well, at the poem's close: "Then night comes / down around them, swallowing whole the man- / made things, the made things left behind turned dream." The construction of "Tumultuous Stillness" as image-barrage makes sense; the poem is made to be dreamlike, to portray the mind avoiding, and taking stabs at, thinking the unthinkable, the mind attempting the impossible, trying to identify with the dead, trying to grasp the horror of the edge: "Still, the mind thinks itself / a bank of windows, sheer glinting invitations. And once the wonder / sleeping in a thing unborn comes to that glass, the anguished / beating of the wings, the flailing, weeping..."

The trouble with images, though, is that they are hard to control. It is difficult to make powerful images serve a specific meaning. Field is aware of this difficult dynamic; in her work, image and meaning often are pitted against each other. In Field's poems, image wins; perhaps paradoxically, Field's poems often seem to be about, seem to mean, the impossibility of meaning. "Crime Scenes," an imagistic poem describing two murder sites, ends, "It is a message the image suppresses. / It is hard to see. It is hard to see or hear or feel anything in this conscripted wind." "L'Atlante," a poem in which the speaker considers an image of her mother and father ("Image she is. / Image she shall marry."), ends, "Intention is a web / without the tensile strength to hold us." If there is overt meaning in *Swallow*, it is problematic, part of the troubled world of the masculine. In "Subway," the speaker thinks that a boy masturbating on a subway platform is an apt image for the production of meaning:

The bones, tendons

in the white wrist pumping, pulling, so much work
to be done to accomplish one small explosion.

The neurons fire, the mind feeds on the spark—meaning: yes—

motion of stitching?—no—engines?—yes—motion of pistons...
Beneath the shut-tight lid, beneath the hood

of any machine, obsessive repetition, invisible hands.

In this postmodern era, all poets are aware of MacLeish's dictum that "a poem should not mean, but be." However, all poets, including Field, need to be more attuned to the fact that, without meaning, without an intention or a message, individual poems often are doomed to obsessive repetition. Some of Field's poems can come to seem slack constructions, mere assemblages made out of the stuff of other poems. Unfortunately, some poems that have real promise, that touch on real complexity and interest, are undermined by this. For example, "Phrenological," a poem with the note, "After a portrait of John Donne by Isaac Oliver," poses itself as one interested in getting inside the head of Donne by reading its physical contours. Midway through the poem, the speaker states, "I guide my skewed-with-longing optical instrument across the topography of your outer-visible mind. By its flickering attempt interpretation of your position in time. Your past-indicative skull half hidden by the glowworm skin..." By the invocation of the powerful, feminine gaze, it seems some type of complexity is invoked; however, it is really the case that complexity, real engagement, is avoided. The inclusion of the gaze is an obfuscation, a trick to make a reader think about how this theme appears throughout the book, and perhaps throughout much recent literature, and how complex looking is, rather than think about an obvious problem: this poem assumes an unmediated contact between the speaker and Donne's skull/mind. However, it is clear that this cannot be, and is not, the case; the artist, Isaac Oliver, the original interpreter, simply has been removed from the scene. The effect is that this poem seems less an insightful, mindful, ekphrastic endeavor and more a rote repetition of a theme.

In other poems, dependency upon the poetic image is limiting. "Affliction Is a Marvel of Divine Technique" is about Audry, a brain-damaged girl who people believe has "the voice of God." The poem ends,

Her head is propped
up, read to twice a day. *Long ago,*
in a distant land... Once, far off,
another time... And music played
to it. And stopped. And the shades
behind her raised and lowered. Audry
keeps her promise. Hard as a marble
apple in a bowl. Cold in its glass
flesh. Not for swallowing.

While these final images may be good, they cover up real consideration. For the first time in the poem, at the end, the reader is made conscious of the care given to Audry, of the fact that others may see Audry in very different ways, that is, precisely not as a marble apple in a bowl. However, this new information, this new perspective, is simply passed over. As a result, the ending feels

not so much like a terrific culmination but an avoidance, and this makes one wonder what else is avoided. Does Audry, as the poem earlier claims, really only see darkness? This certainly is not the belief of those who make pilgrimages to see Audry. Why aren't the perspectives of those who visit Audry included? Why isn't this poem written as complexly as, say, "Tumultuous Stillness," incorporating a variety of perspectives? Here, instead, images take the place of real, and potentially very generative, complexity.

Although the problem of the premature, imagistic ending is a real difficulty in *Swallow*—this flaw appears in other poems, such as "Anaglypta" and "Museum of Natural History"—one brief poem positively shines. In the aptly named "Miraculous Image," Field beautifully describes a decaying icon:

When an effigy cries,
 the wood she's carved from rots
 ... Two trenches
of decay down the cheeks,
 the dress wearing itself
away...
the body shriven, its gilt
 stars of scabbed paint
flaking off. Leaven.

At the end, the poem reveals its meaning: "How our undressings lift us... / A sacred thing undone grows brave, / a convict with nothing / in the world to lose- / the baby sheds his baby fat, / his gold hair calms, mouse-brown. / Epiphanies glance off him then, / a human thing, and hungry." Though this poem collects images and concerns (mysticism, innocence and experience, the body's demands) from other poems, it employs them for itself, for its own ends, ends that are both (miraculously!) surprising and appropriate. Though epiphanies may glance off the poem's child, this poem itself is epiphanic. Its images in themselves are glorious; meaning simply *also* transmutes them into symbol.

While *Swallow* has great potential, and some real accomplishment, it, like any first book, has problems that need to be worked through. Problems, though, should not be feared by poets; so long as one is conscious of them early on, they are the gardens of promise.

—Michael Theune