

A Discussion with Rachel Contreni Flynn

SRPR: Rachel, in “Dead Center” the setting is Indiana. Did you grow up there?—I mean the (very) oblique, grownup denial of the seriousness of the situation for the child-speaker of some of these poems sounds Midwestern to me.

Rachel: My childhood in a rural town in Indiana is the backdrop for many of my poems, but I can’t say that my work has a “personality” attributable to that geography. As flat and forthright as the farmland might be, there are always places to hide, nooks and crannies of vulnerability. Maybe the Midwest and so-called Midwestern writers have a reputation for plain speaking and simplicity—but wherever humans interact, there is complexity. Wherever dreams, language and images interplay, there is ambiguity. I think it was Yeats who commented that he wanted poetry to combine stoicism, asceticism and ecstasy. That sounds to me very difficult, but right.

SRPR: Mother-loss, or some form of family cataclysm, seems to resonate through “Dead Center” (rich *double entendre* of a title!) and other poems. The narrative is removed, or shorthanded: I can just hear the unspoken questions that *aren’t* in the poem “Fine”: “How are you all doing now? Are you all managing okay? How’s your daughter taking it?” And the one answer, which is: “Fine.” Despite the gravity of the poem, I laughed in recognition when I came to understand the title and that weird line, all by itself, apropos of nothing except the unspoken denial that the daughter has put her pain under an armor of ice, “doing fine.”

Rachel: Well, it is laughable. I guess that’s the grim joke of this poem: how could things be less fine than the situation presented here? Poetry, for me, ultimately does not allow a refusal of what is genuine. I’m not interested in word play for the sake of cleverness or a pile of erudite allusions to suggest how learned the writer might be. Poems demand more guts and gristle, in my view. They demand a moment of unblinking, unafraid comment, if one can muster that. Perhaps there is something Midwestern in that sensibility, I’m not sure.

SRPR: I am mesmerized by the reiterations of images—or perhaps, image schemas. In “Fine” again, the face in the not-yet-frozen water pressed against the frozen surface (“doing fine”) practicing kisses, the mouth turning purple, finds a second iteration in the final stanzas: “A plate held/ to the sun shows/a hand behind it—/ /brushing dirt away/ or waving.” Each image contains a silhouetted form. Each image has a kind of nearly thrown-away segue placed right before it that situates the emotional resonance of the image in that iteration. The bone china buried in the yard prepares the reader to map “treasure valuable enough to bury” and “bone china” onto the plate. Bone china is fine enough to show a hand holding it when held against the light, looking as though it could be brushing dirt away or waving. Each of these images—and the perception of the image schema—is held in a frontal perspective. That is, not from the child’s perspective. One makes a mental note of this and reads on to find the image contextualized in the next poem, and partially reiterated: “Once I told him to stop waving at me.” The conceptual blend it takes to track and blend all the different mental image domains from which information is coming, within poems and intertextually, is complex. I love poems that make me know a great deal and yet find “how” I know what I know to be a mystery. Like, how *do* we know that the Burns’s beloved is dark headed with red cheeks instead of blonde and fair in “My luv is like a red red rose/ that’s newly sprung in spring”?

Rachel: Ah, well, love that’s worth anything at all has an edge of danger and risk and other darkneses, right? A couple years into my MFA program, I worked with a wonderful teacher, Chris Forhan, who said this: “Say the strange thing, then don’t explain yourself.” He also encouraged me to layer a poem with images, refrain from editorializing, and just let the images rise and breathe on the page. This was a breakthrough for me, and it truly freed my writing. Up to that point, I was struggling mightily with narrative—plunking down characters, events, scenes—writing in a very logical and sensible way. And it was stultifying. My poems were dead little chunks of tortured descriptions, going nowhere with no music and no passion. To let go of the notion that the poem has to make sense per se, that it has to adhere to a defined, literal situation was to let go

of the over-thinking and over-fidgeting with the poem that worries it into a lump of oatmeal. Having said all this, for me, a poem still needs to make sense in an emotional and physical way. I look for ways to provide a structural scaffolding for my poems, whether that's through connected images or sound, or even a geometric figure (which I think goes on with all the circles in "Dead Center"). I am a big believer in the craft and art of poetry—I want my poems to hang together in a meaningful way, but I no longer insist that they flat-out tell a story.

SRPR: In "Haywire," too, similar structural principles are operative: the clock face, "opening up into a thousand copper sharp things," i.e., going "haywire" maps onto the bitterness "like haywire" around the child's head, growing "sharp" with waiting that would not be named. It is the air, not the child, that goes wet with longing for the mother. The child has displaced all her agency, away from herself. The hair, not the child, takes the mapping from the other iterations of the images as they have accrued, beginning with the clock image: "And my hair sprang in that air, curls/ like feelers, like a thousand needy things." I picked up this image schema in another iteration in "Three Trees" in the "gray stick stuck outraged in the snow," a kind of metonym, again, for the child, her descriptor displaced, defamiliarized, to the sapling most like her that she and the brother are planting in October, "the wrong time for hoping." This element of your composing rather reminds me of Louise Glück's poems. The reiterations of image and agency schemas, their networking, globalizing, and threading, for example in *The Wild Iris*, accrues a polyphony of voices, resonances, and layered domains of meaning that one can map but cannot point to. She also uses a spare line and a sparse coding, an almost telegraphic—or at least austere—speech, as you do. Have you studied her work as you have come to master this? Whom are the poets and writers you read most seriously?

Rachel: I have read Glück for sure. She's not specifically one of my influences, though who can say? I read everything from field guides to Chinese ideograms to Eastern European writers such as Aleksander Ristic and Vasko Popa. A couple years ago I read deeply Charles Simic's translations of many of these Slavic poets

and learned a lot, I think, about working with images. They are also masters of dark humor and of primitive imagery reminiscent of folk tales and carnival. I love complexity blended with primitiveness, to study poems that are able to combine grit with tenderness. The first poem I ever loved was “Death of the Ball Turret Gunner.” I was about 14 years old and completely bowled over by the intersection of death and birth, of infancy and adulthood, and mostly by the intense musical quality of the words melding with and clashing against each other. The books I return to time and time again are those by Laura Kasischke, Fernando Pessoa, Gregory Orr, W.S. Merwin, and a great collection of Roethke’s notebooks called *Straw for the Fire*.

SRPR: I’d like you to talk about your stunning deployment of gerunds and punctuation (timing) in “Full-time Permanent.”

Rachel: I’ve begun over the past several months to draft poems about work. My “day job” is as a corporate attorney for a Fortune 500 company, and before that I worked in a large law firm in downtown Chicago. “Full-Time Permanent” comes out of my early years as a new lawyer. If the language seems like it jolts around in fits and starts, I guess that could be an enactment of how those years felt to me—exhausting, nerve-wracking, crazy. Every once in a while a glimmer of clarity. I like to work with the line length as, of course, a way to control breath. I read poems (mine and others’) out loud, over and over, to figure out what’s going on with breath. in the line. A line can come out as a bullet or a torrent, or anything in between. If you can manipulate that, you can charge up the heart rate or frustrate the tongue.