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Review of: Two books of poetry by Jacques J. Rancourt

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Jacques J. Rancourt, *Novena* (Warrensburg, Mo.: Pleiades Press, 2017), 69 p., ISBN 9780807166604, and *In the Time of PrEP* (Gorham, Me.: Beloit Poetry Journal, 2018), 36 p., ISBN 9781732041103

reviewed by Steven Riel

One of the most engaging virtues of *Novena*, Jacques Rancourt's prize-winning, full-length collection of poetry, is its fresh explorations of Christian, and specifically, Roman Catholic, territory. The book contains two sequences titled "Novena," each consisting of nine poems, corresponding with the nine consecutive days or weeks over which the traditional prayer ritual occurs. However, Rancourt's novenas are anything but conventional, populated instead by one Virgin Mary with silicone breasts, another who dogsleds, another who wears a wig and may be a male passing as the wife (and sex partner) of Saint Joseph—you get the picture.

The drama of the "Novena" sequences is heightened and darkened by the recurring appearance of another presence: "the Deerman":

... He lives behind leaves,
behind bark, in the bat hollows of trees. Thighs and cock
he offers.

At times this "Deerman" seems to merge with Mary. At other moments, the Virgin Mary, although "lurk[ing]" (what a transgressive word to associate with her!—and

one seemingly more appropriate for the Deerman), seems to fail to protect the speaker from this masculine power that pursues:

... The Deerman watching
as I crawl backwards, the rug bunching

in folds. His boots clopping wood, his eyes on me
like eyes. Holy Mary, of course you lurk
in the corners. Of course, you do nothing.

This isn't fourth-grade catechism class, for sure ("I came rosaries / onto his chest"). What results instead is a deep and honest probing of the human psyche created by means of orchestrated image and sound. One of the most complex and effective reworkings of a Catholic prayer can be found in the naked examination of conscience of Rancourt's "Act of Contrition," in which the speaker attempts to face how his sexual behavior affects others:

I became one part driven
to fleas and mange, teeth,

the other part left foaming
over. The sky then pink

as the underside of my tongue.
Pink as the skin beneath

the dead fox's fur. Lover,
I've firmly resolved

to amend my life,
but I keep breaking.

It is striking how many of the poems in *Novena* incorporate supernatural or surreal elements. At times these may seem like minor touches, and yet they can suggest a dimension that profoundly alters an otherwise ordinary scene, as in “Open Shed,” in which the speaker, a boy, takes off into the woods and is found only hours later. To explain why it took so long for searchers to discover him, the speaker asserts, “No dog could sniff me out / because I did not smell like the living.” Is the speaker one of the walking dead? Granted, invocations of a heavenly Virgin do not need to correspond to known reality, but when, within the context of Rancourt’s novenas, during a clandestine tryst between two men, we come upon the following cluster of images, what exactly are we being asked to see:

...Laying on a moon,
like scorpions under a star-studded sheet, my breath
dismantled, our barbs leaked venom.

Is it the speaker’s foggy breath I should picture “laying on a moon”? I ask this not out of pedantry. I understand that scorpions glow phosphorescently under a full moon; that the sexual encounter between these two men may be taking place outside, under the constellation of Scorpius; and that the speaker may have instead gone indoors, risking accompanying the dangerous-seeming sex partner to a bed with star-patterned sheets. I wonder, however, if Rancourt’s penchant for narrative made off-kilter by supernatural or mysterious elements may have something to do with what Tony Hoagland calls “a widespread mistrust of narrative forms, and, in

fact, a pervasive sense of the inadequacy or exhaustion of all modes other than the associative” (174). I also wonder if this penchant may sometimes obstruct rather than reveal.

While Rancourt creates many evocative poems within the realm of associative mystery, he also demonstrates keen skills when remaining in the kingdom of the familiar. In “The Gate,” a novice monk (“me who-was-called”) goes to

confession for the fourth
time that month, into its dark mouth

at the end of childhood[.]

Granted, this youth hears angels, but everything around him—from the fecundity of the neighboring marshlands to the sensual description of his confessor’s chin—fits naturally into the scene with poetic weight and power. We see what he is turning his back on, and the temptations he cannot escape.

The set of circumstances Rancourt addresses in his more recent chapbook *In the Time of PrEP*—tracing the impact of the AIDS pandemic on the generation of gay men who came of age in its aftermath—lends itself to poems that inhabit reality more consistently. These poems aim to illuminate not only a personal response, but communal experience. Here again, Rancourt frequently probes by means of biblical metaphors (Passover, Lot’s wife, Noah and the Flood). The poet seems aware of a tendency to resort to Judeo-Christian motifs, as when the speaker

in “Love in the Time of PrEP” describes his non-scientific explanation of a rainbow in a location reputed to be haunted:

...I,
the melodramatic poet, see

some paranormal visitor,
some queer saint.

For me, however, the most memorable moment in this chapbook rests squarely in the ordinary, when a layered erotic experience generates an awareness of the epidemic residing in the here and now. During a date with an older man, the speaker in “At This Hour” cannot escape considering what the older man and his generation went through:

...but when I kissed his throat,
I kissed in that column
a columbarium
for dead men.
Beyond his windshield,
the city bruised its sky,
each light
another person awake at that hour,
still flushed
with blue thread.

When viewing the entire set of Rancourt’s poems contained in both books through the lens of his Franco-American heritage, I notice not only how he creatively dialogues with the Catholic tradition, but also how he explores lineage in “Hello My Name Is Also Jacques Rancourt” and “Backyard Rock.” In both

poems, what's being passed on from father to son isn't just lumbering skill, but also ethnic and masculine identity. "Hello My Name Is Also Jacques Rancourt" ends with a question: when faced with the speaker's father's two-man saw, "who among us takes up the other end?" It isn't clear, in other words, whether the speaker (and by extension, the present generation of Franco-Americans) is willing to participate in or at least converse with the traditions of his ethnic group as presented by parents. But the poem's existence itself implicitly answers that final question for Rancourt, because by writing the poem, he enacts an engagement with his lineage. The phrase "as it must" in the final lines of "Backyard Rock" make this participation seem at some level unavoidable:

I try to understand how if
I hack and hack, the log
will come apart in pieces, strips, first bark and slivers,
but eventually, as it must, it will halve
and halve again.

By following his father's example and quartering logs, the speaker metaphorically (and repeatedly) participates in passing on a portion of what he has inherited.

The poems in these debut books are many-textured, inventive, and thought-provoking. Rancourt merits inclusion in the list of contemporary Franco-American poets whose work we all should be reading.

Work Cited

Hoagland, Tony. *Real Sofistikashun*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2006.