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Jay Meek's *Windows*

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Jay Meek. *Windows*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1994. 63 pages.

"One perceives transparency when one sees not only surfaces behind a transparent medium but also the transparent medium or object itself."

-Fabio Metelli

The cover to this strong collection of exquisite pieces is a photograph (circa 1890?) of a group of people looking cautiously up into the sky to see something out of the frame. They don't seem to be frightened, but they are fascinated by some distant object. Jay Meek's *Windows* is about looking and seeing. Many of the speakers of these poems find themselves looking through transparent panes of glass, through windows; and they see not only what realities are on the other side, but also the windows themselves that separate them from what they are looking at. Says the speaker of "Behind Glass," "I want to believe that mostly I can be approximate to what I honor, and that the boy I remember...is the boy I have awkwardly been...."

The poems are similarly transparent in the sense that they provide the reader with glimpses of what actually is, and what the poet has imagined it to be. Some of the windows described in the poems are physical apertures through which we glimpse a married couple having a quiet tea, a bird feeder "bobbing in the wind," streets dark with rain, a landscape racing past the dining car of a train. Some are mirrors that open to new worlds, including the ones reflected in them. One startling example is described in "Signals": "At the bottom of the grave there was a full-length mirror and in the mirror the blue sky." Some are photographs, windows open to moments frozen in time. One such window is the screen of an old movie theater described in "Shadowland" and "Swimmers." Some of the windows are not transparent at all but are darkened and closed to view, as when a curtain is drawn across them.

Some of the windows, however, are conceptual: memory, a portal that transcends physical limitations of time or space, frames many of the experiences here. "Angelica must have known the story gave a version of her own life, a mirror of her best understanding." There are wondrous metaphors, such as the glass cases of a darkened museum hall, or the glass eye of a stuffed bird, whose meanings open onto other new meanings. Many of the windows hold reflections, those ephemeral images suspended between two realities, on a surface opaque

enough to mirror the view, but transparent enough to allow a back image through—a kind of sandwich of distinct perceptions. Reading these pieces, I am reminded of the paintings of American artist Richard Estes, which capture the multiple transparent reflections in the plate glass surfaces of banks and storefronts: "It was as if the rowers had seen a mule carrying mirrors through the country side-bits of trees and iron gates given back to the landscape at odd angles and with sharp edges...."

The collection is particularly coherent, for each individual piece fits into a larger mosaic; each piece deals with a problem of perception. Some offer illusion, a "window in a snake's tail"; some, misperception or a trick of memory. Some of the poems are startling in their lucidity; some are more tantalizing, offering the barest glimpse of a suggestion. As readers, we are cleverly caught in the spaces between image, object and perception. As in the classic figure-ground optical illusions, what we perceive as the figure or the ground shifts as we try to orient our vision, to distinguish the focus of our gaze from other competing attentions.

When we apprehend something, we say that we "see" it. The speakers of these poems look very hard at things, trying to see. But *understanding* comes with insight—literally seeing within. Hence, the wife in the final poem who dances blindfolded among eggs scattered on the floor without stepping on one of them, comes to a brief but important understanding when she tells her audience that she loves them, "which made everyone cheer as if they were awakened from a deep sleep, just in time to love themselves." As the speaker in "Travel Notes" admits, "We need poems...to ease our knowing." That is, we need poems to relieve our anxiety about knowing and to make it easier for us to know. Poems frame our experience and help us to see them. Jay Meek's gift to the reader of this collection is the transparent and iridescent language of his art.

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