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**Spencer Holst's *The Zebra*
Storyteller, Peter Redgrave's *The*
Cyclopean Mistress, Barry
Silesky's *One Thing That Can Save*
*Us***

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Spencer Holst. *The Zebra Storyteller*. Station Hill. 1993. 295 pp.
Paper: \$14.95
Peter Redgrove. *The Cyclopean Mistress*. Bloodaxe Books. 1993.
156 pp. Paper: \$7.95.
Barry Silesky. *One Thing That Can Save Us*. Coffee House Press.
1994. 92 pp. \$10.95

"Think of the prose rectangle as a small suitcase," writes Louis Jenkins in the forward to his *Nice Fish: New and Selected Prose Poems*. "One must pack carefully, only the essentials, too much and the reader won't get off the ground. Too much and the poem becomes a story, a novel, an essay, or worse," Jenkins warns. While it's extremely dangerous to attempt a definition that would accurately describe all prose poems, Jenkins' profile does serve to show why two of these three prose-poem collections don't "get off the ground" and one does.

I've never heard Spencer Holst tell his stories. Reading *The Zebra Storyteller*, his collected stories, I wish I had. I quickly discovered that the language in these pieces-some as short as a paragraph, one that approaches novella length-rarely holds my attention. The voice of the storyteller, though, with its little asides-"and, you know, goblins are a little scary"-endear me to the tale-teller. Maybe that's why Station Hill features fourteen photographs of the author, including three with the author's wife, Beate Wheeler, who provides some intriguing pen-and-ink illustrations for the book. Photographs, however, can't take the place of the spoken voice.

At his best, Holst makes a quirky, wistful, and charming storyteller. The title piece, my favorite in this collection, illustrates his quirkiness: "Once upon a time there was a Siamese cat who pretended to be a lion and spoke inappropriate Zebraic." And his whimsy. He takes the cliché "fit to be tied" and has the Siamese cat literally tie the Zebra who uttered the cliché (and thus surely deserves such a fate). As for charm, well, while I won't tell you how the author arrives at the closing line, I will deliver the punchline, as Holst's reference to his craft occurs quite often in these pieces: "That is the function of the storyteller." Another tale, "Bullfinch & Goblin," which opens in the same time-honored way-"Once upon a time"-also captivates. Holst manages to pull me through the slow point in the tale, two boys imitating various bird calls, because of my interest in his character, an insecure bullfinch.

Yet this passage reveals the weakness I find with most of these pieces-imitating bird calls, for example, might work well when per-

formed, but on the page, these conceits feel wooden, flat. I felt the same way with the closing of "The Getaway Car." "Ah-GOO-gah! Ah-GOO-gah!" might work as a performance piece, but not on the page. Only in those few pieces in the book which are separated by asterisks does Holst seem to craft the language. In fact, in "Prose for Dancing," composed of thirty separate entries, he reminds us several times he's sitting at a typewriter: "Beauty mused, as if to herself, 'When I agreed to be in this piece it was understood that there was to be a fresh typewriter ribbon.'" I find myself wishing he brought this chisel to the larger blocks of prose.

Perhaps I'm making demands on Holst's work that shouldn't be placed on it. I approach *The Zebra Storyteller* as written text, whether "stories" or "prose poems," and thus expect to be engaged by the language. I don't bring this to oral tales as a listener, where the voice of the storyteller itself can carry me into other worlds. I find myself transfixed by the tales of Bailey White, on NPR's *All Things Considered*, for example, and when Garrison Keillor is at his best, I've sat in the car with the engine running to hear the news from Lake Wobegone. Perhaps Holst should have released a collection of his tales on CD. That format would be best suited to capture the real strength of Spencer Holst-his gift for storytelling.

Holst's book opens with a quotation from Poe: "even now in the present darkness and madness...it is not impossible that man, the individual, under certain unusual and highly fortuitous conditions, may be happy," and Poe, alas, casts a large shadow over Peter Redgrave's *The Cyclopean Mistress*. Poe can be found in the title "Dance the Putrefact: Scenario for Masque," in the line, "As for myself, I am no madman," ("My Shirt of Small Checks"); and in the fantastic imaginings of "An Army of Mice," one of my favorite pieces in this collection. Redgrave animates a nightmare where everything the waking sleeper touches-"My feet touched a carpet. It wriggled and clasped me with its teeth."-turns into mice.

Unlike Poe, though, Redgrave doesn't usually provide dark and drear settings to evoke horror and fear. He can take the mundane and orchestrate it into something strange and threatening. Take "Riding Crocodiles in Falmouth": "The hail-shower, clicking along the tiles, dragging its leash, scratching itself, makes all the restless dog-noises of a hail-shower." In the same piece, Redgrave likewise transforms trees: "The trees lash their tales, tugging at the earth. They are green as crocodiles diving upwards with something in their teeth." His poetic

prose, however, often becomes Redgrove's worst enemy. When he relies solely on it to propel the pieces, they bog down in the richness of his imagination. Take, for example, this section (XII) from "Excursions":

The comets which blacked the ice-cream; all production had to cease during the transit of the comet. The vast stainless Helmholtz lantern. The dumb-show of the production-line, the *mudras* and the *asanas* everlastingly repeated, the necessary attitudes of packing schemata, the whole-cloud figures in white rubber boots, the visible breath, the array of cold piping, the vast stainless benches, the metal-doored hardening-room. The frosty path from the pasteuriser to the homogeniser. The snowmaiden ice cream-makers. The damned great cold stores.

Placed in the context of the other fourteen sections, this passage unfortunately is rendered no more readable. In fact, it's less comprehensible.

Redgrove's wild imagery-comets blackening ice cream, animals "blessing us in Egyptian"-and the author's ability to stretch language-the series of sentence fragments in the excerpt above-can charm and beguile. But Redgrove's love for "uncommon sense unleashed," as he calls it in "Science," too often turns into baroque for the sake of being baroque. Will readers stay with fifteen sections of "Excursions" merely for the privilege of experiencing "uncommon sense unleashed"? Or make it through the thirteen-line opening sentence of a prose poem entitled "The Electrical Man," closing with "-in short, provocative, and always wearing the same thalamic smile"?

The publisher, Bloodaxe, offers this explanation as to the density of such writing: "Redgrove begins with short fictions, but gradually withdraws the narrative scaffolding, asking the reader to respond instead to an alternative and possibly more dramatic pattern of imagery, where a narrative exists but is unspoken." So "unspoken" is that narrative scaffolding or direction of any sort that I'm often lost in "the holy rauch and the divine schmack," to quote from "A Crystal of Industrial Time." Where Holst employs the flatness of everyday language, Redgrove dives in the opposite direction, plunging us into a sea of swirling language. While I admire his poetic imaginings and his bold experimentation, much of the writing would benefit from some of that "scaffolding" he has shed.

Barry Silesky, in his *One Thing That Can Save Us*, manages to have it both ways. He combines-collides would be a better way to describe it—the techniques of Holst and Redgrave into something new and intriguing. Rosellen Brown describes that collision in this way: "Barry Silesky has taken our selves, our times, our country, and broken them into shards...and then he's shaken the whole thing." Yeats warned us in "The Second Coming" that "the centre cannot hold." Silesky operates not from the given of a centerless world, but from a world reduced to fragments. His prose poems do more, though, than merely recreate a world of shards, and this is where his genius lies. Into that fragmented world of fragmented language, he gives us a Woody Allen-like twentieth century everyman, one with recognizable human worries and preoccupations.

Here's a small, short sampling of the way Silesky recombines those shards for us (from the opening of "Thanksgiving"):

The restaurant's empty, coffee black and fresh. The leaky gas valve on the heater outside the kids' bedroom's fixed, and no fire. The check didn't bounce. As the plane took off the kids stared out the window, dumb at the vanishing lights. The pay for the last job wasn't enough, but it finally came in the mail. In the car by the frozen lake, my first girlfriend let me touch her breast while my mother and sister cooked at home. The children played with the toy garage Grandma bought them, and we could read the paper, talk about the news.

While Silesky certainly doesn't provide us with traditional narrative, he hasn't removed all the narrative scaffolding either. In fact, "Thanksgiving" demonstrates how Silesky can provide several simultaneous narrative threads, seemingly jumbled together, all the while weaving a complete whole. The first sentence of "Thanksgiving" quickly establishes the setting. Then the fragmentation starts. In the very next sentence what I call the anxiety ritual, the perpetual worrying of things breaking down, is momentarily relieved as the narrator recites a list of things to be thankful for: "The leaky gas valve on the heater outside the kids' bedroom's fixed, and no fire." A series of sexual memories then enters the mix: "In the car by the frozen lake, my first girlfriend let me touch her breast while my mother and sister cooked at home." Here is the prose-poet at work. The line sounds like prose, yet the polarities make it poetic—"frozen" contrasted with "cook-

ing," "girlfriend" with "mother and sister," adventure with the limited and yet safe world of the domestic. Three sentences later, our narrator returns to his sexual preoccupation, or perhaps it intrudes back into the thoughts of the narrator: "At first I thought I was supposed to apologize, not touch her where she let me." Then back to the restaurant, where Silesky undercuts the poignancy of his discovery of sexuality with posters for a comedy act: " 'Uproarious!' " " 'Triumphant' " " 'Great Fun!' " Returning out to the sexual encounter, Silesky, in Spencer Holst-like language, brilliantly captures the confusion and wonder of that sexual encounter with this short phrase: "Then she let me more." And we're only half-way through the piece! "Thanksgiving" culminates with the line: "No one knows where I am." It's not only that no one knows he's at this restaurant, but that no one else has had these particular experiences arranged in quite this order.

Not only do narratives appear and reappear within one piece, but they also wend across the pieces of the book. It's clear, for example, that the Persian Gulf War saturated the news at the time Silesky was composing these pieces, as they continually float through *One Thing That Can Save Us*: "Everyone agrees yesterday's peace offer was a sham, the bombing must continue. Too bad about the burnt children" ("History"); "Now the war's over & the whole city slowed for the parade celebrating the victory. The home team won again ("Mount Pleasant"); "The war's finally over....Truth is, we haven't been there, nobody has, all we've got are reports" ("Sacrifice"). At a time when material of this sort is almost universally (at least in this country) discouraged, I have to admire Silesky's vision. History and politics affect us just as strongly as any other ingredient in our lives, his prose poems say.

Other currents could just as easily be traced through the book—the sense of things breaking down: "ceiling plaster falling downstairs;" sexual preoccupations: "If I beat off every day I can forget about sex for hours;" the parental worry and wonder over his children: "our children are practicing words." In fact, tracing these currents points out another way to read Silesky's book. These individual prose poems are also chapters in one unending novel, autobiography as stream-of-consciousness, (or is it stream-of-consciousness as autobiography?).

All three of these books show the diversity of short prose at the end of the twentieth century. They also show the continual difficulty of editors and publishers in trying to describe just what it is writers of poetic prose are doing. Station Hill calls Spencer Holst's work "stories"; Bloodaxe calls Redgrave's work "short fiction"; Coffee House

calls Silesky's work "short-short stories." Is it a matter of enticing readers with more familiar terms of "stories" or "short fiction" or "short-short story" than "prose poem"? (Bloodaxe uses the term "prose poem" only on the back of the book.) Or is length the determining factor? Louis Jenkins notes, "The trick in writing a prose poem is discovering how much is enough and how much is too much." Inexact and mystical as that may sound, that sense of balance is the best compass I can find, the only way I can explain why I consider Silesky's work prose poetry and the other two books works of short fiction.

Regardless, though, of the label used to describe what Silesky has created, *One Thing That Can Save Us* gains in clarity and complexity and beauty with each rereading. I don't know if it will save us, but it offers humor and humanity in an era where both seem in short supply.

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