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**Vern Rutsala's *Little-Known
Sports*, Brian School's *Strabismus***
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Vern Rutsala. *Little-Known Sports*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1994. 63 pp.
Brian Schorn. *Strabismus*. Burning Deck, 1995. 61 pp. \$8.00

Without sufficient perception, an individual can never rise above events. Without adequate perception, art founders. In many ways, Hamlet's famous soliloquy might best begin: "To see, or not to see—that is the question." The writer, too, presents the reader with a mass of perceptions that has been filtered through the writer's being and expressed by the writer's craft. The function of existence and perception could be illustrated by the telescope which brings the far near, or a microscope which makes the small large. But perception and being are rarely discrete. It might be better to view this analogy as a hall of mirrors. However, what happens if the writer, in exercising his or her craft, twists or deforms what's seen, or freezes a particular instant out of context from others? Instead of a hall of shiny, perfect mirrors, we enter a fun house (or horror show, depending on how you want to look at it) wherein the images are distorted or separated from one another in varying degrees and in different fashions.

On the surface, Brian Schorn's *Strabismus* delivers a world based on a defect of vision, guided by the metaphor of walleye. Divided into three sections—a middle section of short verse poems sandwiched by two sections of prose poems—the book focuses on how distorting perception has a profound and interesting relation to being and expression of that being. If this book contented itself to present yet another polemic on writing and expression, there would be little to note other than to acknowledge one more reiteration of the McLuhanesque statement "The medium is the message." Indeed, the first prose poem of the collection, "Entering Poetic Blindspots," engagingly avoids being merely didactic exposition by creating a world for the reader to enter:

What I am trying to say is this: from now on we must enter the poem from its blindspot. We must force ourselves into the danger of not seeing in order to see the poem more clearly, to see it clearly as the head of a giant pin being thrust through the walls of the mouth... Understand this: the retina is a fool, having never said a thing... What a joy in the blindness of really seeing the poem at any point before it ever imagined itself in a word to see, to say this completely blind, to know this in the meat of the poem

that will never come to the surface of the poem. So we enter from here now, completely naked, completely confused, completely poetic. We smile and accept that language is a futile attempt to see anything alive in a poem. We see the poems dead. Yes, but O the life in a blindspot.

Within this logic, the reader is invited to another inferno, to enter warily the dead world alive in the blindspot of perception. Such an invitation is remarkable for the style of writing evoked. There's the intimation of not only upstaging our usual conventions and expectations of literary expression (which has become in the hands of unskilled writers repetitious, dry and boring), but also the promise of upstaging our notions of reality and how we acquire that reality.

The two remaining pieces of the brief first section entitled "Full-Bleed" develop the aesthetic and perceptual foundation Schorn builds on throughout the rest of the book. "Forty Crows From the West" presents the idea of the writer-creator and artist-through an identification with Van Gogh:

There is a jagged line extending from my right inner ear to my left, passing through my inner life, my horizon. It passes through as the inverted oil paint of Vincent van Gogh twenty days before his death, separating my life into the artist's rule of thirds...

That iron-clad rule is not so iron-clad as it seems: the world exists only within the beholder's (writer's) mind and this mind is constructed on what is filtered to it. If the senses are distorted, the reality also becomes distorted. Someone might hold up two fingers, but with blurred vision four might be seen. In that way:

I am standing on the horizon, watching the sun rise in the west and set in the east. Believe me, this is true, the fertile dirt in the temporal lobe of my cerebrum confirms it...

This reality dependent on defects of vision compounded into defects of logic is the product of the writer (and not just a syllogistic exercise):

Higher mental activity becomes lost in the mud of the fron-

tal lobe, meaning red-oxide in my judgment. Congealed clay flooding into failure.

/ am painting a self-portrait.

Through an oval window, I see forty crows flying upside-down from the west, out of my right ear stinging in the breeze.

"Eye or Unexpected Storm," which concludes the opening section, exposes more of the writer's attitude toward the reader and presents us with a way to navigate through the rest of the book (as if we had a Virgil to show us hell's tourist spots):

It is your eye with its outstretched arm that speaks to a point outside, and not necessarily foreign, to the limits of your vision. Only an eye might exist here, having existed, or is existing, as an eye other than your own. My eye does not exist,

but is recognized as the color of an old bruise on my thigh...

My thigh is a result of the direction of your eye...My thigh will serve as a dam in the event of an unexpected storm...

Weeping is not a direction the eye can move in because the whiteness of your open lid prevents it... The dilation of your eye, responding to darkness, giving the moon its fullness.

The sixty short verses that form "Promptbook," the middle of *Strabismus*, move from an inner "blue" to an outer one, with "the vision expanding." With occasional flashes of lucidly irrational images ("My shirts/ironed, stacked in a pile suppressing/those familiar/laugh-enriched alloys") alternating with self-consciously hermetic constructions ("We flimsy/looking fedora. Took off/driving the tractor, so dirty...), it does not live up to the sparks flying in the prose sections.

The nineteen prose poems that constitute the concluding "Asymptotes" could be viewed as the bequest of the artist who was introduced in the first section, with his self-portrait and "bruised" eye. In these prose poems, conventions of reality, vision and expression are

confounded: if we say something, must it be true by virtue of the fact that it has been uttered? The pieces, like "Royal Stimulus Under Surveillance" that follows in its entirety below, are at their best when they play off some semblance of narrative or logical progression as they startle, amuse, excite or scare us with each new twist of vision and cubist depiction of reality:

Salt drowns itself as the king's jewelry. A whitecap, distributed evenly over his scalp, feels more like a shipworm than a navigational error. Scientific theories may be lip-synced, for example, if two kings of science are cut longitudinally, disposing of the right side of one and the left of the other, then, upon reconstruction, one would prove that it is impossible for these two halves to reunite as another king, hence, the body of a queen is born. Each half of the queen, aided by telescopic instruments, will safely monitor the king's buoyancy. His location is pinpointed between the scales of a toy fish. Two live wires exit the queen's eye which, at any moment, may electrocute the king, slapping him like two tender arms caught in the backwash of the sea.

Vern Rutsala prefers to turn his gaze towards the edges and to seek out hidden images in *Little-Known Sports*. The opening piece, "In Shadow," tells us where he is going to gather his perceptions:

Off to one side, under the leaf shade, I spot myself staring toward the snapshot's deckled edge, curious apparently about what is going on there, some marginal event, perhaps a stranger passing by or a dog on a dog's serious round... I still wonder what moves beyond the stiff margin, lying low behind the thick leaves that shade the house, watching.

Rutsala explores how to look at static moments in "The Art of Photography and Other Sorrows," the first section of his collection. The photograph—a reduction of dimensions from three to two, the loss of sound, smell and touch, even color if the photo's black and white—permits a way to focus on a frozen instant, to take in details without interference. The subject of another, "The Photographer," who himself "loves these moments and generously sends as many prints as you

want," is that the photograph-and the prose poem by extension-can replicate any captured moment. What we are given are verbal reconstructions of photographs, some of which are famous, some not. We are given perception two steps removed. Baudelaire's mother transmutes from a stern guardian to a faceless icon. Likened to Alice in Wonderland, Rimbaud's sister ultimately gets lost in an array of objects and dissolves into speculation about where the missing Rimbaud has disappeared.

The "other sorrows" bespeak of moments when we seem to pick up our heads from very ordinary tasks and notice that, indeed, the worst has happened (or might come). "Monsters" gives us an idea of what might be occurring around us if only we had the presence of mind to notice:

We are surrounded by monsters each day, but we have taught ourselves to move among them graciously, almost as if drugged, and never take note of their features. They do the same for us.

These things we cannot see, pretend not to see, that move too quickly or slowly for us-whatever we miss in our earnestness for living constitutes a small loss, an intangible but significant erosion. On the one hand, we are locked in a tautology: we cannot miss what we cannot conceive. On the other, our powers of imagination can create those approximations which can only be accepted as accurate. The academic in "His Sabbatical" daydreams himself to another existence beyond his office:

...He looks at sights and forgets them immediately and takes pictures with the lens cap on or throws the film away. He needs no record-this is life, he is there!...he writes a novel quickly, making no typographical errors...

Rutsala's next section, "Bestiary," assembles a menagerie of commonplace objects. However ordinary the objects are, we are given a glimpse of a slightly skewed way to view them, a glimpse in the margin. With a twist of dark humor, the telephone is transformed into a sinister and dangerous animal:

Like the rattlesnake it has the decency to make a noise before it strikes though it is, of course, capable of

imparting far more venom than any snake.

Salt and pepper shakers become a long-married couple. An ironing board grows into a crane-like bird. The radio is merely a prattling parrot, a paper clip a hook that never snags a fish. All these household objects are looked at in such a way that we end up with a home filled with funny, sad, threatening and ineffectual exotica. Rutsala hints at the possibilities he sees and lets the reader inhabit and react to such a transmogrified humdrum existence—a most extraordinary ordinary zoo. This bestiary is expanded in the book's concluding title section to various petty and ordinary human activities. Rutsala's gaze has shifted from artifacts and objects to behaviors. Again, the direction of the vision is cast toward the margin, toward what is rarely noticed and once noticed made little of. We are treated to such "states of being" as sleeping, flipping coins into beggars' hats, tedium, telephone answering, getting lost, failure, stupidity, getting into bed, lying, and fostering deliberate misunderstanding. In all of these mundane and fairly unlaudatory activities, Rutsala perceptively finds a slightly off-center way to present them, often ending with a satiric twist. For example, "Being Hopeless" begins with a litany of instructions on how to become bereft of hope and ends with the rejoinder:

...If done with care you may become truly hopeless and therefore entitled to wear the most hangdog look at the most hilarious parties.

Or in "Crudity" Rutsala explains how to truly perform a boorish act. At the piece's conclusion he stands the presented view of the coarse on its ears:

...Thus a whole congress of qualities is required if one's effort is to prove effective and receive a decent score, the most essential of which is, inevitably and obviously, finesse.

These prose poems proffer sly snapshots of human foibles, including self-seriousness, and are sharpened into focus by a wink given almost in conspiracy with the reader. Journeying through this section is like watching some scene of common buffoonery and nudging a friend, saying "No, we'd never do that," as you both shake your heads.

The writing itself is well-crafted, rarely stepping onto a soap

box and deflecting attention away from what is being seen in the margins. On occasion, however, one would wish that the same evenness of tone and style that is evident throughout the book be varied and the language get a little bit taken away with itself. On other occasions, one cannot help speculating that there might be something far more interesting, dangerous and difficult in starting off at the point where Rutsala has ended his vision. For example, in "Sleeping":

Though winners are rarely declared this is an arduous contest similar, some feel, to boxing. This fact can be readily corroborated by simply looking at people who have just wakened. Look at their red and puffy eyes, the disheveled hair, the slow sore movements, and their generally dazed appearance. Occasionally, as well, there are those deep scars running across their cheeks. Clearly, if appearances don't lie, they have been engaged in some damaging and dangerous activity and furthermore have come out the losers. If it's not dangerous-and you still have doubts-why do we hear so often the phrase, *He died in his sleep?*

As the prose poem stands, it is an excellent specimen built on an unexpected but ultimately sensible metaphor, with every word and sentence leading to its obvious conclusion which gains so much more weight by being seen in this new light (also playing on the nursery rhyme of "if I die before I wake"). However, with so much so skillfully accomplished beforehand, one wonders what could have been done with the piece if one were to start where it ended-with the danger of dying in one's sleep. Over and over Rutsala-with his good eye for the detail, devilish twists and cheery satire-brings us to the edge between dark and light by showing us common objects and practices in a way we don't normally see them. Perhaps it might be understandable if, every once in a while, he pushed the reader over the edge and explored more deeply what's found in the margins.

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