

Elizabeth Savage

“unsweetened and fat free”: A Review of *Heathen* and *Heterotopia*

Lesley Wheeler, *Heathen* (C&R Press 2009) and *Heterotopia* (Barrow Street Press 2010).

“Finally, the snap peas have surrendered their sugar,/and aren’t we better off? Who really trusts sweetness?” asks Wheeler’s poem “Lucky Thirteen” from the first of *Heathen*’s five sections. Both the questions and the concerns they voice and challenge impel these two very different collections that, nonetheless, have in common the desire for a physical home and a sense of belonging; eating and starving; memory and the management of grief. From time to time, Wordsworth accompanies the speakers’ travels among *Heathen*’s New Jersey and Virginia landscapes and *Heterotopia*’s Liverpool. In *Heathen*, this famous monkey on the back of American poetry (Wordsworth, that is) appears through the metonymy of the daffodils piercing a long season’s snow (“The End of Winter”) and in *Heterotopia*’s description of English schoolgirls taught to recite “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” in “Born, We Didden Know We Was.” Wordsworth arrives via allusion also in *Heterotopia*’s “Lazy Eye, 1978” where the “abundant recompense” his speaker claims as the trade-off for lost childhood in “Tintern Abbey” becomes an ambivalent reply to Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”: “I am a lucky girl, I have/souvenirs, I have plans, I can gaze along two/paths at once. Some kind of recompense.”

The Romantic correspondence between place and identity is an important matter in both collections. “Poem without a Landscape,” from *Heterotopia*, begins each stanza with an anti-nostalgic declaration about homes present and past that might have determined who she is or what she writes, but haven’t. “Virginia does not care for me,” “New Jersey does not miss me,” “Liverpool does not recognize me,” she states without the “taste of homesickness.” The assumption that our connection to a place finds self and voice, that where we live makes and changes who we are (and how we sound), needn’t be the case; the poem continues, “The land is not my mother./It minds its own business and welcome to it,” and concludes, “I’ll be my green world—it can seethe inside of me.” Writers have books, “the fathers on paper,” to ground and guide, and mothers, too. Pages make a better place than states or cities; they hold oceans of loving foreparents.

The defiant voice of this and other poems appeals greatly to me, who like most academics accepted that home would be wherever

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we could teach, think, and write full time, not likely in a familiar place, actually or figuratively. In this poem, Wheeler reminds us of what Dickinson tells us, over and over, that the mind, if tended, can create one's own universe, one more spacious than oceans or heavens. Through reading and writing, we can regenerate the world, remake our home: Wheeler's paper covers Wordsworth's rock of nature.

That defiance against conventional notions of self, poet, and lineage continues because the matter doesn't go away. Both books revisit concepts of place in maps and in memory. *Heterotopia* moves through the cities and stories of family history in fragments of all sizes that drift rather than shore up self against ruin, but heritage eludes the speaker, slipping through the cracks of English history with a big H and wandering off the tracks in oral narratives about family. The sequence "Vronhill Street in Liverpool 8" ends with this confrontation of the most common metaphor for extended family:

If I had a family tree, it would
be pocked and charred but rooted here, on a street
that no longer exists. . .

.....

The branches would forget where their feet
were buried, and every leaf would document
an imaginary history. I'd belong
to it whether it wanted me or not.

Wheeler undoes the idealized vision of family as a natural, sturdy living structure dividing and thriving but connected through common rootedness to a place, here a paved street wiped off the map by progress. The green world of self in this poem is explicitly imaginary, made up of incomplete stories themselves invented, however unintentionally, due to the vagaries of memory, "pocked and charred" as documents of history are bound to be. Kinship isn't the same as place, but they're connected, only in this imaginary wreck of a family tree that doesn't exist, you are part of the history, wanted or not, safe from exile.

Heathen's speakers often seem very much at home in the everyday life of the nuclear family, but what changes a landscape and its people into home and family tend to be those burns and scars of loss and conflict. The emotional self-discipline that overcomes the loneliness in *Heterotopia's* poems and moves their speakers to make their own damn worlds also appears in *Heathen*, but in more complex and private, less explicitly theoretical conditions. In "Space Monkeys,"

the speaker's toddler son mourns the death of the family cat openly, carrying the cat's picture to school and weeping over the absent litter box. His mother completes the rituals of death, like burial and flowers, but remains "ruthless/about endings." Scorning indecision in relationships, cooking, and even grading papers, she defers her messy feelings of grief, not just the displays of those feelings, but the feelings themselves: "Every few hours I catch/my breath and think no, it isn't time yet." It will never be time to mourn her cat, although she misses her. She describes herself severely, but these limits of self-deprivation are also her strength, her way of ruling over and protecting that green world of self and home. She buried the cat; the cat will stay buried. She tells her son in the poem's final line, no, they "can never dig her up again."

The ruthlessness turned on those susceptible to indecision and other emotional gray areas is aimed squarely at the self in another poem in *Heathen*, "Selfish." "Dieters must be ruthless," this speaker announces, although dieting is hard "[w]hen you are always right." Here, the dieting speaker self-consciously and self-mockingly contemplates the strain her mother-in-law's terminal illness places on her husband; her mother-in-law's diminishing body, she anticipates, will lead to her own emotional starvation. This poem moves among literal starvation and dieting, the body as the primary evidence that a woman has control of her appetites and, therefore, may have rational opinions, and the body as rotten, inadequate sustenance. Revealing the interchangeable tropes of self and food, Wheeler reveals the crazy tangle of self-judgments that trap this wife and most women into seeing themselves as "a vast salty empty badness" capable of terrible things like wanting love and attention or another's release from suffering. And in this poem, as with many others, Wheeler manages to show us how damaging such figures of self and place are and how absurd they are without demeaning the speakers and readers stuck in them. A woman who wants anything at all will be called "selfish," and she is likely to be the first to say so—and mean it.

Such subtle articulations of psychological expatriation, more intense in the aptly named *Heterotopia*, connect these books that travel across borders of form and metaphor in search of fullness, if not wholeness. It is that searching, enacted often in questions, that comforts and locates Wheeler's speakers: "The rhythms of questions, sentence sounds./They're waiting for me" says the poetry teacher of "Horror Stories" in *Heathen*. But, "[w]e'll be fine in the end." Wordsworth's pagan-hearted Romantics comfort themselves that joys as deep as grief compensate for life's horror stories—joy or compassion is the sweet answer to loss. In Wheeler, there's depth that accompanies the poetry's variety—of imagination, of intimacy,

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of irony—but you will not find sweetness, no sugar nor fat, despite the abundance of poetic forms and human experience. The salty, sometimes bitter answer Wheeler offers is that you can (and must) keep asking questions. Be curious. Be tough. The promise is that everything will probably turn out fine in the end. Maybe. The hypothesis is worth testing.

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