



## **“THIS DELICATE BALANCE”: TWO BOOKS BY DIANE THIEL**

*Resistance Fantasies*, Diane Thiel. Story Line Press, 2004. *The White Horse: A Colombian Journey*, Diane Thiel. Etruscan Press, 2004.

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These two books—a poetry collection and a travel narrative—give us intelligent observations into the subtle dynamics of power and address the question of how can we live and relate graciously in this world. Her perceptions arise from a deep understanding of history, both human history and that of the earth itself. Thiel’s books spotlight how the struggle for personal or political gain has shaped the story of life, a dialectic that makes for two worthwhile encounters.

In *Resistance Fantasies*, Thiel explores how desire propels and shapes our own stories. In these poems power figures not only as theme, but often as plot and occasionally as the antagonist or protagonist (depending which side you’re on) of the poems themselves.

Thiel divides her book into four sections, each part developing the dialectic between desire and resistance, lust and disgust with power, as well as different forms of victimization. The first section, ‘Black Seas,’ offers poems from Thiel’s memories of Odessa in the Ukraine as well as her preoccupation with Greek and Russian myths, folklore and literary legends. In “Sevenlings for Akhmatova” Thiel writes movingly:

I

It comes in threes—the red letter,  
the midnight warning in disguise,  
the knock that shakes the shutters.

My face learns to have three sides.  
One third smiles and waves at the station.  
Another slides under and hides.

The last goes to the interrogation

‘Black Seas’ not only sets the tone and theme, but begins the work of transformation that constitutes the book’s poetics, for what Thiel does through careful organization and persistence of inquiry, is to transmute personal, human experience into the work of myth. Thus, in the second and third



sections, ‘Resistance Fantasies’ and ‘Lost in Translation,’ Thiel explores her own personal encounters with power and resistance through the same lens that she views the folklore and myths of her first section. ‘Editorial Suggestives’ returns the reader to a similar tone as ‘Black Seas,’ but by now Thiel has widened her discourse to include memory, nature, and the construction of language itself.

At the beginning of *Resistance Fantasies* the poet dashes any hope in the possibility of escape. In “If You Don’t,” the poet imagines eluding the struggle between victim and victor and what such a life would look like. In a series of negations she writes: “If you don’t have a dog / your neighbor will not poison it / . . . if you don’t have a memory / the past cannot devour you / when you stop moving for a brief / moment. Long enough to let the sorrow / catch the joy you never feel . . .”

Throughout *Resistance Fantasies*, poems succeed in weaving a complex labyrinth in which the reader encounters a Minotaur in its rawest and most passionate form. Thiel’s poems are distinguished by her fine ability to transform the disparate experiences of everyday life into living myth. Each of us has been a Daphne resisting Apollo as well as an Apollo seeking domination. Thiel demonstrates how our lives are inscribed with this mythic tension. She does so with remarkable skill of form, rhythm and rhyme, qualities that invest her language with beauty and authority. From the sonnet, “Pushkin and the Black Sea”:

He came to meet me shortly after  
arriving—running down Odessa’s Steps,  
all ears on that compelling laughter,  
all tongues in cheeks on the swing of those hips.  
What did he want with all those women?  
All he needed was a good swim in  
my morning waves, my long caress.  
. . . .

Finally, Thiel is a multifaceted poet. She handles the retelling of myth, both historical and private, with a deft hand, and then sets beside her own songs the voices of Sor Juana, Alfonsina Storni, Cesar Vallejo, Nikos Kavadias and Anna Akhmatova. The result is a multi-faceted, multi-vocal conversation, reaching back toward myth and history, and then extending forward to the language and experience of today. Thiel provides evidence that our stories are continuous, and that over thousands of years they have not changed.

In *The White Horse*, Thiel records her journey from Panama to Chocó,



the Pacific coast rainforest of Colombia where the Emberá tribe lives. Along with her intrepid guide and friend, Ana Maria, the two plunge into adventure. Their mission, a humanitarian one, entails hauling three microscopes for detecting malaria, a sack of medical books and incentives for starting craft industries to the rainforest people. Along the way, they encounter the warm hospitality of the Pan-American people and the region's otherworldly magic—from the haunting forest where tigers walk at dawn, to a river that winds toward the sea in which the skeleton of a whale is found beached and so large they can walk inside. Not a fairytale, but a real life adventure, Thiel writes:

*The Chocó forest looked vast, dense, and impenetrable from where we stood, as it must have looked centuries ago when the first outsiders came to this land. . . It was a blessing to come to a stand of trees that was still intact, still full of old spirits. (80)*

Like a Blakean 'Song of Innocence and Experience', Thiel records the beauty of a people and a place—even as these people and this place are being destroyed. Juxtaposed with this romantic landscape is the stark reality of loggers clear-cutting ancient forests and men fishing with DDT—scooping dead fish from the water for selling at market or cooking at home.

Enriching her narrative with science and history, Thiel traces the fascinating connections among the forces that have shaped Colombia—its geology, geography, foreign invasions, slave trade, gold mining, etc. Not through polemic, but through the eyes of a poet, Thiel writes passionately about how we as human beings can become aware of our interdependence with the forces that have shaped and nurtured us. In this way, the author's experience becomes our own. We feel with her the Emberá's connection to the earth as root and limb, straining under the unhallowed practice of deforestation. We can hear the felling of trees around the close-knit tribe. One by one they drop as the Emberá struggle to retain their community, history, and connection to the forest that sustains them. Taking part in one of the tribe's ceremonies, Thiel remarks how she felt herself transforming into one of the trees on which their lives depend:

*They painted the earth pattern down each of my arms, one long stroke down and then short strokes coming out of the sides. . . I raised my arms so they could paint my sides, and I felt them extend upwards and burst into branches. (246)*

In one chapter, Thiel meets up with a geologist who works for an American gold-mining company. The company is investigating the promise of gold on the land of a local owner. The search for gold, Thiel has already



reminded us in a previous chapter, was one of the major forces to shape South America—the land and its indigenous people—since Columbus. Over five hundred years later, gold seekers are still in business, and their politics, though less vitriolic, are as self-interested as ever. However, rather than denouncing history and the people who created it, rather than dwelling in outrage, Thiel moves the reader into the possibility of a new perspective, one where we see ourselves not as the earth's center, but as part of something greater, more extraordinary than anything we could have invented ourselves. Moving effortlessly from scientific fact to poetry, she states:

*Scientists now believe that gold must have been created long before the creation of the earth. Any element heavier than iron must have been created by a supernova, which sprinkled it throughout this part of the universe. Gold is hence the product of supernovas, as we ourselves are made up of the same basic elements as stars.*

*The sun had not yet fallen, but one of the first stars had already come out and beckoned there on the horizon. An invisible thread connected my eye to the star and the star to the rock in my hand, and I felt the little river of gold run into my own veins, reminding me that I too was part of this delicate balance. (165)*

“This delicate balance” forms the leitmotif of both *The White Horse* and *Resistance Fantasies*.