



ROBERT ARCHAMBEAU: *HOME AND VARIATIONS*

Home and Variations. Robert Archambeau. Salt Publishing, 2004.

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In Robert Archambeau's first full length collection of poetry from a major press, *Home and Variations*, he fulfills the promise so evident in his previous work as he hones his distinctive style and displays the startling range of his talent. The title poem of an early chapbook, "Citation Suite," aptly identifies Archambeau's signature approach as he continues to weave his verse from a complex skein of references. Reading through the variations presented here, you discover that the poems are carved not just out of particular words, but out of these references, each with a resonant history and context. As he writes in "Misremembering Szymborska," "we could say my poem lies in the grass of your poem's/dreaming"—and indeed, we could say the same for this volume of poetry. Composing yourself or finding your home in words then becomes less an act of self-creation and more an archaeological expedition or work of translation.

In *Home and Variations*, the sheer range of allusions is daunting: all places, all relationships are inhabited through language, which becomes the focus of exploration. In the volume, you find poems dedicated to other writers, variations on other works, translations, imitations, collages, and re-workings. Archambeau draws on poets and writers from Wordsworth and Ruskin through Marinetti and Plath, and finally onto contemporary friends and influences such as Michael Anania, Robert Hass, and John Matthias, to name just a few. But the verse never descends into a welter of words, never collapses on itself in a linguistic game because Archambeau always returns the poems to their human context. For example, in "Blackberry," the speaker imagines Robert Hass writing: "the black ink wet there,/on the page, the full, ripe cursive loops wide,.../Blackberry, the full ripe sweetness of it on his tongue." Ultimately, words are not abstract; they are sensual, physical, and they take up space in our mouths.

The theme that emerges in this volume, though, is not simply language, but how we try to make a home for ourselves in words. The title poem "Home and Variations" sets up the stakes of movement and stasis for the speaker who, in verse reminiscent of an interrupted telegraph cable, attempts to settle his place along these vectors. The poem quickly finds its way to its subject - not just home, but a father in that home:





...And my father
 played the phonograph. Played sea chanteys,
 played Hank Snow. Played at doing what
 they did, which wasn't play. Stop. If work
 was what men did with hands and tools
 on farm and sea and if my father's father worked
 with hands and tools but didn't sing. Would the
 singing of the sailors would the singing of Hank Snow
 be singing so my father he could play at
 being home.

It's not a long step from this father who plays at being home to the son left
 to wander:

And if his son who moved, and
 moved from place to place. Whether he wanted.
 Whether he not. If he thought of father thinking father
 thinking work and farm and home would
 the thinking take him farther would the thinking take him
 home.

No matter how deeply felt, these reckonings are not offered in a typical confessional manner. Archambeau seems intent on exposing the way language registers emotional shocks and losses, and one only senses the speaker's relation to the subject obliquely, in a refracted glimmer. Such transformation of the confessional impulse comes through in the stuttering form of "Home and Variations," but is made plain in his response to Sylvia Plath's "Collosus," for example, which opens, "The nights grow strange: red stars, plum sky/I never shall repair him properly." The theme of the irreparable father remains, but the poem speaks of it through Plath—not directly—again using allusion as a vehicle for expression. The dislocation of language and speaker emerges, too, at the opening of a later poem, "In the Beginning": "was the word *father* and/the word was *divorce* and the word was *emptied* and the word was *confessed*...." The experience of this separation, this dis-union, registers in the strange words acquired to describe it.

As the collection unfolds, it becomes clear that the speakers' primary experience is not of an origin or home, but of loss. Any attempt to look backwards, to settle ourselves with a memory, becomes a self-conscious act of translation - or mis-translation: we make the attempt to return, we pull the past forward to meet us, and both past and present are altered in the process. Beyond the personal experience of such separation, though, Archambeau offers history itself played out in unfamiliar contexts. Word-





sworth is presented on the Cuyahoga, Marinetti in Union Station, Chicago. And in “Victory Over the Sun,” the futurists—with their febrile intensity, chanting a motto, “let all by which we’ve lived be lost to sight”—confront the future: “Then it is 1914, 1940, it is Moscow, Leningrad,/the Gulag, Buchenwald, it is the exile’s empty room....Here come the Futurists.” Let those who champion rapid movement, technology, and jolting force see the consequences, even as the poem celebrates their desire to transform this present darkness.

In every poem here chronicling dislocation, rootlessness, and distance, Archambeau pulls the language taut in surprising ways—sometimes through his wit, sometimes through sheer verbal density. But he is not a new formalist. Instead, like many of the best contemporary poets, he largely eschews both traditional rhythms as well as sloppy free verse: this is poetry served over an intricate net of the poets’ own devising. The wickedly satirical “In Elsinore,” for example, sends up the pretensions and peccadilloes of the academic left of the 1990s: while the sequence does include sonnets, it takes its verbal force mainly from deft internal rhymes, clever enjambments, and utterly ironic end rhymes. Ultimately, the verbal dexterity of *Home and Variations* underscores Archambeau’s gifts as a writer. For its formal innovation, as well as its evocative questioning of the way home, this collection deserves an audience.

