NUMINOUS THINGS

Autumn Road. Brian Swann. Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University Press. 2005. *Snow House*. Brian Swann. Rock Hill, South Carolina: Pleiades Press. 2006.

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> …A porcupine
> is crossing the road. Suddenly headlights
> shatter in it. Ball-lightning scuttles
> into the dark and out the other side,
> becoming part of newly numinous night.
> ("The Porcupine in Porcignano," *Autumn Road)*

Walking out of the pharmacy onto the crowded city street, I ran into G. whom I hadn't seen in eight years. I didn't immediately recognize him; we'd both changed, but in that moment, before I put a name to the face, when I recognized first his walk and then the peculiar tilt of his head, I experienced that sensation of knowing without the hindrances and crutches of naming. Naming comes after. First there is that apprehension of what the other animal does. Can we eat it? Will it eat us? No, it's only G. after all: "How's it going? Have you et yet?" as the Chinese say. Brian Swann's two new collections of poems are full of such dis-, or re-locations of the things and persons we think we've tucked safely away under their proper nouns. Swann pays close attention to what the world does. It's the sort of nature poetry that Nature Poets never write. Swann's method and interest are of a piece with the writing, not a measure of vanity.

In these two collections, Swann works an unusual, almost forgotten corner of the field. The poems are not observations of nature (or people) as abstraction; his ambition is to introduce the poems as living things into the world, without resort to genetic engineering. In Swann's 1976 introduction to his collection of Native American translations, he quotes Simon Ortiz on the function of the hunting song, remarking that the song is "expression and perception, an active relationship with the hunting act. 'The purpose of the song is first of all to do things well, the way they're supposed to be done, part of it being the singing and performing of the song.'"

If we take the hunting act here described as a statement of poetics, you have Swann's work.

> I take the poem down, lay it on the stream
> now in full spate at the front of my desk, float it
> off like a leaf or curled bark, and we all see it flash and
> turn and dive in bright water stained with run-off
> from the parking lot and the last dairy farm left,
> heading for the river…
>
> (“Pedagogical,” *Snow House)*

I quote this poem, not as one of the high points of the book, but as an indication of where this poet likes to go. The poems that scramble off under the house, or dive into the brook, are only the flashier moments the poet pulls from his hat, reminiscent of the attempt to sell meditation by levitating a few inches above one’s cushion. Do we even want poems escaping from the schools into the nation’s waterways? The poems are more successful when they’re not so directly about themselves. Those that register an attention to the numinous that still eludes the poet seem more essential to this kind of hunting. The poem released in “Pedagogical” to his students’ delight was small-fry in comparison.

“I have said what I have to say / in so many roundabout ways I’m dizzy / I keep saying it because nobody listens…” (“Metaphor,” *Snow House).* We should take Brian Swann at his word. Back in his 1976 essay, he quoted Kenneth Rexroth summoning the numinous (which is what people used to do in 1976): “poetry or song does not only play a vatic role in the society, but is itself a numinous thing.” The numen here in Swann’s work moves by a metaphysical conceit, the technique which Dr. Johnson found so distressing. Dr. Johnson would have kept the poem from escaping upstream; he would have taken it home and fixed it upon the rotisserie.

It’s refreshing to see the numen surviving into the new millennium, surviving not only Dr. Johnson’s tongue clucking of the 18th century, but Dr. Hunter S. Thompson’s trips to Las Vegas in the 20th as well. The numerous numinous books that proliferated in the 1970s began to appear po-faced and ridiculous following the bad Doctor’s self-administered *delirium tremens numinous.* Drugs may have nothing at all to do with the divine—in fact, that they may be taken simply for entertainment was a revelation to those seeking to grow tentacles of light from their bellies. But the numen has stuck around—troublesome as a *Tamias Striatus*—as numens tend to.

The discovery of “occult resemblances in things apparently unlike,” per Dr. Johnson’s pronouncement, strikes one as the likely result of a close attention to the life of things. The comfortable names that we presume to apply to things are static and the world is ever changing—not something a lexicographer could get behind. The poems that spring from that discovery

of occult resemblance also tend to be rather vital—and much more interesting even than sprouting those powerful tentacles of light and flying over tall buildings (however much you may once have enjoyed such experiences).

> I give him words to tell me who he is.
>   He gives them back, begins a visual discourse
> on invisibility, gunning by me a film in snippets &
>
>   jump shots, starring him. Light flashes everywhere.
> But you can still make out frames that form a sequence,
>   though there are deep lacunae only he can leap
>
> as a kind of semiotic stuntman—I guess it's him, though
>   it could be a series of doubles (impossible to know),
> There—in that shot he's signifying a signified, so
>
> in what follows he's multiple as the seeds he collects
>   like mnemonics. There off he goes again, but now in a
> series of silent sequences subtitled: "The Vital Nothing,"
>
> "The Plump Filling," "The Cake of Soap," "The Full Stop,"
>   & dramatically, "Tamias Striatus Meets Pale Ramon."…
>
> ("Tamias Striatus Poetics," *Snow House)*

The occult resemblance between things becomes only more vital when applied to personal history. In *Autumn Road*, winner of The Ohio State University Press' (*The) Journal Award*, Swann recounts the Orwellian joys of an English childhood. Although the book gives us poems about grandparents, aunts and uncles, it focuses mainly on his unhappy experiences with his father. Autobiography will only carry a book so far. What makes this collection work so well is the approach the author takes toward his material. *Autumn Road* traces the twin tale of two possessions: childhood and love. The first section of the book, titled "The Lost Boy," recounts the heavy influence of an abusive parent. The second section, "Ars Amoratis," is a series of Ovidean possession poems where the characters' actions seem to lie beyond their control. Indeed, the experiences of childhood and of love are occult to the actors in the poems. These are mothers and fathers, aunts and children visited by Apollo and Persephone, Hermes and Athena—though they (and we) may call them bloody-mindedness, or lust, or rage. But these words don't serve us well in the event after all, and one may as well drag in evolutionary conditioning: the father is this way because he has 50,000 years of evolutionary wiring modifying his responses, such that our 4,000 years of literate culture is barely able to name what animal has come into the

room, much less restrain it. It's a wonder the boy isn't eaten alive—or maybe he is. I don't mean to give anything away.

Another quote from Rexroth may be apropos: "All true and proper songs, especially in the past, originate in contacts with supernatural beings." In "The Skull," a poem from the first section of *Autumn Road,* the poet describes his experience as a young boy when he discovered the skull of an ancient fen-dweller, unearthed from the fields. The description of the young boy and his skull is rather touching in a book that is not especially interested in touching. The boy and his skull are inseparable— that is, the artifact of the bone of "an Anglo-Saxon boy about our age" represents an imaginary friend, or someone the young boy, now author, imagines he may have been 1,000 years before. This is a recognition that the boy's father seconds, slapping the living son:

> "You can't do anything.
> You'll end up as a dustman. You'll end up on the streets."
> I tried to say that history's useful too. *Shut up,*
> he said. *Like talking to a brick wall. Numbskull.*
> And he hit me on the head…
> He [the skull] could have been an ancestor of mine, sort of.
>
> ("The Skull," *Autumn Road)*

In this act of naming, the father is almost a poet in Swann's own image…

> This is
> my story, but there's a limit to what
> I can say, and the time to say it.
> I hold up my face in front of me, and
> lay it down. It blows away, vapid
> as a mud flat. It cries out for someone
> to take a hammer to it and yell Liar, Fake.
>
> ("Temporal," *Autumn Road)*

Not to psychoanalyze this poet by the book—actually the author takes care of that himself in due course—but as I read this I found myself asking, what "someone"? There's little humor in this book, and the only laugh I had was when, after the various sordid descriptions of the casual brutalities of an English childhood, the narrator admits, "we were not a close family." The father is generous with his naming, "cunt, cissy, crippen..." until, after the father's death, the child is left waiting for someone to come along and put the lie to the child's own words. Now that the father is gone, who will perform this smashing of the face that the parent had once done so well?

Following a visit to the father in the hospital, the poet reports:

> ... I found I meant
> the opposite of what I said. I said nothing.
> I had a code where each prayer was
> a curse, each thought a scream,
> and nothing was symbolic.
>
> ("The Code," *Autumn Road)*

The second section of the book is titled 'Ars Amatoria' and with that clue I could tell you how these poems are about the symbolic work of metamorphosis and the workings of what people once called the gods. The poems are more than that though: the relationship of a person to the unspoken (and unspeakable) things that move him are only hinted at by those old notions of the Greek gods. Swann drops a couple of bread crumbs about Blake, Jung, and the Golden Bough, but it is also the case that the poems aren't trying to explain themselves in terms of another system, in fact, the terrors of the old gods may seem pale compared to daily life.

> I catch a glimpse of me
> in the bathroom mirror, & it's
> not me. My father looks out as he has, really,
> each day of my life.
> ...I am falling
> into his mouth. He pats me like a dog.
> No part of my body he doesn't know
> as I lie on my back, pink belly exposed,
> tail wagging, squirming. And he orders me
> to do unspeakable things, unspeakable,
> in the literal sense: you cannot speak them...
>
> ("Quasar," *Autumn Road)*

Here is an encounter with one of Rexroth's "supernatural" beings, an encounter that will shape a life. At the funeral, the aunt says, "I bet you're glad he's gone," but as the title of the third section of the book, "Eschatology," implies, there are always last things to ponder.

Of the two books, I preferred *Autumn Road* to *Snow House.* But the books make an excellent pair. *Snow House* shows us how to pay attention to what the world does, and the poems sing along and might just take off on their own feet into the loess if the reader were to drop them. In the case of *Autumn Road,* however, you wouldn't want to let the book get the better of you. The social animal that we call so easily by the name of "family" isn't always as friendly as the natural world hunted in *Snow House*. Returning

to Simon Ortiz' conceit of the hunting song, Swann's poems are songs of a long and dangerous pursuit, beautifully sung.