

## MENTIONING UNMENTIONABLES

*Unmentionables*. Beth Ann Fennelly. New York: W. W. Norton, 2008.

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Beth Ann Fennelly's virtues as a poet have never been more apparent than in *Unmentionables*, her third full-length collection. Chiefly, they are: clarity; humor; precision (by which I mean accuracy sustained by well-tempered thought); ambition, which springs from a wide and deep reservoir of learning and a willingness to delve, sometimes recklessly, into the depths of preceding works; an unforced and genuine sensuality, which combines interestingly with Fennelly's fondness for audacity; and the sort of earned wisdom that avoids quaintness. Formally, the poems are unabashedly conventional, so if we are to look for experiment, even audacity, we must turn more often to the subjects Fennelly chooses and the rhetorical strategies by which she makes them present to us (which isn't to say that her lines lack invention). And we will not be disappointed, though in the end not all these strategies succeed equally well.

The collection is long by contemporary standards and is divided into small groups of shorter poems alternating with longer pieces. The grouping of the shorter lyrics is thematic, for the most part, and there is a pleasing sweep to the collection as a whole without the contrived tying up of loose ends so common in contemporary collections. Two of the longer works center on famous and difficult cultural figures, which helps to color the entire collection as literary. Fennelly prefers the sequence to the cycle and the cycle to collage, and seems to be, like many of her contemporaries, most comfortable in the mode of direct address.

Direct address is certainly the preferred mode in the shorter poems, the addressees often family members, most conspicuously her young son or daughter. A common occasion for the shorter poems is the quiet moments of routine, or, more exactly, the quiet moments between routines: the taxi to take-off or brief respite during a child's playdate. And the book opens with two such occasions, in poems which also embody many of the virtues listed above. "First Warm Day in a College Town," charmingly rewrites W.D. Snodgrass's "April Inventory," as the poet drives to work and notices the (male) joggers, who have also noticed the change of temperature and the early spring of the Deep South.

Hard to recall just now  
 that these are the torsos of my students,  
 or my past or future students, who every year  
  
 grow one year younger, get one year fewer  
 of my funny jokes and hip references  
 to *Fletch* and Nirvana...

The second poem, “Cow Tipping,” begins as simple recollection, as the poet sees out her plane window a “field of cows, the meek, long-suffering cows;” but, because she is an American poet alone on a plane after 9/11, it launches out at just the point this line occurs into an appropriate excoriation of her own (innocent?) nostalgia and the indulgence of wider middle-class American childhood and adolescence. The last lines of the poem make clear that Fennelly is aware that this very poem presumes the same homogeneity of America that “whole countries hate.”

And I, a girl at thirty-two, who likes to think she was a rebel....  
  
 who brags (isn't it a brag?) that no harm  
 ever came to her—what would they think of me, the terrorists  
 and terrified? Wouldn't they agree I've got it coming?

Yes, undoubtedly.

The four poems that begin *Unmentionables* lead into the first and next-to-finest longer work in the book: “Berthe Morisot: Retrospective,” a biopic of sixteen poems, spoken in the Impressionist’s voice. But is it her voice? Fennelly is no mockingbird, disappearing into her subject’s song, and a large part of the success of this sequence is how obviously Fennelly, poet, wife, and mother, identifies with Morisot, artist, mother, and wife. For this reason, “Colorplate 30,” with its startling and marvelous conclusion (Can it be true?) and “Colorplate 36,” which I will quote in full below are my favorites of the sequence.

Soon my fellow impressionists  
 are praising my new style—my  
 “great contribution to the movement”  
  
 “Loose, calligraphic strokes  
 which produce the effect of spontaneity  
 and rapid brushwork”—

(I do not say, *I must paint rapidly*)

“Radical simplicity”—  
“Exaggeration and blur”—

(I do not say, *I haven't slept*).

This rhymes nicely with Fennelly's “The Mommy at the Zoo,” a funny poem in the middle of the next section of shorter poems on motherhood which should be required reading for anyone burdened with the great privilege of having to keep up with small children. “Berthe Morisot: Retrospective” is a compelling sequence, though I do wish a few more of the sections ended less like the couplet in a Shakesperean sonnet and that Fennelly worried less, at times, about communicating actual biography.

But this fondness for Laureate-like rightness and completion is less a problem for any one section than for the book as a whole. By the time I reach, in the third section, “To JC and DL on the Opening of the Sestina Bar,” I find myself on my knees praying for a pantoum, a triolet, or even some linked haiku, anything but the inevitable sestina that follows, and not even Fennelly's awareness of the cuteness of her choice in the last lines can rid me of the taste of Harp in my mouth. The real problem is I like the poem quite a bit, and think it one of the few successes of the form in contemporary American poetry, which is saying something, I suppose, since you're not a poet these days until you publish one.

You're also not a poet, apparently, until you contend with the ghost of John Berryman, as Fennelly does, not for the first time, in the sixth section of the book, “Say You Waved: A Dream Song Cycle.” In fifteen dream songs, Fennelly recreates, in contradistinction to “Berthe Morisot: Retrospective,” not the voice of her subject, but the manner of her subject's persona, Henry. This isn't the first time Fennelly has wrestled with this particular fallen angel, as readers of her first book will remember. If anything, the family tree of Fennelly's “Mr. Daylater” and Berryman's “Mr. Bones” has been further pruned by this new record of her contention. There is much worthy of praise in this cycle, but I'm afraid this section brings the dividing lines between aesthetics and ethics a little too close for my comfort. It's one thing to impersonate a person, but to kidnap the speaking voice of a persona, a persona created in a specific place and certain time as a way of making known certain feelings—individual (original) and emphatically idiosyncratic (unrepeatable)? Hmmm. Not that Fennelly does it badly or without artfulness, but in too many places, she really does, as the book-jacket claims, “out-Berryman Berryman” in the way a certain kind of bright

and contentious student might try to out-profess their Prof. (This analogy gains its freshman fifteen when one encounters all the riffs on the works of Berryman's heroes and peers that pepper the cycle, indeed the collection as a whole.) The poignancy of his (hard-won?) frenetics seems, at times, to be more the end rather than means for Fennelly.

No sing, no sing to shay. Naughty Henry's  
gone away and if I live a peckel  
he won't be-O.  
Let's wake him. I'll call the Davids wicked, Kevin, Karl,  
& Jack Pendarvis (I'll be the only lass),  
we'll Danny-boy-O.

Of course, there are a great many moments where Berryman's manner is clearly the means for Fennelly's realization. Here's the opening salvo from "5."

Fall'd find you mooding, brooding on turkey's fate.  
Then winter worst. If you wrote not of snow hate  
it's because you wrote not.  
Then spring your pen. March a lion. Out put,  
A ball of dough, punched down, will rise,  
double in size—

The classic (eternal?) lyric sentiments behind moments like these get close to what Robert Pinsky noted about Berryman's own purpose, something to the effect that the outlandishness of the language, its slanginess and play, actually conditions the reader to admit moments of high-art in the Songs. I'm afraid, though, that no amount of manner can admit to this reader the throwaway anecdote snuck in at the end of "6."

"Free Willie" is the question, a U.S. flick  
about a whale I saw previewed in London,  
where "willie" is slang for "dick."  
Free Willie. Like whales the giggles breached.  
Is accountability just that, some cosmic  
inadvertent joke?

Not that all the anecdotes fall flat. "7." does it much better.

In roadside Mexico a man macheted pineapple,  
sprinkled it with salt and lime and hellborn chili dust.  
It cost less than a buck.

Don't eat it, a fellow tourist warned, coming off the bus.  
 I ate it. So with your words  
 my lips sweetburn.

I wish I had more space to talk about this cycle. But perhaps it's best if I, too, put it "in the ground." I hope Fennelly will put Berryman down now too. After all, fifteen songs, not to mention the earlier incarnations, are much more solid a block than Berryman gave even to Delmore Schwartz.

"Say You Waved" leads, quite naturally, given Berryman's own biography, to a poem in the seventh and final section of the book about Fennelly's own father, a compelling antiphonal work occasioned by Fennelly's wide reading, which engages any number of father-as-river myths, emphasizing both his power and inscrutability and the daughter's continuing (impossible?) desire for understanding. "I thought of my father's knuckles and how he threw his head back when he laughed./ *He said, Like a language studied two languages ago, this river.*" The four shorter poems that make up this last section are the most intimate but also most expansive in the book, where Fennelly seems to be writing out what her Daphne-self asks of the river: "Teach me to drift in the eddies of clouds and willows./ *Without this irascible grasping after meaning, he said.*" All four could be read as *ars poéticas*—two bravely, brazenly so—and, thusly, autobiographical. But these narratives have admirable gaps and while part of the lack of immediate cohesion present in the last poems is due to the fact that almost all are drawn from outside sources (so other kinds of discourse and other voices are written necessarily into the poems), part of it must also have to do with Fennelly's awareness of (and resistance to?) her "gathering/ scraps of phrases/ weaving my story of someone gone bad."

By way of ending, I want to retrace my steps to the fourth section of the book, which is, to my mind, the crown of the collection. "The Kudzu Chronicles" makes me wish I had written it from the moment it begins:

Kudzu sallies into the gully  
 like a man pulling up a chair  
 where a woman was happily dining alone.  
 Kudzu sees a field of cotton,  
 wants to be its better half.

For me, these five lines are worth any number of copycat Dream Songs. And it only gets better. Best of all, though, is the author's (hyper-aware) identification with this fellow transplant to the South.

Kudzu quickly aped the vernacular—most folks assume  
it's native. Thus, it's my blend-in mentor, big brother  
waltzing in a chlorophyll suit, amethyst cufflinks.

Of the longer works, it is this sequence which best blends Fennelly's considerable gifts of clarity, wit, and precision with her fondness for contending with, and evoking, literary predecessors. It is this sequence that best blends her tendency towards cohesion with her recognition that the best stories give us gaps to fill and refill ourselves. And it is this sequence that stands out to me in *Unmentionables* most, and most worthy of mentioning last.