

ON RACHEL MANHEIMER'S *EARTH ROOM*

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REVIEWED BY DANIEL SCHONNING

For a phase in childhood, I planned to grow up to be a foley artist. I wanted to spend every day recording sounds—a tin can rolling on pavement, the click of beetles against my bedroom window. I imagined the recordings could one day join some great cache, collected from all over the world (one pictures a warehouse brimming with boxes, those boxes stuffed with cassettes and scratched CDs)—thunderclap, a crowded market, pebbles shaking in a rubber drum. And from the cache and onto film, those sounds would be transformed. The audience at last might find themselves wondering: *Haven't I heard that monster's call before?* Yes—it's a common loon. *And those soft footsteps in snow?* Orange peels in a paper lunch bag.

Rachel Mannheimer's *Earth Room*, in its central logic, shares something of that purpose—her accretive, attentive, and transformative debut offers its readers, first, what the poet herself has collected. These variously occasional, ekphrastic, ecological, and erotic poems of place are delivered to the reader like jars of earth. *Haven't I seen that color dirt before?* Yes—this one's from Germantown, New York. *And the next?* A ceramicist's studio in Chicago. Montana's Big Hole Battlefield. A former concentration camp in Berlin. Each poem a record, a memory, a living relic of place and time—each offered with astounding clarity of vision and clarity of voice. I struggle to remember when I last read a book that holds so much so well.

The versatility of this project is owed, at least in part, to the humility of its speaker. As she offers in *Earth Room*'s opening poem, "People say that poets love the moon, / but I got into poetry because I liked words and small things / and lacked the imagination for fiction." In this, Mannheimer's ethic is clear. More than humility, the poet exhibits a profound trust in both the subjects and substance of her poetry—in the images, metaphors, movements of form themselves. Per Inger Christensen, Mannheimer's project manages to

"add / words, but let / things be."

At times, those words are a pithy, fine-edged lyric, employing a precision of diction and line that resonates in the reader's mind long after reading. Couplets shine out from longer poems—sing, ghazal-like, as discrete poems themselves. Excerpted from "Berlin":

Why should I ever miss her less?
It's only ever longer since I've seen her.

From "The Car (Seattle)":

Then we drove across the country.
I can tell you, geese are everywhere.

Elsewhere, *Earth Room* spills over the container of the line, cascades into prose. In this mode, the project spins in directions sometimes-curatorial, sometimes-ekphrastic. We're told of Robert Morris's *Arizona*; of Pina Bausch's Tanztheater expressionism; of sculptors and dancers and conceptual artists alike. In "Cayuga Lake," the speaker interfolds an exploration of Robert Smithson's art with a record of one of the central romantic relationships of the text. The poem reads:

Most of Smithson's work was designed to change or disappear entirely over time. (At Dia, they sweep up and maintain the edges of those piles of salt and sand.) *Spiral Jetty* was, for several years, submerged under the Great Salt Lake. Then it reappeared.

In high school, I had dated one of Dan's best friends, and then I briefly dated Dan, and then he dated my best friend, and then we drove across the country. After that, I lose track. But there were times when we slept together and times when he let me stay at his apartment while he slept with someone else, times when we swam in the ocean or rode his two bikes down the concrete steps of a municipal plaza. I moved to Brooklyn. Dan moved back west.

Parataxis of this kind is central to *Earth Room*. In the poet's juxtapositional thinking, readers are entrusted to feel their way between two threads, to find a crisis in common. In the poem above, we circle ever closer to the "Ship of Theseus" paradox implied by the poem: When does the art piece cease to be the piece it was? When does the relationship, the love? In this, the work *essais*, earnestly reaches toward the unknown and unknowable.

One of the most affecting threads of the book grapples with questions of origin, othering, and "place" as they relate to identity. The speaker's Judaism is an essential lens through which she views the world, through which the world views her. "My peers, the theater boys who sang the 'Dreidel Song' at me—they didn't know enough Jews to form a stereotype." What's missing tells us yet more than what's there. In this apophatic mode, the whole of "Tempelhof" reads:

A relationship is only that—
the space between two shapes. A shape.

From "Frankfurt":

Your name, it sounds so German, the ticket woman says.
German Jewish, yes, I say.
Huh. I've never heard it, shakes her head.

Earth Room is a poetry of the real: bodies made and unmade, moving and still. A climate mid-catastrophe. Schemas of desire and lack. Beacon, Anchorage, Wuppertal, Mars. All of it held together by the poet's sustained attention—attention of a kind, it bears mentioning, that can't be reified only in review. As Mannheimer herself offers:

My theory of art
is that there should be pleasure
in just hearing the concept,
but added pleasure
in seeing the thing itself.