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BOOK REVIEWS

An Exercise in Googling

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LK Holt. *MAN wolf MAN* Elwood (Victoria): John Leonard Press, 2007. ISBN: 978 0 9775787 7 1

L.K. Holt does not wear her learning lightly, and unless her intention is simply to impress with evocative terms and exotic references, she presumably expects her readers to do some heavy duty investigative work on Google. The first poem in the collection, "Man is Wolf to Man" depicts man's bestial violence, a violence that seems biologically determined, or divinely ordained: "A man hangs / like an amulet. His death to counter- / weight the deaths by his hand, / assuming God has a sense of balance." The enjambment of *counter- / weight* dividing *His death* from *deaths by his hand*, although predictable, is nonetheless effective, but the following line, "The skeleton in the sand of Ash Sham" sends us scurrying to discover that *Ash Sham* is another name for Damascus. Further enquiry reveals that in the twelfth century there was indeed a man of violence, Reginald of Chatillon-sur-Marne, a Frankish crusader, known as "The Wolf" by the afflicted Damascenes. Is this what she is referring to? But surely a crusader would not have worn a "Shirt unbuttoned / to show a cage of sand, the blindfold / blown off his three eyeholes." No, she must be referring to the murder of a hostage by terrorists, or perhaps the victim of a CIA operation. Who knows? Is this our task as readers, to try and find out?

The second and final verse paragraph of the poem moves to the other end of the Mediterranean, to Spain, the Peninsular War, Napoleon and the "*guerilla*". We learn that "Napoleon loves his soldiers, as do / the ravens" both sharing, presumably, an appetite for seeing the hapless combatants dead. But is the reference to the raven a link to the crusader in the first half of the poem through the ballad "The Three Ravens" and its story of the dead knight? No, it can't be, didn't we decide the dead man was killed by the SAS, or Delta Force, or someone? I think we should be told. Fortunately there is

a page devoted to "Notes and Sources" at the end of the book, but sadly "Man is Wolf to Man" does not appear there, and we are left unenlightened.

But then, again, the poem serves its purpose; man is indeed, wolf to man, and perhaps the killing fields of history do not need precise depiction, there being so very many of them. *Ash Sham* the Obscure is analgous, perhaps, to the Unknown Soldier – representative of them all – but if this is the case it is too obscure. Coleridge's "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure dome decree" works because everyone has heard of Xanadu, but has no idea where it is. This is not true of *Ash Sham*: we've never heard of it at all.

The love of obscure words, names and places is evident throughout the collection, and although this may be at times irritating (perhaps because the reader's ignorance is all too uncomfortably revealed), it is almost always rewarding to discover, once googled, what the terms mean. "[Q]uincunx", for example, from the first of the "Long Sonnets of Leocadia" is a marvellous word referring to the pattern that 5 makes on dice and playing cards: ⁘. The word "foramens" is, though, a little forced. It means "a small opening, perforation or orifice" according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, and it appears in the lines "I must be content to find him through the cramped / foramens of his work" from "Last Communion", also one of the "Long Sonnets of Leocadia". In what way is *foramens* preferable, in this poem, to a more familiar word? There seems to be little reason for its use, other than in helping we lesser mortals improve our vocabularies.

Having once started, it is difficult to stop: the compulsion to google that this collection imposes can reveal, at times, information that distracts us from the very words on the page. Take "Fountain with Five Kneeling Boys", a poem quite disturbing in its hints of incestuous violence and drunken abuse. The title, and much of the poem, refer to a sculpture by Georges Minne (we are told by the notes) and a desire to see this is rapidly fulfilled by recourse to Google Images. Except it turns out that the sculpture is actually called *Spring of the Bereaved* and not "Fountain with Five Kneeling Boys". Does this matter for the purposes of the poem? Perhaps not, but once the need for more information has been awoken, there is no turning back, and no matter how intrigued we are by the final line of the poem: "*to wrench the little fuckers off*" (original italics), it is the image of the sculpture, and the poem's delightfully precise description of the five boys, that remains.

Technical skill, or at least a thorough knowledge of traditional poetical tructures, is evident throughout the collection. Sometimes we are told which form is being used, as with the poem "Half Sestina" or the "Long Sonnets of Leocadia" with their extra quatrain, but sometimes we are not. Perhaps we are being tested. "Pompeii" is an Elizabethan sonnet, "The Flowers in the Vase Clench into a Gang of Fists in the Night" is a villanelle, while "Violets" with an echo of a clue in the title, is a triolet. "The Head" seems to be a kind of pantoum, and undoubtedly there are others, the result, perhaps, of a creative writing course. Or of a very professional poet, seriously interested in and concerned for her craft.

Not, of course, that the rhythm and rhyme schemes are strictly regular, indeed, at first glance, or to unwary readers unprepared for the structural games being played, the

poems might well appear to be written in free verse. The blurb on the back of the collection gives us a hint: "A feeling for the formality of language guides us through a music of rhyme, half-rhyme (and quarter rhyme)," we are told. *Quarter rhyme*. Whatever that is. Assonance, perhaps.

So what is the collection about? The afore-mentioned obscurity is something of an obstacle when it comes to answering this question. The blurb, again, is of some assistance: "[t]here is an unblinking amazement at violence; and a lively vein of the erotic" seems to be a reasonable summary of the themes explored. The eroticism, though lively, is not necessarily improved by facetiousness. Take "Sedimentary Layers": "If a geologist were to wander in / and see us lying here / – my head on your chest but / your legs on top of mine – / he'd certainly be a little perplexed / over whether you or I came first". No, I'm sorry, he wouldn't.
But "A Problem of Filing", which is neither erotic nor violent, is touching in its portrayal of a small girl putting on her father's shoes: "I could not find the saint or sentiment / for the time when I put on my shoes / then put on my father's over the top / and I just stood there, my tiny ankles / just holding me up, my love enclosed / in formality, my heart lost in a heart."

Yet, after all this carping, after all these complaints about obscurity, formality, distraction and difficult words, and the often impenetrable but nevertheless vivid explorations of gender, sexuality, creativity and hurt, this small but provocative volume proves to be rich in ideas and feelings. A single reading is rarely sufficient and a bit of work is required if any sustenance is to be obtained. So, is the effort worth it? Is the investment repaid? Yes, I think it is.