

Johannes Göransson, *Summer* (Tarpaulin Press 2022)

Until now, Johannes Göransson's books had all been prose even where versified. He seemed forever limited to being a ranter, an enemy of man (*Poetry is War*, 2020). His work was a virtual automatic weapon of shocks of vileness. One example will be illustration enough:

My rage has a white face.
It looks like the white face of colonialism
but my natives eat horses at night.
My natives fuck like a bag of spiders

But (and it's truly a surprise) this same Johannes Göransson has written, in *Summer*, arguably the best lyrical poems of anger and grief (and a book-length poem at that) since Sylvia Plath tore up the runway of the genre for all but the most powerful performances. He has turned his considerable bile upon himself, drunk it down to alleviate the pain of having lost a daughter, his third, to a hole in her lungs after 13 days of life. For which he blames himself, or say the gods in whom he was apparently in appalling disfavor. He does not analyze; he reacts, and oh such a reaction.

After writing a species of black comedy for years, Göransson is plunged into tragedy. The tragic lyric, the passionate if not exactly melodic lyric, is the most sensitive of genres. Wrong notes or just dead keys must be completely avoided. *Summer* spurts out of Göransson as if unstoppably, in short spontaneous canto after canto – unpunctuated, self-revolving, rotating on an axis made up of more than a dozen obsessive motif-words. The poet himself is but a medium; he calls himself a “translator” of what is already formed: “I am translating the poem / om mina dottrar until / it's the color of oxidized metal / you are the color of stain / glass window.”

He is in Stockholm, in what was his home, after, or so I imagine, fleeing from the scene of the crime back in Indiana, where Göransson and his wife, the poet Joyelle McSweeney, teach at the University of Notre Dame and publish Action books, books full of distress and darkness. His father, gullible before this country's supposed glamor, removed him to America when he was eleven (not happily: “everything that America touches turns into torture”). Back in Sweden, he may be seeking the “innocence” of his childhood, pre-rage, pre-crime, but it's no good: Stockholm is “finished.” Most of the book's lines are in the safer but still repellent “Father Tongue.” Of course: the poet is terribly out of sorts with natural law, Mother *life*. Lines in her “tongue” mix with those in the father tongue, but are few.

He's no longer either his mother's or his father's child. Hypersensitivity has cast him beyond them: "Many people don't realize that I write not to shock them but because I'm hypersensitive. I'm trying to survive." Surely he tried to shock, or anyway he gave a linguistic finger to everything that, as it were, dared show itself. But hypersensitive he is. He would like to lose his shattered identity altogether: "I ask my subsister to set fire to my passport / she sets fire to foals in the meadow." (That plunging run-on can make one's stomach drop.)

As you read the poem, you see that pain is terribly genuine, for all that it is allowed a stage. It has ruthlessly supplanted the ire and disgust that were once Göransson's signature:

I will bleed longer
in this poem now that I belong
at the afterparty and her lungs
have been intoxicated
I have been kissed by her mercury
I have been told to slash dioramas
I won't I'm not
as clean as that I carry
the violent leaf in my mouth

This writing is typical in its despondency and its resistance to an easy reading (which is poetry).

In *Summer*, handsomely designed at the Tarpaulin Press, Göransson continues to display a basic and uncompromising exile from anything ontological, anything that slips or buzz=saws itself into the world. Except for his family, every in it is garbage. Garbage is even what the sun throws down upon us: "I'm being sent through / the walls inside Giovanni's / room the sun's garbage / pours in.")

But his daughter has raised him out of the underworld. Previously he defended himself in a Dostoyevskian unground. He once said, "We will never leave the underground, Alice. I don't want to." But here he is, subject to being oxidized, to bleeding. He has met up with something stronger and more rejective than even he is:

my nature is to be afraid
of angels that embroider

on their winding sheets a poem
that goes like this oxygen
oxygen oxygen

He is forced into an admission, as opposed to a boast of his evil:

the daughter
goes clap clap
med hennes nakna galna
händer° I invented war.
I can/t turn it off

Tough though he is, he all but whines the words, “it’s hard to write it’s hard to dance with a baby’s breath.” If he could write his way out of the situation he would:

I am the color
red beneath trees where are you
hiding where are your punctured
lungs my beautiful pen inlaid
with bird bone is what I use
to write

If he could write in fire, could he burn up the grief? “I’ve been trying this whole time / to set [the poem] on fire.” Instead, he says,

I set fire to the flowers
I set fire to the debts
I set fire to the fire . . .

“Debt” is a principal motif. What does the poet owe and to whom? The word has an ambiguity that he can only troll. “Rabble” functions in the same way. The rabble threatens him, he is the rabble. The motifs form a net that tightens with each repetition. Besides *debt* and *rabble*, the emphatic motifs, most acting as metaphors, are *poison, ruins, garbage, kill, kill lists, hell, pomegranate seeds, Orpheus, war, carcass, fire, angels, holes, lungs, torso, bullet, virginity, Giovanni’s Room* (Giovanni being Italian for Johannes), *poems, voice, tree, matter, winter palace, mother, father, daughter*. The motifs all have roughly the same heat because the entire book is “burning.” They are all captors and captives in a life-changing

* Perhaps “with her night-crazy hands”

episode of horrid cruelty. Density is employed for the effect of capture. To one who does not have Swedish, the words look harsh with consonants, thorny.

The following illustrates the insistency, the boiling activity, the protagonism of the motifs, which I italicize:

Lets pretend to eat
candy in *hell*
where we belong
with all those *bullet*
holes we could make
a *rabble* strong enough
to *kill* my *debt*
make me a *virgin*
antimatter but I'm an anti
father now lets pretend
between the *bodies*
in this room there is
a third *body*
it can't *breathe* in this winter
palace where the *rabble*
has been uncovered
beneath tarpaulin
where I write *poems* like *kill*
lists *debt lists* I *write poems*
like a garland no like
I want to oblivionate

Summer is a *book as action* by a burning man who hates writing it as much as he needs it. Emotion (which in the mid-16th century denoted a “public disturbance”) is here true to its past, an experience of excitation, specifically of what has the chaotic, obsessive character of trauma and its shocks of returns. An empathic reader can't sit back and listen to (I was tempted to say watch) the emotional struggle in detachment. The poetry is indubitably, grippingly sincere. “I will tell as one who weeps and tells (*Inferno* V, 126).” Writing at the extreme limit of getting it out without apology or timidity, in helpless access to what is felt, is to be on thin ice, if thickened a little by repeated words so as not to fall in. Despite the repetition, the strong-voiced narrative and argument are always alive with impetus, always fresh. Each canto has its own violence and brusque rhythm; each is tight-woven, compressed, intense

I take the liberty of both compressing and selecting from the end, where there are larger intervals between some of the lines. The italics should by no means be confused with the text itself: *the bank is on fire / in a poem about matter / the bank is garbage / in a poem about matter / who am I / the angel of summer drinks milk out of my rifle / it's still summer / rifle summer rabble summer / I should be sentenced / for trying to devour heaven / it was a heaven / to listen to the paper / as it burned / I read it as it burned / the metaphors were dead.*

A formidable poem, then, that resisted and regretted itself as it was being written.

This book is something.