

A NOTE ON FEBRUARY

for *Dark Horses: Poets on Overlooked Poems*

Edited by Joy Katz and Kevin Prufer

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I love James Schuyler's poetry, its effortless grace, its sound, its thick and at times gnarly descriptions. A palpable sense of irrealism is everywhere present in it. His poems combine the attention of an ethnographic account with the charm of a great dinner guest. Add to this a private reading of the physical world imprinted on his nervous system. In his hyper-real descriptions colors shift; the words shimmer. The "violet sea" verges on the violent, there's a deeper cold behind the "gold and chilly" weather.

In one sense "February" is composed as a painstakingly specific catalog of discrete images. Each line is a surprise, delighting in the pleasures of coincidence, like "the pink of five tulips/ at five p.m." Gradually we progress through the city day to the dust inside the tulip, to the shape of the tulip, the container the tulip is in (a glass), and the container the glass is in (this day). The poem draws us from

1) the impalpability of the discrete units of matter; the fuzz of memory; the microscopic material of being; the "dust" inside the tulip;

2) to the shape of the tulip; its form (seemingly almost a platonic form—an ideal form—and yet here it is both symbolic and specific)

3) to the container; the context we can "place" it in; the context of the day, as the poet records the shifting of the light;

4) to the container of the poem, which can contain more than the day; the poetic tension between the beginning of matter—the baby being jogged on a hip—and the end of matter—the dust we become. The beauty of the tulip may draw us to observe it but inside it we see a reflection of what we ourselves are made of, just as we may see an image of our own childhood when we look in someone else's window.

“February” is not a tranquil Romantic recollection; it is active observation that creates the effect of recollection. Schuyler exchanges a syntax of memory and judgment for a syntax of simultaneity. He uncouples his sentences, so that the electric spark must jump from noun to noun, and from event to event, no matter how disparate or seemingly unrelated. The gaps between his lines give us the experience of the passage of time, a verbal time-lapse photography. Schuyler is a watcher. If you look out the window long enough you can actually “see” time pass as the light and colors of the world shift. In the first poem of his first book, John Ashbery wrote “Everything has a schedule, if you can find out what it is.” And one might say that in this poem “February” (the second poem of Schuyler’s first book, *Freely Espousing*), he does the work to disclose this invisible schedule, revealing the seemingly random syntax of the physical world.

This world as he presents it is both reassuring and unstable. The “day before March 1st” is not always February 28th and by not naming it—but naming what is next to it—he draws attention to this hinge of seasonal, temporal change, this “leap.” The poem is partly about this passage, getting over the hump of winter, as the truck disappears over the hump of the hill, or the speaker “can’t get over” his latest observation. And in this simple gesture nature, commerce, and human reason are intertwined. It is this interconnectedness that makes Schuyler’s poems reassuring in spite of the instability of their surface. And yet, reality is never as real as it is in a Schuyler poem. One has the sense of events and words being brought together out of necessity, to conduct a vision, giving the apparent randomness of living a sense of coherence and even inevitability.

PG; 2002

The Poem:

FEBRUARY

A chimney, breathing a little smoke.

The sun, I can't see

making a bit of pink

I can't quite see in the blue.

The pink of five tulips

at five p.m. on the day before March first.

The green of the tulip stems and leaves

like something I can't remember,

finding a jack-in-the-pulpit

a long time ago and far away.

Why it was December then

and the sun was on the sea

by the temples we'd gone to see.

One green wave moved in the violet sea

like the UN Building on big evenings,

green and wet

while the sky turns violet.

A few almond trees

had a few flowers, like a few snowflakes

out of the blue looking pink in the light.

A gray hush

in which the boxy trucks roll up Second Avenue

into the sky. They're just

going over the hill.

The green leaves of the tulips on my desk

like grass light on flesh,

and a green-copper steeple

and streaks of cloud beginning to glow.

I can't get over

how it all works in together

like a woman who just came to her window

and stands there filling it

jogging her baby in her arms.

She's so far off. Is it the light

that makes the baby pink?

I can see the little fists

and the rocking-horse motion of her breasts.

It's getting grayer and gold and chilly.

Two dog-size lions face each other

at the corners of a roof.

It's the yellow dust inside the tulips.

It's the shape of a tulip.

It's the water in the drinking glass the tulips are in.

It's a day like any other.

JAMES SCHUYLER

(p.15 in *Freely Espousing*; p.6 in *Selected Poems*, p. 4 in *Collected Poems*)