

HAPAX BY A.E. STALLINGS

Reviewed by Steffen Horstmann

Hapax, by A.E. Stallings
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Since the appearance of her first book *Archaic Smile* (winner of the Richard Wilbur Award for 1999), American expatriate A.E. Stallings has become widely known for her highly polished short lyrics—poems that display a rare formal prowess and most often reach unsettling conclusions. In her recently released second collection *Hapax* (a Greek word meaning “once” or “once only”), Stallings offers poems of reflectiveness and reckoning. Her attention is continually fixed on that which is fleeting or has been lost. The speaker of “Lovejoy Street” describes a relationship in which happiness was experienced but not appreciated. “Arrowhead Hunting,” “Noir,” and “Minutes” each assess different aspects of time’s unfolding. Stallings can write poems that are simultaneously emotional and remarkably poised, as in this sonnet:

Sine Qua Non

Your absence, father, is nothing. It is naught—
The factor by which nothing will multiply,
The gap of a dropped stitch, the needle’s eye
Weeping its black thread. It is the spot
Blindly spreading behind the looking glass.
It is the startled silences that come
When the refrigerator stops its hum,
And crickets pause to let the winter pass.

Your absence, father, is nothing—for it is
Omega’s long last O, memory’s elision,
The fraction of impossible division,
The element I move through, emptiness,
The void stars hang in, the interstice of lace,
The zero that still holds the sum in place.

Stallings studied classics at the University of Georgia and has been living in Greece for a decade. Dispersed throughout *Hapax* are poems whose subjects or speakers are characters out of Greek myth—Cassandra, Apollo, Aeneas, Penelope, Circe, Eurydice, and Athena are just some of the figures making appearances. Perhaps the strongest of the Greek poems is “Sisyphus,” a pseudo-sestina with some clever psychological twists—the famous protagonist (hopeless in the task of rolling a stone up a

hill) is immersed in a conundrum, living “in hope/ of dream-work,/ its regressive,/ infinite object.” The Greek myths have undergone some remarkable transformations in contemporary poetry—frequently adapted with the hero (most often Odysseus, Orpheus, or Sisyphus) appearing in a modern setting. Stallings resists making these kinds of departures, and it is admirable the way in which she practices a loyalty to the classics. She may supply them with intelligent nuances, or their speakers with the perspective of hindsight, but does so while allowing each character to retain their essential identity. Among the Greek poems is a delightful group of limericks. Here is a sample:

Stoic Seneca wasn't a hero
To take on a pupil like Nero.
 But I tell you, in those days,
 It took some cojones
To give his assignments a zero.

Stallings briefly explores characteristics of the exile's condition of displacement. In the fourth section of “Exile: Picture Postcards,” an adaptation of a well known poem by C.P. Cavafy, the subject is paradoxically pursued by and always arriving in his native city. In the compelling poem “Alice, Grown-up, at the Cocktail Party,” Alice (as a kind of double exile) has difficulty assimilating in the “real” world, though it's been years since she left Wonderland:

Always the golden key sits out of reach.
Always people riddle me with questions
For which there are no answers; always the wrong
Words tumble out to fill the awkward breach,
Like half-remembered lyrics from a song.

The self cannot decipher its true home, and Alice is unable to overcome her sense of estrangement. One can only surmise how closely these poems may relate to the author's experience as expatriate. Part three of “Exile: Picture Postcards” reveals: “After five years here, I understand/ Most of the sung words, recognize the tune,/ But there's an element I'll never get,/ That isn't born in me...” Here Stallings acknowledges there are inherent traits of the native's birthright—of a language, a land, a history—the outsider can never fully appreciate.

Stallings employs sonnets, couplets, quatrains, triplets, Sapphics, and a variety of other forms with uncommon skill. She typically will not attempt to interlace various subjects within individual poems, but isolates moments which are examined with a jeweller's attention. Her poems (through which she channels voices and stories from the community of an ancient world) are accessible and well-honed, marked by an “inspired” clarity. These days it is rare to witness a poet coming to acclaim while writing almost

exclusively in forms. Not yet forty, Stallings seems poised for a career of substantial achievement. The concluding stanzas of “Prelude” are an example of the kind of work that demonstrates such promise.

But it is not when cellos shoulder the tune,
Nor changing of the key
Nor resolution of disharmony
That makes me almost tremble, and it is not
The ambered afternoon
Slanting through motes of dust a painter caught

Four hundred years ago as someone stands
Opening the blank
Future like a letter in her hands.
It is not masterpieces of first rank,
Not something made
By once-warm fingers, nothing painted, played.

No, no. It is something else. It is something raw
That suddenly falls
Upon me at the start, like loss or awe—
The vertigo of possibility—
The pictures I don't see,
The open strings, the perfect intervals.

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