

Rivista di poesia comparata

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[« indietro](#)ELIZABETH ROBINSON, **Apprehend**, NewYork, Fence Book 2003, pp. 89, \$ 12,00.

Though Elizabeth Robinson is by no means a new figure in the landscape of American poetry – she has published six full-length books of poetry in the last decade and some nine chapbooks since 1987 – in the last several years her work has received the considerable attention that is its due. Since 2000, she has published two well-received collections, *House Made of Silver* (2000), and *Harrow* (2001); two additional books have been published as recipients of major prizes – *Pure Descent*, National Poetry Series Prize winner in 2001, and *Apprehend*, winner of the 2003 Fence Modern Poets Prize. With these books, and with her work as an editor of 26 Magazine and Ether Dome Press, Robinson is beginning to be recognized as one of the most important writers of her generation (the generation born in the 1960s) and as a force in contemporary American poetry.

In *Apprehend*, Robinson employs spare music and taut, lyric lines in a continual revision of narrative structures and a thoughtful investigation of readership. Many of the poems here recast the familiar stories of fairy tales and childhood rhymes, always with a slant, a new shape; «an old story, told yet again». Robinson writes in *Hansel and Gretel*, «is subject to certain deformations». These are poems that reexamine the elements, at once familiar and fantastic, of these old stories – monsters, dragons, candy houses, glinting jewels; at the same time, Robinson's deft use of plain and precise language to continually modify and transform these figures forces the reader to reconsider her own expectations, her desire for a certain narrative, the consolation of a well-known tale; «the nature of treasure, » Robinson writes in *Treasure Chest*, «being to appear transparent / as it reflects ». Telling a known story, these poems remind us, is always an act of reading, interpretation, and adaptation; here, then, reader and writer are allied in compelling ways, the acts of reading and writing linked.

One excellent example of Robinson's elegant borrowing of a familiar story is the long poem *Hansel and Gretel* mentioned above. In graceful lines, Robinson recounts it as a tale of hunger, and one that might be understood anew. Near the middle of the poem, we get the following synopsis of the story: «Two children, mad with hunger, / impose themselves on a gentle old crone. / They hustle her into her house, / and finding her larder bare, / they attack the house itself and try to consume it». Robinson's *Hansel and Gretel* is a tale in which the once-clear distinctions between villainous and virtuous, child and witch, reader and report have become murky. «The wicked stepmother,» Robinson tells us, «is merely hungry and absentminded »; later in the poem, the poet conflates Hansel and the witch in image: «the boy stretches into such a posture / that, seen from above, / he forms the profile of the witch's face». When Robinson addresses the reader, her tone is not without accusation and implication: «You have grown weary / of this story's slow progress. // You look at a fantastical candy house, / its reflection warped and wavering. / You turn from its reflection in / an unnamed body of water. / You turn, go, and sink your teeth in».

Another reader address later in the poem further complicates the relationship of the reader to both the text and the speaker of the poem: «You, Reader, come closer / and extend your fingers / through the bars of the cage// so I can feel their pleasing tenderness: / be our mirror. // For you / are neither boy nor girl / but the certain // unity of the sweet abode- / a spun sugar house...».

Throughout *Apprehend*, Robinson suggests the instability of received narratives, inserts the possibility of alternative lines reader or narrative might follow; Panoply begins, «You can sit here: / there are three bowls from which to select,» and continues, «Here you may rise / to keen the terms of escape. / The window defines the house / but spurns its duty to view». In *Three Little*, the first poem in the collection, Robinson considers the aftermath of the tale, the consequences and our possible possible readings of them: «Tomorrow we sweep out the cinders and the black clods of wood. / The door is still locked. Our secure house is more gesture than matter. // Were there three of us sheltering there. / That wind was relevant. We had a bellows. / The record would have shown we sought confusion. / So did we inhale».

We may recognize many of the narrative threads and images in *Apprehend* – the three bears, the three pigs and the huffing wolf, Chicken Little's falling sky, the Little Match Girl – but these are not the stories of our childhoods. Rather, they are intense explorations of the limits of narrative, the volatility of language. The poems in *Apprehend* resist the passive reading one might think likely for wellknown stories and require that the reader grapple with a text rich with fluid, shifting images, one that confounds expectation and demands attention.

Nancy Kuhl

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