

Song Sing Sung Sang

Giles Goodland, *What the Things Sang*

(Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2009)



Brian Marley

In a typical (if there is a such a thing) Giles Goodland poem, grammatical and syntactical rules are teased and occasionally sweetly tormented as words form associations along new lines of logic. Order is readily apparent once we readjust our expectations of what a poem should be—or, rather, what it should do (a poem is a thing, a muscular thing, all those brute verbs pushing the other words along). In the main, the poems aren't hard to follow, but they do require the reader to keep faith in the enterprise and make certain imaginative leaps. They're informative (if this is important to you, read on) and highly entertaining (ditto), while effortlessly getting on with the business of being elegant and eloquent.

“No ideas but in things,” as William Carlos Williams famously declared (between parentheses) in the poem ‘A Sort of a Song’. But what's often more interesting than the things themselves is how they interact, the associations that are forged between them. In this regard, Goodland is particularly inventive. Here, for example, are four consecutive lines from the untitled poem that begins on page 60:

if you walk from one side to the other of yourself you must be
god

if god is a child she never gets bored of the lightswitch

if all of the facts have come to light light has burnt them away

if you burn your shadow on the drive history lacks a last page

It's easy to see how the poem advances from one suggestible moment to the next: god the giver of light/lightswitch/the play on the word 'light' as in 'come to light'/the casting of a shadow, for which light is required. This amounts to illumination, as in lit up, and a condition of spiritual awareness, as in to follow god's light. But amidst the playfulness a lot more is being said, and much is suggested. How young children are often fascinated by light that goes on and off at the flick of a switch, and how this apes god's celestial machinery, giving us night and day. Yet the planetary orbits are a given, something over which we homo sapiens have no control; a true indication of our free will is in finding a way to make our own light, in defiance of god's nightly imposition.

Then there's the terrific ambiguity of the third line, "if all of the facts have come to light light has burnt them away". The phrase "come to light" can also mean 'come to god'. One of the possible readings of the line is that although revealed facts should inexorably destroy our belief in god, god's light has burnt them away – i.e. the mystery of our origins is maintained through belief, in denial of the facts (or 'facts'). And the last line suggests the fragility of human history in the computer age. The representations of ourselves that end up on the hard drive are easily corrupted and/or rendered unreadable as file formats change over time and are not back compatible, whereas paper is a more durable and enduring medium on which to capture words and visual images. There's also an apocalyptic slant to these four lines: in our innocence (as signified by the child) we may, through our technological advances, lose our history and with it aspects of our cultural memory and an important sense of what it is to be human.

But my interpretation of these four lines is speculative; there's good reason to assume that each reader will read them somewhat differently. What I merely wish to show, even with the use of such a small example, is that although the poems have playful surfaces, and can be read in an almost mantra-like way, with one brilliant image

following another at a dizzying rate, Goodland's work has rich depths that can be mined if one so chooses.

He's a subtle devil, and clever, that's for sure. By declaring what he meant to say but said instead in the poem on page 71 which begins—

How it was a mistake. I meant to say

how fine these trees are
on the horizon, defined by cloud,
but what I said was

how a blackbird conjugates a song,
but what I wrote came out

how those full-lipped tulips sneer at me
withering from the wastepaper bin
but it became measurable as

etc., etc., he explores some of the slippages between intention and action and the way the mind focuses selectively. In the process, he also gets to write a lyric poem that avoids all the deadening clichés that bedevil such an enterprise. In other words, he gets to have his cake and eat it, and I don't begrudge him a single mouthful. *What the Things Sang* is a remarkable book.