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A BEAUTIFUL UNRAVELING: A REVIEW OF *THE RUINED ELEGANCE*

The Ruined Elegance. Fiona Sze-Lorrain. Princeton University Press, 2016. 62 pp. \$14.95 (paperback).

Poetry is often considered the most intimate of literary forms, ironic perhaps in an era where one can hardly experience the Internet without encountering the soul-baring YouTube poet, the confessional slam aficionado, or perhaps even the word-drunk blogger. However, in her new collection, *The Ruined Elegance*, Fiona Sze-Lorrain shuns such styles of intimacy in favor of a tightrope balance between closeness and distance, chaos and objectivism. The book is Sze-Lorrain's attempt to capture in writing the beauty to be found in disorder—a beauty that is to resonate with the reader, despite the transience of the physical text. To try to recreate and preserve the world's chaos she does, and largely, succeeds.

Primarily a lyrical poet, Sze-Lorrain's fascination with the visual also informs the collection. Keeping with the central motifs of splendor and disorder, in "Mausoleum," the audible beauty of rhyme captures the visual horrors of the dead: ". . . they said her eyes stuck out / *like orange buns that bite* they said his hair / turned white overnight" (lines 8–10). Other poems, such as "Ionian Supper," are a series of snapshots, whipping the reader from story to story, place to place. The opening lines of this prose poem depend on both the contrast between italics and standard font and short, rapid scene changes to convey frenetic movement: "*Let's not discuss politics*. Exits made in haste, an extra glass of wine. A young / lad taunts a duchess with a line from Ibsen." From there, the reader continues to navigate a dizzying scope of scenery—the vastness of the night sky, a close-up of a man's ear—never allowed more than a phrase or two per image. Her concise work at the word level aside, Sze-Lorrain, in a single prose poem, also allows for a precarious conceptual interaction between the familiar sensations of shared grief—"This is why our grief tastes like water"—and the measured distance of frank, intellectual certainty: "The children associate it with punishment. They have forgotten that water is an herb" ("Am

I What the Lake Gave Me”).

Like many lyric-inspired poets—Basho and William Carlos Williams come to mind—Sze-Lorrain navigates these constant shifts in emotion, tone, time, and place by referencing the natural world. The return to nature feels familiar and grounded—exactly what is needed for a successful dive into disorder. For Sze-Lorrain, however, this technique does not solely rely on the beauty or simplicity of nature; rather, as the collection’s title implies, its ruination most holds her attention. In “Towering,” she writes: “as a star dies, another / emerges, in astonishment / and for no reason” (lines 25–27), highlighting the senselessness of nature alongside its beauty. Humanity is senseless as well. In “Spring Massacre,” the speaker depicts her cousin’s rapists as both plunderers and the sowers of new life when they return after the rape to help plant sunflowers, to revel in their beauty and size. This jarring juxtaposition of rape and flowers embodies Sze-Lorrain’s often surprising pairings of simple nature imagery with powerful, uncomfortable emotion.

Other poems express frustration at the inadequacy of words to properly illustrate and bear witness to painful moments of ruination. In “Yield, Please,” Sze-Lorrain notes that even ghosts can’t occupy two spots at once, “let / alone us, princes who inherit / this static light” (lines 7–9). Nevertheless, the collection is, in some ways, an argument for the written word’s special role in preserving events that are normally difficult to preserve, and Sze-Lorrain manages to convey this textual preservation in an almost scientific fashion. For example, the poem “Three Moves, Clockwise” examines a set dinner table from three angles. With “rotate the image ninety degrees” as the poem’s refrain, she provides the reader with not only simple shifts in visual perspective but also changes in emotion. In the first rotation, the scene is very objectively described; in the second rotation, however, words like “flayed,” “shadows,” and “plot” lend a quiet mystery and air of suspicion to the formerly mundane scene. By the third rotation, the fork is “under siege,” a “victim”—creating a story arc for the inanimate objects. While perhaps not as emotionally impactful as “Spring Massacre” or “Yield, Please,” this seemingly simple poem conveys that point of view is never singular, never fixed.

To fully understand how Sze-Lorrain connects perspective to form, one need only examine “Om Hhrung Svaha,” a strange piece spread out on the page in two left-aligned columns with space in between them. The poem itself is not simply a marvel of words but also of design. Allowing for multiple ways to scan lines across the page yields infinite possibilities—“A cricket, alone / It spits out

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a tongue," or alternatively, "A cricket, alone / in this field. I want the moon to strip / It spits out a tongue" is merely one example of the poem's grammatical gymnastics.

Finally, though, what may be most compelling about the collection is a keen sense of meta-commentary on poetry's ability to do exactly what the chaotic "Om Dhrung Svaha" does. The poet argues in "Partita, But Nothing to do with Bach" that "[w]rite is to stay at a crime scene from the start" (line 2), accounting for Sze-Lorrain's almost compulsion to document the synchronicity of seemingly random events. Yet poetry is also for smaller beauties, such as the sunflowers from "Spring Massacre" or the artful place settings of "Three Moves, Clockwise." Indeed, as with her relationship to nature, Sze-Lorrain seeks simplicity: "Here stands a moment in praise of mundane details," she writes in "Bonnard's Naked Wife Leaving the Bathtub" (line 16). This self-conscious attention to the very act of writing reappears in "To Survive When It Must," a tale of book pages whose "curse" the librarian knows to be life-saving. Similarly, in "Granted Asylum," the reader finds that the "buried book showed its teeth" (1), the poem speaking to a desperate need for the written word not only to cling to its reader but to thrive throughout the ages, steadfast against a disordered world.

Fiona Sze-Lorrain's *The Ruined Elegance* certainly isn't a book to be enjoyed in a single sitting—not when there is so much at stake and so much to miss. While much thematic complexity is captured with varying degrees of success through both form and function, Sze-Lorrain recognizes the impossibility of her task: while poetry can be "a form, a word / something hard to fake" (lines 17–18), she notes that the work will never quite capture all that is both ruined and elegant. She, in the end, opines in "Bonnard's Naked Wife Leaving the Bathtub" that "like you, I wish for more narratives. / A plot that unravels a grand finale" (lines 20–21). Wonderfully, *The Ruined Elegance* is a collection in a perpetual state of unraveling.

