

# Beautiful World Haunted

Andrew Kozma

## ROAM

Susan B. A. Somers-Willett

Southern Illinois University Press

<http://www.siu.edu/~siupress>

96 pages; paper, \$14.95

It's not often that I acquire a new book of poetry through a poem in a journal, but that's exactly what happened with *Roam*. I read "The Boy Who Would Be Achilles" in the *Crab Orchard Review* and found a voice I identified with, who echoed the problems with language and the glories in wordplay and allusive disjunction that I was dealing with in my own writing—which means this is probably the point to tell you that this is not so much an unbiased review.

Which is not to mean that I have any untoward connection to Susan B. A. Somers-Willett or have designs on being published by her press, but that I feel so connected to her aesthetic that even when she's failing in a poem, I can't help but be behind every faltering line.

Her poems are often lyric, make that always lyric, and allusive. Take the first poem, "Self-Portrait as Interstate 10." The connections between lines are missing, in that the narrative is not a narrative as much as a portrait, each line, each image, like one dot of paint in a pointillist composition: at the end, there is a painting, but the closer you look at the canvas the more open spaces you see. A flock of implication.

This is not exactly true. The lines "Still, the sky is the great equalizer" and "Still, I yawn into the visible: yellow sun, / shack, mountains of uncertain / range" can easily be linked under the controlling metaphor of the interstate or, more correctly, the "I" as Interstate. Somers-Willett's poems become an act of active reading, a game where you connect the meanings between the title and each line, each line to each other line, and those lines to other people's poems. The end of "Self-Portrait as Interstate 10" alludes to Stevie Smith, W. H. Auden, and William Carlos Williams: "not drowning, not waving, / but falling out of the sky." This isn't just a layering for the poem alone; the Williams poem alluded to provides the epigraph for the second section, even more closely relating the two poems.

*Roam*'s poems create their own worlds, their own myths, even while calling in favors from the myths of a common western culture. For each "The Boy Who Would Be Achilles" that anchors its emotion to established myth, there is a poem like "Migration" that carries emotional weight through Somers-Willett's clear images and surety of voice:

Can you hear it, tumbling pell-mell out of the  
sky  
over the acid flute of altitude, over wind

singing all of your holes?

What is the word that repeats itself inside your  
body?

The word that lives in your chest,  
that chases you into the deaf and repeating sea.

Here you see the echo of Icarus, though it is only an echo. And this echo reverberates through the entire book, emerging from "Self-Portrait as Interstate 10," the second ring of "Circus Acts," and is most noticeably reworked in "*Girl, 7, Seeking U.S. Flight Record, Dies in Crash.*"

Somers-Willett shows her hand directly near the end of the book in "After Leaving the House of Minos." This poem ends the second section in metaphor, weaving together myth and reality, the epic loss and the poet's personal loss of her father. The poem ending the first section ("What the Doctors Forget to Tell You about Morphine") is a grounded exploration of a child easing an ailing parent through the process of dying. Although the father at the end "is, for a time, an angel," this is the poet forcing imagery on the tragedy of the real, an attempt to make suffering understandable and beautiful. With "After Leaving the House of Minos" the perspective is reversed: now mythology is brought down to the gritty, dirty earth, and, instead of being myth and holding up some higher "meaning," the suffering of Daedalus over the loss of his son is made real. His loss means nothing but loss.

The theme of the myth of Icarus—reaching too high out of pride, out of recklessness, out of the belief that people can be like gods—is what threads the book together. A series of poems on the Roanoke Colony follow the historical John White, governor of the colony, in the initial founding of the colony and his travels to and from England to support the fledgling society. The poems are all called "Virginia Dare," named after the first English child born in America, and her name itself calls out the act of daring, and what one risks to try something new, something believed impossible. The last poem of the series ends with "They talk of this country, how / it is beginning to eat its people." An aggressive statement not only on the past costs of ambition and empire, but on the current state of politics as well.

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*Roam*'s poems are generally aggressive in form and content. The poems are tightly constructed, each line a careful unit that often turns in meaning with the jump to the next line. Poems like "(Emptiness)" sneak their rhythms up on you:

Vitaly throws sacks of red potatoes in the tractor  
he throws grain to the rooster and studies the  
grass  
he sharpens the blade of the gut knife for dinner  
and I kill the weak one, the slow-moving calf.

The first line sets up the scene and the initial rhyme, while the next three lines tumble into a music that punches the "I kill" at the end. Other poems are openly sexual, owning words and subjects that wouldn't normally work their way into, say, a pantoum like "Matins":

of soft fruit, my cunt whispers: holy.  
Bells put tongues to body  
in a sound myth, with a prayer.  
Your once-child's finger moves on the catch.

This frank and aggressive use of form and language



Detail from cover

also creates a danger: that the cutting frankness will turn into a blunt earnestness. "The Gift" moves into the latter area when its talk about the speaker's sex with a boy she didn't know was a virgin moves from the vague and coy "and things were done" to "and all that sweet boy could say was / *Thank you, thank you, thank you.*" On the other extreme, a poem may aim towards shock and lose emotional truth. This happens in "Ophelia's Technicolor G-String: An Urban Mythology," where the revelation in the last line is, suddenly, that Ophelia is "Horatio in drag." However, those are the only two poems in the collection where something seems out of place, and even those poems are laced with beautiful language and images.

*Roam* ends with a collection of poems on Jeanne d'Arc, each poem spiked with quotes from her trial by the Catholic Church. These poems combine the real and the mythic which the rest of the book has kept separated, always dragging one over to the side of the other. Jeanne is a character who is aware of the real world, but sees the beauty that can overlay it, that can be brought down from Heaven. She, of course, is also an Icarus figure, claiming domain not only in having direct inspiration from God but in moving into traditionally male territories. Jeanne does what many other speakers in *Roam* do not: she claims her ambition, her hubris, and embraces it as part of her. Her pride may have caused her death, but it is also what gave her life meaning: trying what others said could not be done, should not be done.

Susan B. A. Somers-Willett has written a beautiful, sad, and passionate book. The poems in *Roam* force me to admit, like Jeanne, "my beautiful world haunted, / my heart has chanted: / *I want, I want.*"

Andrew Kozma's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Alehouse; Pebble Lake Review; Spoon River Poetry Review; American Letters and Commentary; Forklift, Ohio; Eclipse; and Best New Poets 2006. His poetry manuscript City of Regret will be out in the spring from Zone 3 Press.