Arts & Humanities

Remembering Rachel Wetzsteon (1967—2009)

By
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Spring 2010

Rachel Wetzsteon ’99GSAS, whom Richard Howard called “the most variously gifted of our young poets,” took her own life in late December, at the age of 42. A professor of English at William Paterson University, she had just succeeded C. K. Williams as poetry editor of *The New Republic*.

A full listing of her prizes and plaudits would be long, impressive, and radically insufficient as a record of her real achievements. These include a featherlight critical touch (see her posthumously published essay on “Philip Larkin and Happiness” in the *Contemporary Poetry Review*), and a wise, searching, unfailingly lovely poetic line. Over and over again in her books, one encounters the chaos of daily urban life made coherent through the pressures of poetic form. For Wetzsteon, writing poetry was a quest for perspective, which she gained by assembling word structures solid enough to stand on.

Nothing *Columbia* writes about Wetzsteon can approach the beauty of the things she wrote about Columbia. Indeed, with her death, the Upper West Side may have lost its fondest and most faithful describer. “Wetzsteon’s poems manage to turn Morningside Heights . . . into a theater of romance, an intellectual haven, a flaneur’s paradise,” the poet-critic Adam Kirsch wrote of her third book, *Sakura Park*. “Her poems evoke the kind of life that generations of young people have come to New York to live — earnest, glamorous, and passionate, full of sex and articulate suffering.”

Along with a critical study of Auden, Wetzsteon published three collections of poems. A fourth, *Silver Roses*, from which "Ruins" is taken, will appear later this year from

Persea Books.

Ruins

I sat on the subway sipping latte,
reading a short history of ruins.

Then, boarding the bus at Ninety-Sixth Street,
grabbed by mistake — such screwball
anti-élan! — a blind man’s cane
instead of the post beside his slouching form.

Then home to my journal and ordering in.

There are times when one feels oneself
the star of a movie about one’s life,
all nuance and dimension replaced
by scare-quote features, floodlit in plain day.

There are times when one feels a frightful cliché.

And yet the coffee tasted good,
the book set me brooding helplessly,
hopefully, on the folly of recent woes.

To every cliché, a germ of truth.
To do otherwise, a terrible falsehood.
And so, to the unthumbed cookbooks,
to the lavender lipstick bought
in a you-must-change-your-life frenzy,

a gentle not yet: this caffeine high,
this madcap tribute to Hepburn’s ghost,
this zeal for aqueducts and abbeys
compose a life, though someday they may rest
in cobwebbed attics, dear ruins of former selves.

(from Silver Roses*, Persea Books, 2010)*

Short Ode to Morningside Heights

Convergence of worlds, old stomping ground,
comfort me in my dark apartment
when my latest complaint shrinks my focus
to a point so small it’s hugely present
but barely there, and I fill the air
with all the spiteful words I spared the streets.

The pastry shop’s abuzz
with crazy George and filthy graffiti,
but the peacocks are strutting across the way
and the sumptuous cathedral gives
the open-air banter a reason to deepen:
build structures inside the mind, it tells
the languorous talkers, to rival the ones outside!

Things are and are not solid.
As Opera Night starts at Caffe Taci,
shapes hurry home with little red bags,
but do they watch the movies they hold
or do they forego movies for rooftops
where they catch Low’s floating dome in the act
of always being about to fly away?

Ranters, racers, help me remember
that the moon-faced fountain’s the work of many hands,
that people linger at Toast long after we’ve left.
And as two parks frame the neighborhood—
green framing gray and space calming clamor—
be for me, well-worn streets, a context
I can’t help carrying home, a night fugue
streaming over my one-note *how, when, why*.
Be the rain for my barren indoor cry.

(from Sakura Park*, Persea Books, 2006)*

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