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is, hits home—I’ll conclude with two stories, both from creative writers I have known, one troubling and one potentially enlightening. The first concerns one of my favorite students over the past five years, a first-generation student who proved herself wonderful at soaking up the juices in the creative writing classroom and is going on to study at a major M.F.A. school next year, where she’s been accepted despite all the tight competition. In her exit interview, though, concerning her rather exceptional Senior Writing Project, when asked what writers she was reading now, she confessed to the two faculty members interviewing her that “I really don’t like to read.” In fact, she said, she doesn’t read. Anything. Hearing those words, and gathering from follow-up questions that she doesn’t intend to change, my heart sank. What had we done? Offered her a route toward “expressing her voice” but not developed her sense of the history of literature as conversation? I know she is an exception, but her response still troubles me. I don’t know what I’d make of her attitude, in the light of my Chilean questioner.

But here’s an alternative story—about a good friend of mine, not a creative writing student but a high school English teacher who for many years spent a good deal of his free time, such as it was, writing short stories and poems. He loved Faulkner, in particular, but also Raymond Carver and

Alice Munro, among others. His reading had fostered his love of fiction and he produced some nice work of his own. Finally, though, he quit. He told me: “I just found myself chasing the written page, to the detriment of my family and my teaching.” And he gave it up, at least for now, while his kids are young. He teaches contemporary poetry and classical fiction. He coaches his kids’ baseball and softball teams. He is an amazing teacher. And he reads, consuming everyone from Cervantes to Proust to Jose Saramago (a Nobel Prize-winning writer whom I’d never heard of, yet he was able to tell me about three books of his he’d read over the past three years!). Does it matter that my friend doesn’t write fiction anymore? Not in the least. But did his time spent writing it help him read it better and make him a better parent, teacher and friend? Absolutely.

My answer to the question posed to me at the Congreso is still formulating in my mind. I dare say it’s one we could all benefit from asking ourselves—and each other—if we care about fostering the healthiest literary climate in this country as we can manage. ☺



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There’s No Defying *Logic* *by Chuck Salmons*

One could infer, simply from its title, that Rikki Santer’s second collection of poetry seeks to examine and explain the world, and one’s experiences in it, with a domestic eye, like that of a housewife or postal worker or retiree. But while the poems in this chapbook tackle subjects we all deal with on a daily basis, Santer’s approach is varied and complex, her language lush and musical, her turns of phrase clever and often hilarious. Santer is a poet who clearly has a sense of history, both personal and global, and her poems take many forms, often experimental and layered with meaning. And thus the reader sometimes will find himself reading the poems again and again, uncovering bits of allusion and symbolism. As a result, the reader works hard to appreciate the complexity of the poems while simultaneously rejoicing at the richness of their language.

Knowing Santer personally and having work-

shopped poems with her (some of which appear in *Clothesline Logic*), it’s difficult for me to be completely objective about this collection. Like these poems, her career is chock full of experiences as a journalist and writer, editor, poet, teacher and even, as the author’s notes will tell you, a bagel street vendor, “her all-time favorite job.” Hence, her poems possess a sense of both domesticity and worldliness—the former acting as bookends for the collection with the latter nestled between.

For this reader, those bookends are the most interesting poems. The second (and title) poem, “Clothesline Logic,” give us the first taste of the speaker exploring and grappling with the past to seek some sort of resolve or closure. There is a sense that the speaker was once tied down to an unimaginative life that was “slim/and linear... memories flapping/like moiré, schemes snapping/ from too much wind.” Anyone who’s looked at

moiré fabric as it moves immediately will understand the dizzying effect it has, communicated here by the speaker. The trope of fabrics continues throughout the next lines, moving from the cheap (“chintz, duck, felt”) to more lavish (“satin, velvet, . . . appliques shimmering gold”). It’s a past that’s gaudy, pigeonholed, unauthentic and uncertain. But the speaker, without revealing how the change occurs, moves past this and the poem ends with a sense of liberation to move through and make sense of life as one pleases:

Now the haze compels,
the glow, sense in nonsense,

clothesline with wings, tails
in flight, cousin kites, the plodding
unfettered and propulsive

freed from a two-point plan.

From here, Santer moves on to explore more detached subjects, giving voice to several American-pop culture and historical icons in poems such as “RCA Victor Dog’s First Day on the Job”; “Charles Darwin Visits the Beagle Point Mall”; and the laugh-out-loud funny “Dick and Jane, All Grown Up.” She pays homage to Ezra Pound in her poem “In a Station of the Metro” and again gets the reader laughing with “RE: Secretaries from Hell.” Santer’s use of vibrant language permeates the poems, as evidenced by the opening stanzas of “A Case for Mathematics,” which one could argue might be any an anthem for English majors who hated to go to math class:

I’m calling my lawyer.
Let’s sue, I’ll say,
for the tallying that too often
tugged at my tail . . .

for each pyramid stone
stacked by those chalky fingers,
tired teachers entombing
my swerving mind.

Note the strong use of alliteration and assonance, the clever use of “swerving” to indicate the speaker’s struggle to avoid math while also conveying a sense of disorientation, much like the effect of staring at moiré flapping in the breeze.

At the other end of the collection, the bookends once again take us into the personal experience of the speaker with “This Backyard Ravine” and

“Mourning Sickness.” And with the poem “At Sixteen,” Santer again displays her deftness with both language and metaphor, describing what may well have been the speaker’s first, albeit turbulent love:

... I’m a flat cartoon, steamrolled
into the next frame, my tiara tarnished and tagged.

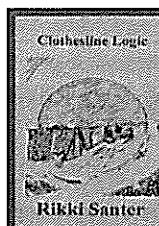
you rear up onto your heels to spar, to tar
and feather my rationale before it can stand

on its own two feet . . .

The reader wants to sympathize with the speaker as her lover—who always plays it “like a gamer”—folds up their love “like a game board.” But the freshness of the language prohibits us from doing so, even as bits of their love fall apart, “wedge[d] between the floor boards/with the bread crumbs and spiders.”

And so it is with Santer’s work. From the rant of “Waiting Room” to the jazziness of “Willie Akins Plays the St. Louis Bistro,” to the hip rhythm of “Depending on the Definition of What Is Is,” these poems exhibit both purpose and playfulness. They’re poems to be read aloud, performed, sang. No doubt readers will find a few of them more difficult to dig into—“Literary Movement: An Answer Key” and “From Window Sill” perhaps falling short of the standard set by the others. But the bookends hold everything in place as Santer “coax[es] chord/progressions from a paragraph standing on its head.” Readers will discover that *Clothesline Logic* leaves them satisfied, as they sit down for “Lunch with My Analyst,” the final poem, and find themselves—like the speaker—“in good company.” ☺

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poems by Rikki Santer
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Hear the Poet

OPA member Rikki Santer will give a reading from her latest chapbook, “*Clothesline Logic*,” at the Upper Arlington Library—Main Branch, 2800 Tremont Road, on Wednesday, February 24, 2010, at 7 P.M. Get more information about the event from the Upper Arlington Public Library website at www.ualibrary.org.