

John Sakkis, *Rude Girl*  
reviewed by Sophie Sills  
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### A Glancing Back

A nearly empty bedroom, with a backpack propped against a mirrored vanity and a television on, dispatching the ghostly image of a woman staring back at you, sets an unearthly scene for entrance to John Sakkis' first full-length book of poems, *Rude Girl*. The reflections projected in this image promote an investigation into distances within us, our grappling to find reality inside the image, that is, some sort of anchoring to reality. Sakkis writes:

there seemed to be woods and water  
the scirmed light  
made tunnel vision in—  
actual (12 p.)

In this passage, he identifies how impressions of the natural world blur upon our attempt to capture them, or make them “actual.” Throughout *Rude Girl*, we find varied forms of these failed challenges to make “actual.” There is a fabric of open weave, a “scrim” and “fatty sheets of rainbow” that divide the world into a semi-permeable duality of planes; one of the past and our idea of the past, one of oneself and of alterity, and one of being and non-being. All of which seem to stand in relation to a fundamental disjunction, or, what George Oppen describes as, “the gap which is the aware of being, tho it is within it.” From, “On The Tarp: On The Scaffold,” whose very title appears to reference Oppen's poem, “The Building of the Skyscraper,” Sakkis suggests this disparity:

points on the globe  
at right angles

eight-armed horsepower  
towards the lake, that is

near the back of the head  
a welding fuel refusing

the flame, a tide that is  
a pseudonym, the tide is

out and stirring without a word (29 p.)

Sakkis juxtaposes “points on the globe” or our endeavors to measure/comprehend our world with “a welding fuel refusing the flame,” that is, element refusing catalyst. The world, by nature, rejects our impetus to calculate it. After all, the right angle is only a quarter of the whole. Our world is ascertained by a fitting together of these fragments; places and situations are puzzle pieces. There is a natural world that we can’t wholly unify by our understanding of it. A few lines down, “A tide that is a pseudonym,” proposes an image of nature as the impenetrable other, as waters that conceal. And not just any waters, but those whose effects are the result of the gravitations forces of the sun, moon and rotation of the earth. Nature’s vigor is inseparable from its mystery. For Sakkis, this alterity is not exotification of the natural world, rather, as in Oppen, it is a call to see it for what it is, not to impose our own meanings upon it.

“To Build a Skyscraper” opens with the lines, “The steel worker on the girder/ Learned not to look down.” Taken in relation to Sakkis’ title “On the Tarp: On the Scaffold” both imply man’s location as precarious, high up among the manmade towers. We can elevate ourselves above nature, especially when we try to interpret nature through the filter of language, but this is a shaky position to be in. In Oppen’s poem he argues, “there are words that mean nothing, but there is something to mean,” and what meaning is, is arrived at by object, not idea. When Sakkis states, “the tide is out/ and stirring without a word,” he notes the separation between nature and language. The waters have pulled back, finally, to reveal nothing that man can interpret in his own language; they are mute to him.

Much of *Rude Girl* makes reference to the “tunnel.” As a theme it works bilaterally, suggesting passage, or a wormhole through the planes, OR as a narrowing of vision. The “tunnel” reminds me of when, in dreams, I am not able to make out clearly the things before me. Does Sakkis mean a failure to apprehend or does he mean an opening in time/space? The following passage suggests both:

in a play/

this  
kind  
trouble  
being  
part  
visiting  
this  
part  
this  
tunnel  
being

*water-ditch is real* ( 51 p.)

It is difficult to contextualize this “tunnel/being,” but I think “this/kind/trouble/being/part/visiting,” proposes the trouble with *being* both as an impermanent stay AND *being* as a partial self. This passage must be read in relation to the rest of the book, in which Sakkis makes reference to Oakland, Fulton St., Port Costa, Highway 4, and the East Bay, thus mapping out a physical terrain, but one that is somehow never arrived at. That is, these locales exist on another plane, one of pasts only grasped at through the narrowing vision of memory. The very form of this passage appears narrow on the page, and without connective tissue. It enacts the meaning of being partial AND transient, as each line is a stepping-stone to the next. Returning to the notion that language is inadequate to depict the actual, this passage demonstrates, in its physical form, that language is inherently separate from being.

This fluency of movement through space and one’s relationship to it winds throughout the book. But, “there is a gap.” The reader is confronted with the disconnection between sensory description and implication/meaning. We are made partially blind, disabled to “the things in front” of us. Sakkis writes:

**the property of current objects**

**turned ration the property of make-onto objects**

1. one begins to see the things in front of him, which through contrary to belief were always in front of him, with clearer frequency and occurrence.
2. like a palimpsest he will appear both visible and implied.
3. this at first will induce a kind of paranoia in which seeing becomes mnemonic.
4. the shade of a car will assuredly put him in it. (32 p.)

This poem suggests that as we perceive, we actually envision, and that this envisioning makes the thing real to us, through what is “visible and implied.” We make both “onto objects,” objects that serve as pilings, and make-onto objects, or ideas of what these objects are. In regard to the latter, the object’s character becomes only a degree of itself as we impose our assembled knowledge of the object upon what it actually is. He reminds the reader that our existence is egotistical in nature; our perceptions are never to be trusted. In this equation the observer is always observing from within her/his own being.

Sakkis seems to assert that the actual can only be known through the senses, can only be perceived and filtered through our “tunnel” vision of memory/distorted

reality. That “seeing becomes mnemonic” means that perception is grounded in a precedence of what we saw before. Therefore the “shade of the car” is never seen, only known through the shorthand of a prior experience of it.

In the vein of the Objectivists, this entire book uses words to mean without word for. There are arresting images of the grotesque, “the meet is sweeter/ after it has been buried/ and infested with maggots” and narratives built like the Winchester Mystery House, “she had remembered/ the presence of bones, her daughter.” But more than anything, Sakkis demonstrates a mastery of listening to the silence that overwhelms. The poems are splintered mirrors, recognizing that the “thin and cold surface/ have their way/ as if a wire/ above the water/ glancing back.” (70 p.)

Sakkis uses language not to “give names to things,” but to tackle the very materiality of language, so that language becomes “the meaning of which is itself.” That is, identifying language as separate from the actual, a diction for diction, rather than a diction for reality. It is this “glancing back” of the actual, and our attempt to reconcile the gap between perception and vision, carried-out through Sakkis startling and beautiful poetry that *Rude Girl* distinguishes itself.