

culture now challenges modern realism and its long reign of patriotic, paternalistic terror.

With these three stories, Peck establishes himself as a leading revelator of contemporary Latter-day Saint life. Especially when bringing his full range of imaginative powers to the task of social criticism, he excels. As for the rest of the volume, which is a whopping 415 pages long, I must say that Peck writes best when he writes long. Many of the shorter pieces are fragments in need of either completion or deletion. From an ecological point of view, a shorter book would have been more tree-friendly. From a literary point of view, it would have been more effective.



Mere Tears and Torrents, Signs and Seals: The Sweet Semantic Everything of *Troubled Love*

Matthew James Babcock. *Four Tales of Troubled Love*. New York: Harvard Square Editions, 2019. 245 pp. Paperback: \$22.95. ISBN: 978-1-941861-62-2.

Reviewed by Jonathon Penny

*Out of the sighs a little comes,
But not of grief, for I have knocked down that
Before the agony; the spirit grows,
Forgets, and cries;
A little comes, is tasted and found good;
All could not disappoint;*

*There must, be praised, some certainty,
If not of loving well, then not,
And that is true after perpetual defeat.*

—Dylan Thomas, “Out of the Sighs”

If Matthew Babcock’s *Four Tales of Troubled Love* is about something, it is about private worlds; the reconciliation of self and other; the reckoning of what two people are with each other, without each other, and with the people that made them and that they make in turn; the luke and warm compromise of to-be-with-you and as-I-am.

Each tale is a deft, revealing, merciless, and tender-hearted portrait of the love it tells: of marriages, of persons within families, of families within families, of the mild terrors natural to devotion, and of the queer and queasy relief that follows such terror; of the awful calms that augur storms, and of the troubles incident and consequent to love. Each is uncanny in its perception, earthy in its presentation, and deeply poetic in its execution.

Some wag—Babcock or his editors—has subtitled each tale on the back cover with Italian musical notations, and they are delightfully apropos.

“Help Phone Thirteen” is “playful with notes of mystery,” featuring a “MegaMart” clown and a network of guardian anglers: fishers of folk bent on brightening troubled lives through the cryptic dispensation of hard-won wisdom. It addresses the banality of infidelity, especially the near-miss. It examines the crisis forced, the hard and hapless anger of love, and the heroic obligations of domestic life. It venerates the going on anyway, the chaos of truth, and the attendant sorrowing unto sorrowing unto forgiveness. It reveals the real magic of domestic living, the miracle born of the need for it, the terrible secrecy of being-married-and-a-self.

“Meer, Tarn, Water, Fell” is “a measured but fiery march” up an English hill amid Dutch curses. It portrays the violence of the broken soul, the confusion of love languages, the bitterness of Babel tongues and hearts. It reminds us that hope is lunar, not solar. It satirizes the

inevitable splitting of hairs, the cross-currents of knowledge and speculation, the semantic everything, and the dark truth that the lover makes all love in his own image. But it also reminds us that there is healing in the hurt, promise in the promises, and that marriage is “hoop heavy” with it all, and all the time.

“Impressions” is “impassioned,” both in the ground of marital love and its collapse. It shows us the severance and the equal, awful link between thought and action, between impulse and impotence, between habit and horror. It lays bare the competing powers of familial connections: parent-sibling-spouse-child. It warns us that whatever we may think, our histories and perceptions are folded over and into each other, like all matter and memory. It mourns the obstinate silence of heaven.

“The Seal” is “heroic (but not too heroic)” and advocates accepting both blessing and punishment. It celebrates the beauty of domestic love and its vocabularies of word and gesture, and the glory that such a thing exists at all, however tentative it may be. It celebrates, too, the nothing done, the never on time, the heroic hanging on until the other gasps above the waves, and then the inevitable sinking of my-turn-to-drown: she in the river, and he in the sea. It wonders at the blowing of gaskets and insists on the fixing of seals, at the sanctification of the domestic and the domestication of the saint.

The love in each is troubled in different ways—by distance, ignorance, pride, mental illness, the vagaries and varieties of personhood, failures of imagination, failures to communicate, errors of perception, or in-laws. In all but “Impressions” we are thrown into the troubles in full toil and bubble to watch as they reach a darkly comic, bitterly Shakespearean fever pitch of veiled opportunities and false assumptions making the usual asses until they are unwound, or the mysteries cease to matter, or the partners surrender to each other’s love.

“Impressions” works in the other direction, winding up rather than down, and here Babcock deprives us of comedy altogether. But everywhere else we’ll smile as often as we frown, and laugh as often as

we cry because these are deeply human stories, as chaotic and absurd and beautiful as our own.

The poetry of *Troubled Love* is saved for “passions”: streaks of wordless grief and articulate fear, largely in the mouth of the narrator and the minds of the characters he rides, or for a deep, image-rich alertness of place and context and objects that absorb or reflect the weight and wildness of the troubles. For example, again in “Impressions,” the narrator describes the life and time that winds around a bottle washed up on a beach, far from the events of the story but whose contents are bound up in them. The passage is “typical,” if anything is, of Babcock’s style, tongue-cheeked but somehow *right*. I’ve structured it here to foreground the nimble, arrhythmic pulse of the thing:

A black-naped tern lands near the bottle and
pecks the glass, *tink-tink*.
The tern flaps away, and
a yellow fiddler crab fails twice to scale the bottle but
after an hour finally clamps a choke-hold on the neck and
like a window washer ogling a bikini ad on a billboard stares at the
note inside.
In the sizzling heat the crab enters a phase of stillness then slips,
dangles by its claw,
drops to the sand,
and sidles away. (149)]

I look at it now and even I wonder why it stood out so: a window-washer simile is hardly high art, and the stubbornness of the crab’s struggle—reminiscent of Woolf or Golding—feels peculiar at best. But there are truths appurtenant and plenty in these few lines, relevant to more than the deep sense of isolation and fragility the whole scene produces.

And by golly they must, those window washers, dangling vulnerable in space from tentative points of anchorage, really *see*, straight on, the proper curve and carriage of the beautiful people writ large above our heads! And who but a wife or husband, suspended in the vulnerable spaces of work and domesticity and desire, belayed or cranked or pulled

or hanging by a finger's edge, would look up from the bliss or boredom of work and see, would *really see* the beauty or the blemish of the person they love, or try to love, or wish to love? And who but a writer would think of that, and of its meaning, and roll it into bottles and crabs and cramps and seizures and then into resigned sidlings away?

The main characters are men, altogether different from each other in temperament, appearance, and background: all desperately "in love" with their wives, all some way in awe of them, but all struggling, as men often do, with the blurring of the lines between self and selflessness, the fine line between the assertion of one's will and the right of another's, the deep negotiation essential to partnership.

Thankfully, Babcock avoids the patriarchal monovision of, say, McEwan or Hardy, where women and children are mere extensions or functions of the men. Babcock is at pains to breathe life into every character. We do, however, encounter the women and children largely *through* the neurosis, desperation, humiliation, fascination, exasperation, affection, and devotion of the men. But this tells us more about the husbands than it does the wives, and that feels very intentional. Even then, the women resist definition: surprising their husbands, fleeing them, loathing them, loving them unexpectedly, and bewraying private lives and longings of their own; as fraught, as desperate, as neurotic and, in every case, as devoted.

All the characters speak in startlingly private vocabularies and personal grammars, in family idioms and marital codes: with knives and forks and liquid tongues. Each situation feels as if it really exists and is familiar (sometimes painfully so); each relationship is rendered with its own realities and rhythms, as if possessed of a built-in history, revealed organically if sparingly, selective and fulsome and clear.

"The Seal" opens with just such an exchange, but because we're not yet oriented, we might be forgiven for thinking that "the woman from New York City" seated on the plane next to "the man from Idaho," watching with aggravation as he fiddles nervously with a kitchen timer

and muttering “Smash that damn thing, or I smash you,” is a stranger to him, however sudden or cruel we might think her in her impatience or nosiness (219). After all, she’s the woman from New York City, the “flight is full,” the narrator offers no indication that the two are linked, and we’ve all watched or looked away from some unknown wriggler or fidgeter or mutterer with whom we’ve been thrown together in the misery of public conveyance.

A page later, however, we discover she is his wife, and then we realize that only a married couple—and only a married couple in crisis—would speak this way: with the familiarity and intimacy of strangers. This makes immediate, ironic, funny, and depressing sense to us, even as it distances us temporarily from the couple. But in all the stories, and most notably in “The Seal,” after throwing us *in medias*, Babcock does us the favor of working backwards, through layers and lines of progression, like an archaeology of how-did-we-get-here?, a baring naked of a deep code, a revelation of scars and warts and nipples and curves and moles and hair and hollow and all the crude and clean accoutrements of lives shared in bodies, hearts, and minds.

These are all written in the rhythms and the grammars of the book itself: seeded and sealed up, earthbound and sacramental, haggard and holy. This is what it is to live alongside someone in the sometime inconvenience of compact or covenant, this beautiful and barren both/and, this determination to love at cost of self, and in hope of its discovery.

So, if *Troubled Love* says anything—if Babcock offers any truth at all—it is this: All love is troubled that is true.

That seems right to me.

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