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Stephen Oliver. *Deadly Pollen*. Middletown, NJ: Word Riot Press, 2003. ISBN 0-9728200-2-7.

Chris Danta

*A night club blows up
In a tropical paradise. In the
Slipstream above the stratosphere,
Fear drifts about the globe
as deadly pollen.*

The movement which takes an historical event – the bombing of the Sari Nightclub in Bali on October 12, 2002 – into the “slipstream above the stratosphere” is also the movement of transtasman poet Stephen Oliver’s admirable 2003 chapbook: *Deadly Pollen*. To be more precise, two movements dominate here. The first sends history into the stratosphere: “Time passes – that pressure in space again” (Poem 7). According to the second movement, the laws of Newtonian physics reassert themselves and there are so many particular things that fall: sand, dust, snow, “star flecks, nova spittle” (Poem 26). Earthly bombing becomes nova explosion. The poem’s perspective expands until it collapses under its own metaphysical weight into an even smaller, even more constricted *topos*: “in an emptied / space within a space caved under” (Poem 2). This is the cosmic claustrophobia characterising the sequence of thirty-one granular poems making up the (w)hole of “Deadly Pollen”.

Two distinct voices accompany the two movements of “Deadly Pollen”. The first is generalising and metaphysical, always marking erasure: “The invisible hides *cause-and-effect*” (Poem 21); “Memory is dead” (Poem 17); “*Better death than surrender*” (Poem 25). The second registers the failure of the ‘explosion’ to erase what is most particular and spies transfiguration amongst the rubble: “Is recollection seeing anew, / old pieces, rearranged seemingly?” (Poem 23). The first voice reasserts itself in the very erasure of dialogue: “An / explosion is no rediscovery, it’s / return without guide to the / deepest sinkhole from whence / hell’s laughter issues” (Poem 29). This is a placeless place. One without a roadmap: not the “blessed rage for order” of Wallace Stevens at Key West but “*Rage of / Emptiness ... Looking back to / what beginning*” (Poem 26).

There is undeniable politics here – a politics of the beginning. The first word of the poem is the caps-locked, “ZIONISM”. Abraham – the first of the Biblical Patriarchs, who “made a sacrificial alter” (Poem 25) for his beloved son – is also mentioned in the twenty-fifth poem of the sequence. There is no doubt that the politics of the bombing can be traced to the Middle East: “The East / is reliquary; bone splinter and shrapnel / mixed in daily” (Poem, 17). But the real politics of Oliver’s poem is to be found elsewhere, in an image that takes account of the poem only as endless enjambment: “*A line is taking a full-stop / for a walk,*’ said Klee. A straight line is / the supreme act of cruelty; is intent without reprieve, ambush / and final judgement” (Poem, 18).

The poem only asserts itself by asserting the impossibility of the straight line – by finding reprieve in the act of interrupting itself.

It is most appropriate, then, that “Deadly Pollen” ends up musing upon the least rectilinear and most disordered of the senses: smell. “Scent makes the air visible” (Poem 31), Oliver writes in the final poem of the sequence. Scent renders the invisible visible without giving in to the rule of the straight line: “bullet-to-victim” (Poem 18). The poem ends: “Scent is a map of an / ancient journey. The poem prints – / makes a seal of every season, / its message delivered and read” (Poem 31).

The same point is made differently in the second and final poem of the chapbook, “An Actual Encounter with the Sun on my Balcony at France Street”. Here, the tone is decidedly lighter, more directly conversational and self-parodic. The devil’s advocate sun advises the “slack-arse poet”: “You’re not a poet for all time but / for your own time” ... “Remember, you’re not / writing bus-timetables and calling it / ‘performance poetry’ like a few I / could name. Stick with the atmospherics, / the true essence of people”. By sticking to the scent of his own time, Oliver sticks to “the atmospherics” and rightly avoids the ‘straight lines’ of bus timetables.

The “atmospherics” of *Deadly Pollen*: remarking the ancient journey of the seasons as this throws every political intention,

every “supreme act of cruelty” and every straight line off the scent.

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