

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Delicious “Raw” Poems: Review of *My Soul is a Broken Down Valise* by Rob Plath

Eileen Murphy · Wednesday, November 18th, 2020

a father beats
 his son
 w/ in
 its walls
 where bones
 are broken
 more than
 bread
 sounds
 fucked up
 but it's
 the price
 we pay
 for the
 birth of
 a true
 fucking
 poet

(“the price”)

When I was little, we'd help my grandpa scoop up buckets of live oysters in their shells from one of Tampa Bay's causeways (they weren't polluted back then—it was the Stone Age). Once home, we'd shuck them, slather them in horseradish sauce, and slurp them down as quickly as we could. The poems in Rob Plath's new collection *My Soul is a Broken Down Valise* (Epic Rites Press 2019) are equally as visceral and delicious. They provide connoisseurs of such delights with an intense reading experience as well as fresh truths from a recognized master of the “raw” poem.

It's hard to think of “raw” poetry without thinking of the original raw poet Charles Bukowski; Plath's style is somewhat reminiscent of Bukowski's work, but Plath adds twists and turns that are also uniquely his own. Plath's speaker describes his own poetry as:

a brutal lantern
 [that] glides

over
the dark waters

(“my poetry”)

It can be refreshing and transformative to read poetry that has just one rule: *Tell it like it is*. Good raw poetry penetrates our shields and challenges our defenses, clichés, and pretenses. Plath’s speaker explains the reason that we need raw poems:

[when] yr literary
vision
is full
of cataracts
you’ll scream for
the edge of
a good raw poem
to slide across
yr corneas
let some goddamn
light in

(“a good raw poem”)

Raw poetry slices our eyes open, similar to the scene in the 1929 Buñuel/Dali classic surrealist silent film *Un Chien Andalou*, where we see a razor about to slit open a woman’s eye, then a view of the moon obscured by a cloud. The speaker (and, presumably, Plath) takes his role as poet very seriously—the good raw poem should be the type of poem that’s so powerful and so real that it can operate to prevent a suicide (“poetry: a definition”).

Where do good raw poems come from? Here’s where Plath’s poetry gets imaginative. Perhaps poems are ejaculated (“uploading poems”) or excreted, “letting the barbs rip thru you / squeezing out blood & shit on the paper” (“barbed poetry”). Maybe they are imbued in the phlegm from the speaker’s lungs that he coughs up into a “spit cup,” about which the speaker says:

poetry...
...is born deep
in the branches of
the wheezing lung-sacks
in the gut, the bowels
& these organs are
not pretty pink things
they are odious
they are slimy
they are oozing

(“my spit cup”)

When the speaker gets a new “poetry machine” (presumably, a typewriter), he hears Bukowski’s voice saying,

if you smash it a shitload
of more poems will come

(“a new poetry machine”)

Do you need to have a troubled childhood in order to become a good raw poet? That’s a good question. Plath credits his past with helping to mold him as a poet (“the price”). He apparently (at least according to his poems) comes from a dysfunctional family. The poems in *My Soul is a Broken Down Valise* generally don’t dwell on this issue. This collection of poems is not a narrative about overcoming abuse or the unsinkable human spirit—although it could have been. What it *is* is a collection of poems of witness, mostly showing what the poet is experiencing right now.



However, the poet does directly focus on his childhood abuse in a handful of poems. For example, he gives us the picture of his father’s explosion of rage when somebody cuts him off in traffic (“the temper”) and of the speaker’s younger self hiding in their dog’s house to escape his family’s drama (“among the pines”). The speaker reveals that, as an angry child, he “wished [his father] were dead” (“batting stones”). He says: “you can be hysterical / without screaming” (“card tables & makeshift ashtrays”). Breathing in the chain-smoking-fueled fumes of his mother and listening to his father’s “daily barrage” of curse words, the speaker explains, “this is how I grew” (“1969”).

Ultimately, in my view, the abuse hovers around all the poems in the book, providing a backdrop or back story. For this poet, the raw poems he writes transform his experiences of adversity, past and present. By writing poems that metaphorically have the keenest, sharpest edges, the poet fashions a weapon for himself, a “beautiful blade” that no mere knife can match (“the blade”).

The poems in *My Soul is a Broken Down Valise* are perhaps too intense for those who prefer to consume their poetry in harmless bytes. On the other hand, maybe we all need at least an occasional dose of raw poetry—for catharsis or cleansing of our poetry palates, not to mention our souls.

Don’t hold back. I advise you to get a copy of *My Soul is a Broken Down Valise* by Rob Plath, take a deep breath, crack open the book, and read a poem. You’re likely to find the poem slides down like a raw oyster. Savor the unique flavors.

Swallow and repeat.



Further information:

You can buy *My Soul is a Broken Down Valise* by Rob Plath on [Amazon](#)

Rob Plath's website is: <https://www.robplath.com/>

Art and photo credits: Rob Plath

This entry was posted on Wednesday, November 18th, 2020 at 2:39 pm and is filed under [Poetry](#)
You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.