

## The Nature of the Mirror: *Life Pig*

Alan Shapiro. *Life Pig*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. \$18, paper.

To those who would find easy, sentimental consolations in a blinkered view of benevolent nature and its divinity-reflecting orderliness, Bertrand Russell had a pithy retort: “There’s a conspiracy of silence about the tapeworm.” Alan Shapiro’s dark and marvelous new collection of poems—the jarringly titled *Life Pig*—constitutes a similar retort to those who accept easy consolations from art. Shapiro’s concurrently released book of essays—*That Self-Forgetful Perfectly Useless Concentration*—describes an “anti-monumentalist aesthetic” that his poems embody, “one that refuses the consolations and rationales we fall back on when we talk about art, culture, or history in relation to the suffering of those on whom that art, that culture, that history feeds.”

“Feeds” is telling. The three numbered sections of the book are bracketed by two poems that color all we read: the introductory “Life Pig” and a coda, “Death Hog.” An unpunctuated, heavily enjambed single sentence, the title poem demands a kind of reading that mirrors the rooting about which we read:

The hams the hocks the oddly delicate  
little busy trotters  
dug in and pushing forward through the already grunted  
through  
wet stink of what’s been rooted up and chewed and  
gobbled down to be shit  
out in clumps and dribbles to be again ploughed  
through like a harrow back  
and forth across the pen for more and still more ...

One of the traditional functions of art is to hold a mirror up to nature—though the nature of the mirror also matters: recall Stephen

Dedalus's "metaphor for Irish art" under English domination: "the cracked looking glass of a servant." In M.H. Abrams formulation, the romantic poets replaced the mirror with a lamp—a representation of the writer's illuminating soul, in the glow of which the reader sees a transformed world. "Life Pig" presents both a mirror and a lamp; neither is consoling:

... at last the head lifts up  
defiant nostrils pulsing wide  
as if to suck in the even bigger pig of sun  
which as it eats is glistening  
inside the darkest beads and beadlets hanging from  
the tip of every bristle on the snout.

The unexpected iambic pentameter of the final line occurs at the precise moment of logical closure. The effect is startling—as if we've been offered something unpalatable on a cloth napkin: the sonic steadiness and resolution coincide with the disturbing recognition that between porcine sun and swinish earth, we cast our own hungry images. The sections that follow will include love poems, moments of lyric beauty, and qualified affirmations, but all will be enacted amid our reflections *on* (and *in*) this opening image.

And this is a book in which dizzying mirrors and troubling reflections will loom large: "colossal towers" in which we find "rippling images of buildings inside buildings," plate glass windows of an arcade in which the speaker and his friends are "looked at by our own reflections," a group of students watching the televised moon landing "in the very specter of our own reflections / looking at ourselves look back across two hundred thousand / miles," an aging couple whose brief reversion to youthful play occurs with the woman's "eyes now in the mirror locked on my eyes locked on her hand," a dressing-table in which a mother's magnified face is "warped as in a fun house where there was no fun."

In place of Emerson's "transparent eyeball," *Life Pig* offers us a "transparent blindfold." Rather than transcendent visions, our view is always colored by our own animal limitations; rather than the mystic, we more closely resemble the clumsy student who stares through a

microscope and inadvertently draws, not the cell on the slide, but his own optic nerve.

If our vision is circumscribed, so are the utterances by which we attempt to convey our visions. The entangled repetition at the start of “Toward Language” both describes and dramatizes our plight:

Invisible *inn* we live *inside*,  
that lives *inside* us, that not one of us  
remembers ever entering, or knows  
most of the time *inside* it that  
we’re even there *inside* ... [emphasis added]

The closing lines present a kind of internal roundel in which form mirrors the self-reflexive confusion being described. As two people face each other inside a “prison house,” separated by a wall of glass, the speaker says,

Tell me, before you go, or I do,  
just what it is you see through this  
transparent blindfold, this dividing  
revealing mistrusted and yearned for  
what next what now what not of  
tell me and I’ll tell you.

*Life Pig* opens with a series of poems that present a roughly chronological portrait of the artist as a young man as he considers (or reconsiders) a series public events and artifacts: the holocaust, the moon landing, a Roman monument, an episode in Plutarch, a poetry recital, an arcade. In “Hebrew Ouija Board,” we move from the disorder of the trough to the even more horrific orderliness of the concentration camp. Under the command of a grade school teacher, a young student confronts bodies “neatly stacked” beside “the dirt absence” of a ditch. “I couldn’t look at them / or look away” says the speaker. “I wanted to be nothing else / except the clothes I wore.” As the teacher moves the planchette of the speaker’s hand over the image to decipher the “secret messages the dead were passing back and forth” about the as yet unformed “other picture” of his own future, one recalls Cormac

McCarthy's description of a boy "made privy to some secret thing to which he was in no way entitled, for which he was in no way prepared."

In "The *Hiawatha* Recitation," the poem proves as unfortifying as the holocaust photograph was overwhelming, the verses the students chant unable to protect them from fears instilled by the horrific "black mouths" of "blown out basement windows" that surround the playground. The decay of Longfellow's trochaic trimeter—from strict to strained to nonexistent—coincides perfectly with the growing recognition of the distance between the poetic ideal and the students' lives:

But as always when the bell rang,  
we filed back into the classroom  
to our row, our desk, our  
primer opened to the same page—  
where we now would read in  
unison about the triumph and the  
honor that for us existed  
nowhere off the page, and even  
on it now was crossed with  
something shameful, something  
unseen we could sense there  
at the bottom of it.

In his essays, Shapiro points out that "discussions of meter and formal strategies of any kind can easily degenerate into sentimental impressionism if one isn't careful to connect form to content, style to subject matter, metrical properties to semantic meaning." A book that rewards (and demands) close and repeated reading, *Life Pig* again and again makes these careful connections. More adroitly than any contemporary poet, Shapiro uses convention "to express an unconventional feeling," effecting "a kind of reciprocal alchemy: a transmutation of private incommunicable feeling into the public conventions of communication; and, conversely, of those public forms into the particulars of subjectively intense experience."

In "Green Thought," for example, he both evokes and reframes Marvel's iconic "The Garden." In place of the earlier poet's Edenic

paradise, Shapiro gives us “a thin strip of woods” beside a deserted park, a run-down playground, a noisy apartment complex, and a “creek that’s not a creek” but “a gully for runoff” in the middle of which the “gnarled exposed roots of a beech tree make / an islet of snakes for nesting condoms, needles, flip flops, and a brown bag full of empties.” Yet Shapiro’s purpose is neither to mock nor dismiss Marvel’s soul-transforming solitude, but to qualify it. If you should happen onto this ratty oasis at just the right time, Shapiro says, “briefly and barely” and “for a moment” only, you can “almost” imagine yourself—not in the trough of a pig—but in Marvel’s garden. In the poem’s final two lines, this qualification is perfectly embodied in the form.

Marvel tells us,

the nectarine and curious *peach*  
into my hands themselves do *reach*.

Shapiro keeps the rhyme, but by displacing it near the start of the penultimate line, he makes us reach even as he describes an ideal that says we shouldn’t have to. You can “almost” see, he says,

the marvel of a willing nectarine  
and *peach* bending the end branches to the hands  
that only have to open, never *reach*.

The anti-monumentalist aesthetic evident here is even more pronounced in “Trajan’s Column.” The poem’s two-line stanzas mirror the helical frieze that snakes up the tower (topped incongruously not by Trajan but St. Peter), recording the emperor’s victories in the two Dacian Wars. What the column awakens in the speaker, however, is not a sense of the heroic conquest; rather the seven-stanza opening sentence records the “tumultuous unreadable sleepwalk through the hacking and / the being hacked, spiraling up and away beyond what we can see.” The speaker takes his place in the ongoing spiral, braiding into Roman history an episode of his own obliviousness in the face of suffering.

Worth noting here is the total absence in Shapiro of what is all too often present in his contemporaries: “self-applauding shows of anguish at the suffering of others.” Shapiro never uses the poems as

advertisements for himself. “The Killing,” for example, shows just how quickly we accommodate ourselves to the horrific. The poem is a single sentence that traverses a 180-degree narrative arc as it describes an animal being killed and eaten. We begin, “No sound more hellish” and conclude, “a hunger growing sweet / as heaven as it dies down.”

“The Look” makes clear that piety and principles can be “brutish” as warfare. Here Shapiro employs a tortured and qualifying syntax reminiscent of Herbert Morris to relate a parallel between his life and an episode in Plutarch.

I saw it without knowing  
I had seen it  
until I saw it again  
years later in Plutarch’s  
*Parallel Lives*, the look  
(I have to think)  
not unassailable  
but not uncertain  
either, and so, my father  
to discipline both his urge to do and not  
do what needed doing ...

The parentheses, the double negatives, the unresolved pronouns, the drawn-out play on “do”—all these suggest a hesitancy in the speaker at odds with the certainty we find in the faces with “the look”: Shapiro’s father beating his brother for some forgotten point of duty and Brutus presiding stoically over the beheading of his sons, Titus and Tiberius, for their part in the Tarquinian Conspiracy to overthrow the republic.

Like piety, innocence offers no escape from the trough. “Low Tide” calls to mind lines from Anthony Hecht’s “Voice at a Séance” on “the sad knowledge / that it was impossible not to hurt anyone / whether by action or inaction.” As the speaker walks casually across the mud flats, his foot falls leave a trail of “subductions and extinctions / on a scale / too small to register.” Thoughtless as “a leper without his bell,” the speaker is “wandering the world, / meaning no harm.” This concluding image alludes to Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*, specifically Alden Pyle, about whom the narrator says: “I never knew a man with

better motives for all the trouble he caused... He was impregnably armored by his good intentions and his ignorance.”

*Life Pig*'s final section chronicles the decline and death of Shapiro's mother—a complement to the more public subjects of the opening poems. “On the Beach” artfully echoes the rooting images in the title poem: “I dug a little hole in the sand,” the speaker says, “my hand the shovel, my fingers the mechanical claws” as he stares uneasily at his sunbathing mother, her skin “wet with beads of light.” In disquieting but unsentimental detail, Shapiro links her gradual inability to speak with the loss of other faculties: “why is it the hand won't / hear her, won't listen, is it / deaf or stubborn...” In the book's single prose poem, “The Last Outing,” the formlessness of the verse makes more poignant his mother's efforts to impose cosmetic order before her son pushes her wheelchair around an empty parking lot where she will meet no one: “eyeliner, rouge, lipstick, pink matching the blanket on your knees, sparse hair brushed, a dab of perfume...” At her death, one feels the encroachment of the trough on her spotless kitchen, irresistible as the second law of thermodynamics—the final lines faintly evoking the snowfall in the final lines of Joyce's “The Dead”:

... her long watch over,  
inside dust column  
after column  
she as dust was falling  
onto all the helpless surfaces  
she wasn't there to clean.

“Death Hog” returns us to where we began, “the maw of breeding mud.” Here, however, the speaker is even more specific, disavowing any “gorgeous hogwash” that would “prettify” the squalor. In his essay “Some Questions Concerning Art and Suffering,” Shapiro insists that the best poems “recognize the insufficiency of art even as they bring art to the highest level.” *Life Pig* does precisely that. The book concludes with its most harrowing lines (“instantly unforgettable” in Martin Amis's phrase). Confronting the pig, we eagerly adopt all kinds of comforting notions, Shapiro says, but that changes nothing: “we sink the same, even / as we swallow. Even then it feeds.”