

Book Review: *Stereopticon*
(David Robert Books, Cincinnati, 2004)
by William Craig for the *Valley News*, April 8, 2005

“Norwich Poet Ponders What is Seen Versus What is Understood”

“The retina,” my old one-volume encyclopedia reminds me, is actually “the embryonic outgrowth of the brain.” Nothing less, in other words, than an outpost of thought, projected into and projected upon by the world.

What’s more, “the image of the world formed on the retina,”—the intelligence it transmits of all reality beyond ourselves—“is an inverted one.” We see everything upside down. “However, the mental image as interpreted by the brain is right side up. How the brain corrects the inverted image to produce normal vision is unknown, but the ability is thought to be acquired early in life, with the aid of other senses.”

In other words, we don’t know how we see straight, but it isn’t built into the equipment. It’s a learning process, something we’re required to master before we even know we’re learning.

“I grew up,” writes Pamela Harrison in the title poem of her collection, *Stereopticon*,

in a house where what was said
 was so different from what was felt
 it made me wall-eyed to string a meaning

between the two. Sometimes my eyes crossed,
 and I groped all day through double vision—
 like one of those tropical fish with eyes

so far apart they guard against two
 discontinuous worlds at once.

Stereopticon is Harrison’s first book-length collection, gathering poems that have appeared in *Poetry*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Calliope*, *Yankee*, *Green Mountains Review*, and other magazines and journals as well as in her Pudding House chapbook, *Greatest Hits 1981-2000*. She was the PEN Northern New England Discovery Poet for 2002.

A long-time Norwich resident, Harrison writes about a world as wide as the prairie-state sky of her childhood, as broad as a triangle touching on affluent Vermont, Idi Amin’s Uganda, and a Honduran village “so dismantled by United Fruit/ it has...nothing/ gratuitously pretty except a flower/ scratched in the whitewash of a mountain house.”

She is worldly-wise enough to convey the impressions of a wealthy “gringa” in the Third World without making us wince. “El Rosario” and other poems engage politics, poverty and atrocity with images as well chosen as that scratched flower or, in “At

Home in Our Ignorance As in a Canopy of Trees," the feeding of the dogs that guard their Kampala compound:

The dogs mistake us every meal.
Open the door, they tear for our throats.
We heave the meat like hand grenades.

But *Stereopticon* is less concerned with travel than with sightseeing in the most literal sense, with consonances and dissonances between what is seen and how it is understood. In "The Rules of Sight" a woman is fooled, by the care her new neighbor takes in planting handsome trees, into thinking him a possible soul mate. As she reads her daughter a bedtime story, she can't stop herself from imagining the possibility that he is likewise watching her:

She pictured the golden fleck of their window's shining light

flying through the dark, entering the spherical gates of his iris
into the waiting pupil—eager student of the world—refracting
through the lens, cartwheeling as it flew, and coming at last to rest
within him, a sudden sentience in the nerve: rays of sight accomplishing
across the wintry distance as kind of knowing, what seeing truly might do.

Yet it turns out she's been seeing anything but truly. His plans for the land obviate her idyll, and she comes to see

...how obscenely passive watchers are,
so shocked and stupid in the crux of real events, they retreat
to dreams and elegies, too slow to save a world so close to lost.

How those who act must sneer at those who watch!
Some kinds of knowing change all the rules of sight.

Insight, eloquent and often bitter, is a commonplace in this collection, but so is beauty though even that is often of a dangerous species. Harrison offers several sharp definitions of the poetic process' problematic raptures, including Poetry's image of a snake accidentally embraced in an armful of leaves:

Hugging it to your chest, you felt
the coiling muscle long enough
to gather what you held. Your body spoke then
of its own accord. You know it's real

when your heart throngs in your throat.

With its wealth of visions linking delight and disturbance, *Stereopticon* insists on a point of view that is both satisfying and unsettling, like needful change or passionate love. Like the trick our eyes must learn to use its eponymous device, Harrison's poems can change the way we see. They talk about perceiving opportunities for joy, but also about making adjustments for the sake of mere survival.

“The shape of the lens,” my encyclopedia notes, changes to make possible both big-picture and picayune perceptions. “This ability to focus objects at varying distances,” the book says, “is known as accommodation.” *Stereopticon* makes accommodation into art.