

**Defeated by the Love for Language:  
A Review of Melissa Range's *Horse and Rider***

It requires tact and an impeccable integration to begin a book of modern poetry with an epigraph from the book of Exodus. Yet, Melissa Range succeeds with her passage from chapter 3, verse 15: "Sing unto the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has cast into the sea." Range's "horse and rider" are an amalgam of violence; they are "the union of force and intellect" (The Trebuchet). As a poet, Range addresses the problem of war and destruction that has always visited the world. In language drawn from David's psalms of thanksgiving, she proclaims a *Novus Ordo Saeculorum*, a new age in which victory becomes defeat and defeat victory. Melissa Range is the prophet of a love that "begins in defeats" (The Taming of Bucephalus).

In this first book, Range has given birth to a work of timeless proportions. With relish she embraces the Anglo-Saxon heritage of our language and tethers it to modern conventions of speech. *Horse and Rider* bears its readers back into the scene of moving mythological and biblical rhetoric while simultaneously allowing them to retain their rootedness in the present. After she timelessly transports modernity to the tent of Sisera to observe his untimely death, Melissa Range stuffs a hand-grenade full of Persephone's "bitter seeds," "bits of fear, [and] bits of rage" (The Hand-Grenade). Range "teach[es] land-bound things to fly, / [and] turn[s] mountains into missiles" (The Trebuchet). Melissa Range emphasizes the role of poetry as the launching of the language of common prose. In the same breath that she hurls her "mountain[ous] missiles" towards her reader, she calmly advises them to:

Sing of defeat, for without defeat, how could we sing?

Sing of swords, shields, chariots, sifting  
down beneath the tangling reeds.

Sing of the clear dry heavens, the mottled sea—  
cedar, sable, silver, sunset, snow.

Sing unto the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously;  
He has slaughtered whom he has slaughtered;

He has shown himself worthy of all our noise:  
He has rid the earth of a few more horses, a few more boys.

-Horse and Rider

She both initiates an invasion and draws up the defense for it. Range reaches into the past; she has the hindsight to address an age-old problem with an equally ancient answer. In an interview with Kim Urquhart, she recognizes the need for the world to reify the role of religion in the casting of horse and rider into the sea: "I am not writing from a place of religious faith, though I used to.... A teacher once told me that we write about our obsession, and I seem to have

a religious obsession.” Melissa Range binds and ties her “religious obsession” into her book.

*Horse and Rider* can be likened to a whip or lariat, braided of three strands, each of which is composed of a gathering of threads. It is the reins, held in the hands of the rider – a rider and a poet who has come on her horse with a message “to sear the unsuspecting world that lay in shadow” (The Taming of Bucephalus). The epigraph of *Horse and Rider* begins the book with a fitting tone of directive. Throughout her book, Melissa Range magnificently melds her own poetic voice to the voices of her subjects; she speaks to her reader through them. Commenting on her art in a Hopkins-like poem about a common dragonfly, Range “pair[s] nouns / and adjectives / to one fierce verb” and with her “aqua-stylus,” “threads” words “—those frail jades / and blues” “into a gauze” (Green Darner). She “seed[s] stained pages back to life” (September Trees) and writes with her wooden pencil, having the crucifixion in mind, “Long live the cog, the clog, the rod, the twig. / There are other wars besides the wars of men. / Wood has bested iron, as it shall again” (The Tent Peg). Range ropes her readers in and snaps them into cognizance with her whip. Her poems directly address the quandaries of death, suffering, and violence that are contemporary concerns in a world ridden with terrorism. Melissa Range imposes herself upon her audience, as she “dart[s] toward the undefended space,” with such “indeflectible purpose” that it is right for us to ask: “Have [we] ever seen such a swarming fist, / a smiting wit?” (Self-Portrait as the Labors of Samson).

The book is roped off and arranged into three significant sections: Horse and Rider, The War Horse, and The Taming of Bucephalus. Throughout each one, Range plucks skeins of tradition, both biblical and mythological, and tethers them together, with marvelous ease. Range leaves it up to her readers to unravel the meaning found in each of her poems. *Horse and Rider* begins with a collection of poems, corralled in a section called “Horse and Rider.” Here Melissa Range presents murky meditations on “blood shed,” “the polestar of grief,” “murderous love,” and a “scarred” heritage. Range begins rhetorically with her poetic presentation of the problem. In her poems, Range finds favor with all those who have undergone pain, suffering, and injustice. Range’s opening section builds a firm foundation of empathy from which the rest of the book can rise.

Range’s second section is in the style of the Exeter Book of Riddles. In it she presents weaponry, devilry, destruction, and death; she gathers the various violent seeds of arrows, bows, landmines, shields, and ropes, and husks them all under the ruddy skin of a pomegranate:

Eat of me, Persephone—  
I’m a pomegranate with a brigade  
of bitter seeds beneath my husk;  
give a tug, and they’ll cascade.  
  
You’re like me, a ball of shrapnel

set to detonate at just a touch, made  
of bits of fear, bits of rage; your filler's  
part escape, part escapade.

-The Hand Grenade

With her "fly-by...nick[ing]" and "etch[ing]" diction, Melissa Range "deal[s] death as death should be: / commonplace, quick, and economical" (The Battle-Axe). Violence presents itself coldly from the voice of the weapons themselves, giving the reader an insight into their true identity. They are cold, blunt, and inhuman. Although, her use of the traditional riddle poem allows Range to anthropomorphize her weapons, the language she uses never allows her reader to forget that weapons are not humans, and humans not weapons. Range reveals the lie that lets "The Trebuchet" proclaim itself "a product of harmless machines / in harmony." From the horse and rider that have been "cast into the sea," Range resurrects a new order of horse and rider.

The part of her book that Melissa Range named as "The Taming of Bucephalus" presents the reunion of horse and rider in harmony, using the relationship of Alexander the Great and Bucephalus as a paradigm:

Your blaze burning, you saw the shadow  
of a phalanx in Alexander's face;  
you saw grazing plateaus strewn with horses;  
speared with desire to spur your boy  
through all his wars, you cared not what became of you  
Love begins in such defeats. The sun  
made of you two a conflagration, another sun  
to sear the unsuspecting world that lay in shadow...

According to Range's rationale, the horse and rider had to be defeated. Even her presentation of "Christ Imagined as a Cavalry Commander" revels in the rhetoric of defeat: "Chevalier... You've lost, once and for all. That pleases you." Defeat runs rampant throughout *Horse and Rider*. If Range had ended her book without braiding a third strand into her rope, she could be classified among the innumerable artistic cynics of the world, who harp on as many horrors as their poetic sight can encompass. However, Melissa Range is an empathetic poet; she deals with the subject of victory only against the reality of defeat. Love and joy are painted against the frame of death and sorrow. Conversion and prayer only rise from the "dark and bloody ground" where they were "buried / unmarked like arrowhead[s]" (Dragging Canoe). From her heritage and the tribes that first peopled the "black sky gash[ed] black hills" of Tennessee (High Lonesome), Melissa Range "learned to win [the] losing battle"; the "blood of Chickamaugas" planted and "fertilized" the seeds of patience, suffering, and humility within her (Dragging Canoe). The theme of defeat and humility traces its beginnings back to Range's first influences.

Beginning a collection of poetry with a poem entitled "The Canary," which commences with "This miner's minion, / this drab rendition of light / yellow,

feathers fades, slated / saffron,” is a sure sign of homage to Hopkins. Range’s influences are notable and numerous. They begin “at home” in her own backyard of the Tennessee coal mines and stretch backwards in time making stops along the way in various Greek myths and finally rooting themselves in the histories of the Bible. As her poem “High Lonesome” conveys, the concept of home holds an honored roll in her poetry:

Tennessee November: nothing slumbers:  
in the barn, bluebottles’ ice-whittled shells  
hue the tops of feed and water buckets,  
inlay corn shucks and tobacco flakes  
instead of the lashes of Appaloosa or Paint.  
Everything which could be salvaged  
has gone to rot—a dead woman’s house,  
her dead husband’s barn. I live  
among the ghosts of horses I gave names...

Escape from the present is not a priority for Melissa Range; rather, as she said in her interview with Kim Urquhart, “What I’m really interested in is how to capture what is ineffable, elusive and sacred in the world.” For Melissa, this means the bringing of the past into the present. She speaks with the same surety whether writing about the fame of Martin Luther King Jr., that “Brother who blew the covers from the Bibles” (Those Who Wait), or “Achilles the grand,” whose “labors” embody the “love which has no rest, no home, no gain” (Achilles Walks the Beaches). Unabashedly, she attributes inspiration to both the novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky and to the indie-pop artist Sufjan Stevens. Melissa Range twines her influences together in her poems’ subject matter, structure, and persuasive sentiment.

Oddly enough, *Horse and Rider* begins and ends with images of birds. Range’s opening poem presents cavernous, coalmine-dwelling canaries:

Little  
birds, broods bred for dank  
And death, for lost myths—the maze  
hot in the throat, the notes a pyre—  
what beast of sacrifice  
cannot guess its saving fire?  
-The Canary

This poor creature, yoked to live a life of inevitable death, is forced by the spirit of the horse and rider, the spirit of violence and utility, to remain forever flightless. Range’s concluding poem, “Prayers to the Birds,” creates a stark contrast:

Forgive us as priests  
in slums and picket lines forgive the church:  
in vigilance, mining the breach—

that sky—for something that will not be owned.  
Cardinal, finch—forgive us our lone  
hiding behind bushes, spying you out  
when we should be flying at your side, not  
from pride but from humility: that soaring  
force that finds its power in adoring.

These two poems act as an avian aria, a duet bookending *Horse and Rider* as Melissa Range's *ars poetica*; language allows her to soar and lends her flight. The sight that she—airborne—sees enlightens her and after alighting on a perch of “October Trees,” she announces to us:

I must quit my day job. I have found another calling:  
to expose the lie of the foreign tongue, the notion  
of human understanding—that I should not listen  
to bark or bray or cool flutter, that I should not dog-ear  
the un-paged dictionaries waving in every trunk,  
that I should not learn a dirge for the *each* of you,  
rather than the all, for in the all is nothing  
either of us can keep. Sawfallen, Splitlightning,  
Allorange, Ovenflame, Slightring, Coldpenny,  
Leatherlantern—how will I have time to sleep?

*Horse and Rider* preaches a love of language – a love that begins in submission to it. Language must not be broken by violence, must not be crushed by utilizing strength. We must not harness it as we would the warhorse or the workhorse. As in Yeats' poem, “The Fascination of what's Difficult,” our yoke must not be the cause of Pegasus' “Shiver[ing] under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt / As though [he] dragged road-metal.” Rather, we must ride language as Alexander the Great rode his beloved steed, Bucephalus. We must ride it as the birds overhead ride the air. Only then will we find flight.