Foreword Review

Complex Sleep

Tony Tost
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As the choreographer of *Complex Sleep*'s verbal acrobatics, Tost's senses are tuned to the frequency where words and their meanings collide, break apart, and come back together again. This collection revolves around the way the brain processes the world.

Tost's first book, *Invisible Bride*, was selected for the 2003 Walt Whitman Award. The eight poems in his follow-up are sophisticated and often punny creations. Without traditional narrative, the poems are complicated spirals of meaning; they test and retest the possible permutations and re-imagine how words are paired and processed. These poems challenge the debatable and often fluid boundaries of poetry.

The first poem of the collection, "Imaginary Synonyms," speaks both to poetic boundaries and the reader's assumptions of meaning. While many believe a synonym to consist of two words with similar meanings, Tost challenges this by breaking apart words and pairings; as a result, meaning is transformed. Two words may be linked, but they are different. In this poem, the eye is as important as the ear: Tost pairs "palate" with "plate." The resulting wordplay that pops up throughout the collection is both hilarious and thought-provoking.

The title poem speaks to how meaning is dissected and rebuilt. Having formal constraints, Tost introduces the poem as "an index of alphabetically arranged sentences and significant syntactical units." It is here that Tost reinterprets established meaning by rearranging, rewording, and adding to syntactical structures. For instance, Tost uses "scaffolding," from sources as diverse as the Beatles, Gertrude Stein, and Leonard Cohen. Meaning exists even when taken or influenced by a source outside of the mind. This is exactly the point: meaning and ownership are not as exclusive as the reader might think.

Complex Sleep is a collection that plays with language as much as it challenges perception. Just as meaning and reality shift in sleep, meaning and reality shift in these poems. Tost writes in the title poem that "a fact has its own topology / (the joy of not knowing)." If the reader peers into each poem, they may discover joy in not knowing. If readers allow themselves to experience the poem for what it is rather than what they want it to be, they will see, as Tost writes in the title poem, how "the predetermined areas / expand into something beyond a beyond."

(August 18, 2009)