

Oubliette

Peter Richards

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Emotional poverty and a yearning for freedom are the leitmotifs in *Oubliette*. The poems delve into the darkness of actual and imagined fears, of loss and isolation, and they propose the possibility of redemption.

The title poem of the volume considers the image of an oubliette (a dungeon with only an opening at the top) as a locus of anxiety and shame: "He can hear shade taking shape from a hole, / not procedures of shade strung to the hole." The repeated image of a hole and a journey through darkness echoes Dante's *Inferno*, yet Richards, unlike Dante, does not ask the reader to abandon hope.

Rather, Richards's poems teeter between anxiety and expectation; they examine a particular post-modern existentialist dilemma: how to find meaning, using images and words, in what could be a meaningless world. "Begin speaking with no voice at all. / Stand there, silent and secretly gestured / affect an armless voice in search for itself." Despite attempts at talking, speech in these poems often becomes "The refugee / whispers of two people who shouldn't."

In language and images that evoke the works of Pirandello, Eliot, Stevens, Ashbery, Bronk, and Baudelaire, the poems in *Oubliette* challenge the reader to interpret each moment and each utterance as iconographic. While dense and emotionally complex, the poems ask the reader to take nothing for granted, to consider that "A single day / disremembered for days / passes over / with the look of any other."

Therefore, according to Richards's tortured logic, in order to find meaning in words and in life, one should awake to the numinous quality of each moment: "I beg for the day I rise in the morning / Mine is a poor light / and glad to be // continuing."

DUNCAN SPRATTMORAN (July / August 2001)

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