

Stroke

Sidney Wade

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Sidney Wade could easily be speaking of herself when she writes about a turtle that “precisely / balances her load / of hungry bone on / four dactylic feet.” These lines end the poem “Tortoise” from Wade’s latest book, *Stroke*, a collection that balances weighty topics (such as the denial of rights or the death of a friend) atop seemingly insubstantial forms. The most obvious example of this technique is her series of monosonnets employing fourteen one-word lines. The success of this uneven pairing—delicate forms with not-so-delicate subjects—lies in Wade’s light touch, inherited perhaps from Marianne Moore who had her own penchant for animal poems.

Also like Moore, Wade prefers the communal to the confessional and employs the “we” much more often than the “I.” The final poem of *Stroke* suggests, “We travelers will end up back / where we began, and may our gods provide // us all with equal grace.” Even “Long Bright Hall” about a friend’s death begins with that familiar “we” and describes the group of mourners rather than the poet specifically. This is not to say that these poems are devoid of the personal, but rather when Wade is self-aware, it is deliberate; she is crafting a portrait—stroke by stroke.

Her self-awareness is often linked to her craft and other poems reference poetry or language directly. In “Lost Words” Wade considers language that has lost its meaning because of misuse—some words killed off include “truth” and “charity.” The duo “freedom” and “liberation” stage a double suicide because they have been so abused by those in charge. Can anything be done to reclaim language from the authorities? In “Nothing But the Truth,” Wade paints herself as a rebel ready to fight for just that cause: “I’ve got a word-strung gun here, // and it’s double-barreled, / so at least I’m technically focused.” While this is a far cry from her earlier alliance with the pacifist turtle, both self-portraits are accurate for such an accomplished artist.

Wade is the author of four previous collections of poetry including *Celestial Bodies*, *Empty Sleeves*, *Green*, and *Istanbul’dan/From Istanbul*, which was published in Turkish and English. She is also the recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship and the Stanley P. Young Fellowship to the Breadloaf Writers’ Conference. With such a résumé, she can afford to let her poems take center stage, to strut like Moore’s colossal prize bird, while the hand that toiled at them rests in the wings.

ERICA WRIGHT (February 14, 2008)

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