

Visible Ink

George Starbuck

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The author originated a form he called SLABS, Standard Length and Breadth sonnets, poems with fourteen lines, each line constructed of fourteen characters. It is a form democratic in the ease with which readers might understand its construction, and difficult in actual execution, particularly with Starbuck's characteristic ear for rhythm and sound. Readers may find themselves soothed into the rhythm of "O Tennenbaum" as they read through a poem objecting to the violence at Hadrian's Wall circa 1988. This combination of rhythmic play, current events, and pop culture combine to form a volume that is still distinctly Starbuck's, formalist yet progressive, a combination for a man who represents both classical literature and progressive politics.

Starbuck served as the Director of Creative Writing at Boston University and the University of Iowa. He received the Yale Younger Poets Prize, a Guggenheim fellowship, and the Nation's Lenore Marshall prize, among others. Posthumously published, *Visible Ink* collects poems written in the early eighties through the early nineties, ordered, organized, and edited by Elizabeth Meese and Starbuck's widow, Kathryn.

Poem after poem illustrate Starbuck's mastery of rhythm, creating a strange bon vivant feel, though the poems themselves are often overtly political, critiquing social ills from gun control to media representation. In "Practical Shooter Comes to Downers Grove," his would-be gun-toting persona laments: "I was a sitting target / Disarmed by liberals. / Ransacked my bedside table / And all I found was pills. // You see the situation? / You see the price of it? / A thousand drowsing suburbs / Just waitin' to be hit."

Always rhythmic, often cutting, Starbuck moves with equal ease between the political and the literary, teasing John Keats and his little Grecian Urn, scoffing at Robert Frost's benevolent, grandfather farmer image. In these poems, there is a strange collision of politics, history, literature, and very often humor. Ultimately, readers interested in a truly innovative formalist and social activist will be lulled by the rhythm and stunned by the breadth of social concern.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (May / June 2002)

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