

SUSAN SCARLATA

## Of Windmills, Llamas, and Crossing into Them Both: On Andrea Rexilius's *Half of What They Carried Flew Away*

*Half of What They Carried Flew Away*, by Andrea Rexilius. Denver, Colorado: Letter Machine Editions, 2012.

In full disclosure, Andrea Rexilius and I have been sledding together, we've held bird specimens on sticks, we've walked hills with dustings of snow, taken sleighs to see elk, and tried to swim in shallow water. Andrea and I have also written together collaboratively, and I've met her mannequin. I have recently returned from two years in Asia, and Andrea's *Half of What They Carried Flew Away* has been a constant companion in this transition.

The term "moving" does not quite cover it for the massive shifts that take place when you are leaving one country for another, one situation for another, combining lives, or peeling one life apart from another. In these states of transitional motion, we often try to carry everything we possibly can. Having made nine large moves in the past decade, I have regularly had anxiety dreams about packing everything but still ending up forgetting that one last, most important object my subconscious is sure I cannot live without. Inevitably though, much of what we bring from one life into the next falls away, has to fall away really, in order for any settling into new environs to take place. Andrea Rexilius's *Half of What They Carried Flew Away*, is about what flies away, what stays with us, what stays with "them" and much, much more. This careful book of poems whirls around incantations, crossings, and emanations all the while directing quiet attention, through questions and formulations, to the fleeting nature of this thing called living.

I love what this book does with windmills. In particularly fresh lines early in the collection, Rexilius writes, "I would dream about them and see them as films across the surface of my eyes. Oh, they would be so interested in themselves too, like windmills." The "them" here is the

group making crossings and emanating throughout the text. Throughout the book there is an even back and forth between accounts of this "they" and the subject's relationship to them—a voyeuristic watching, and sometimes participation in what the "they" is up to. This simile ("so interested in themselves too, like windmills") of thing matched to thought is a perfect concept in that "oh," when it comes down to it, we *are* all wholly interested in ourselves, aren't we? The visual of the windmill in perpetual motion conjures the myriad ways we, as humans, turn in on ourselves. These poems add up to be embodiments of windmills, in them bodies speak *to* not just *of* them, and in certain moments the speaker uses the windmill as support system.

Considering support and recovery, the word "salvage" is key to this text, maintaining itself there at the core of *Half of What They Carried Flew Away*. What can be salvaged? Recovered? What can be reclaimed, retrieved, rescued when half has flown away? Rexilius asks numerous questions throughout this text, but none so blatant as these. Instead, she deftly makes the salvaged existences she recounts echo through related ideas. Early on: "It was impossible for them to choose whether or not to be savage." And then too, the writing references itself in related, pleasing ways with "Metaphor does not recognize its own savagery." The salvaged savage does not know "What it is it is like," or even, "What [it might] want most."

"What they wanted most," repeats as the first line of the book and a phrase that starts another poem in the sequence. They most want "to see things they had never seen before," and then "to be persuaded, to be moved." Rexilius could be describing every tourist journey from the grand tour forward in wanting to see the "unseen," and to experience things that no one back home (wherever that might be) has ever seen. Then the want "to be persuaded," and the equality posited between persuasion and "being moved" simultaneously brings up religiosity and the want to be relieved of one's own life. Rexilius captures it, this palpable human desire many have to take a step, a day, or an hour out of their lives. These phrases early on in the text coupled with the first line of the last poem "I do not know what it is I am like," act as perimeter metering out deep desires, understandings of identity, and how the desires of the group play into those of the individual. Can anyone hold to or know intently what "it is they are like." That is, without being persuaded or moved?

Rexilius's phrasing takes place in a literal interpretation of that term. As in "our rituals dance," where the noun takes action without need of a human subject to lead it through the sentence. The thing taking place is activated. This separation and "our" here being made

up of onlookers connects readers to all that is happening as it happens in *Half of What They Carried Flew Away*. Rexilius's word choice is actualized; her repetition is reappearance.

In this, Rexilius relates to forbearer female writers, referencing Emily Dickinson—"in anticipation of her body, *It is a mixture of three things: the light, the medium through which the light is seen, the place from which the light happens to be reflected*"—which makes this a bodily sequence of poems. Whether bodies are being seen or ignored, their presence is felt throughout. Rexilius writes, "it is unfair to say the word 'body' again. That's fine. It's easy enough to ignore." As with lists of questions in this book that begin various sections, this statement negates what it says as it says it. The physical forms are embodied as they move across and through landscapes. As, in that same poem, when an evocation of Sappho enters the text with "I could not see to touch what was below. / I could not think to touch the sky with both my arms." The subject, its body, and its relationship to space and place exist in this text, throughout time. Bodies can exist, can pass through and can be refracted back. The bodies populating this text are never abstract, are entirely present, however unaware minds try to be of the bodies-they-rest-within.

Abstract things are discussed in these pages, too. They are "in the images" with further reference to writing, which directs us back into the poems as things. "Seeing expansion and risk decrease in the images" allows us to see that we are seeing and to conjure what those things look like as they are reduced. Similarly, "A ceaseless stratus shape" is the lack of horizon one experiences in a valley. It is ceaseless and it is a shape despite its lack of sharp edges. And the sheet-like cloud presents one version of things falling away, the dissipation into other things. Half of what we carry always drops away, right? We're always dispersing and gathering to disperse once again. The poems in this book show this, the coming together only to part. One moment of gathering occurs in the following poem:

I shouted at them and as the llamas came down the hill, I went  
up toward them.  
I had no desire to leave that hill.  
I could wound eighteen men before I could be touched.  
I asked them to take me across the river.  
I stood scanning the landscape with a telescope.  
I was so far from the border.  
I might as well fire my gun.

I enjoy re-reading the entire text considering all of the "theys" in the poems as llamas. "[Llamas] are categories in the retina," "[Llamas] were living spaces," "[Llamas] were swimming all over it." It works, and it works even better if, as intended, this "they" is read as llamas and as everything else too. The "I" in this poem, as throughout, is scanning the landscape, asking to cross, considering the distance from the border, and what might as well happen.

This is the very opposite of "things flying away." This is the difference between things that fall away, or drop out of one's life, versus the "flying away" in Rexilius's spell-like sequence. To think of things you carry flying away, having the agency to do it, is exalting. If, in your crossing and moving through borders, things that you carry go off and start other laudable things, that warrants praise and acclaim. Rexilius's diction, language, sequencing, and poems in *Half of What They Carried Flew Away* do just that.