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BOOK REVIEW

Sanjeev Sethi. *Legato Without a Lisp*. Classix, 2024. ISBN: 978-81-19858-96-5, pp. 122,
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“Let me sing/despite a sore throat”: Sanjeev Sethi’s *Legato Without a Lisp*

Pradip Mondal
Assistant Professor of English
L. B. S. Govt. P. G. College
Kumaun University
Nainital, Uttarakhand

The Distinguished poet Sanjeev Sethi celebrates three scores of his life with *Legato Without a Lisp* (2024), which contains 102 meticulously tailored, breviloquent, and programmatic poems. The first poem in this collection, *Ceremony*, celebrates the process of writing a poem. Here, the poet-persona thinks that unfinishedness is a requisite to write on as it truly defines his *being*. Another notable thing is the cadence of the poems, which makes the reader lilt. As a reader goes through each of the poems in this collection, s/he will surely get awestruck at the neat structure and economy of words. It’s nothing new in Sethi’s poetry as it’s his *style extraordinaire*.

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Recollection is an important motif in Sethi's poetry. In *Rifeness*, the persona recollects something and keeps faith in flashbacks. With beautiful imagery, the speaker expresses that recollection gets marred as flashbacks copulate or collide with reality. In the second stanza, we also find a befitting metaphor of irrigation. He is not prejudiced against social media platforms because he finds slices of his being analyzed there: "Social platforms are fine with me./In Meatspace, we meet slices, too". In another poem, the persona believes that an emotional roller-coaster down memory lane can become vocal in lyrical stanzas. In *Quinary*, too, the speaker harps on the past: "As the perfume of the past/blends with most aromas". Regarding the import of recollection, I am reminded of Kierkegaard's assertion, "Recollection has the great advantage that it begins with the loss; the reason it is safe and secure is that it has nothing to lose."

In *Directive*, the persona, in self-introspection, waits for precise words and engaging themes. In the sneezing of the tree, he finds his material for a poem and takes it as a gift from God. While digging for materials from the mine of the past, he utters the Latin maxim "*e pluribus unum*" (out of the many, one). This is somewhat similar to the Wordsworthian expression "spots of time" (evoked in *The Prelude*), which selects the most important moments. In *Entreaties*, the persona beseeches the addressee to leave him alone because only he can sing his song in solitude. The persona also opines the necessity of recollection to form a unified self: "Seeking unity with oneself is the Parthian shot (*Reflections*).

Cupidity in any form is inherent in mankind. In a poem with a marvelous musical metaphor, the speaker expresses his greed for a dialect of a bygone era:

Amendatory moves whistle their way
through the lanes of lust as we pick
up a dialect from the gramophone of
another generation. (*Structure*)

He is greedy for ideas that enlarge the mindscape of the poet: "The trees in my backyard/share their stories with me./They tell me things I wish/to fix my database with" (*Earnings*). In *Inditer*, the speaker shares his realization with the reader that he often gets misled by the cosmic *en route* to his poetic composition. To find a solution, we must embrace small things that come to



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his rescue as the poet is in the throes of delivering. He waits for perspective and providence to key: “If fortune lends us its font, a phrase or two may flow.” In his essay “The Figure a Poem Makes” (1939), Robert Frost teasingly argues the logic of a good poem is “backward, in retrospect.” Frost concludes his essay with a vivid image of the poem making its figure in composition: “Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting.”

The metaphor of childbirth is used in a few of Sethi’s poems. We find a scintillating metaphor of childbirth in *Parturition*. The speaker realizes we should strike off depression and distress from our register. Otherwise, if a sperm of distress happens to inseminate an egg of dejections, the child would be biologically deformed:

Or when sparks of distress
fecundate gamete of dejections,
how is the child of good cheer delivered? (*Parturition*)

The metaphor of childbirth is also used in another poem where he thinks that moderation can’t propel his boat of creativity. He is impatient to give birth to his brainchild: “Childbearing sans/the other sex/is itching to be unveiled” (*Effectuation*). In *Outlay*, the persona’s poetic pursuits are of more value than any pecuniary pursuits. He believes that when a self finds other avenues to taste the slices of materiality, poetry remains no longer a “vocation.”

Some of Sethi’s poems touch on the theme of the frontier. The poet asserts that there cannot be any borderline for a poet as his ideas can’t be circumscribed. In *Synchromesh*, by using a brilliant metaphor of a visa, the speaker proudly declares that he is already an expatriate even without applying for a visa as his ideas migrate and no one can stop his entry to another’s mental realm. In *Fluidities*, the persona also talks about the fluidity of boundaries in poetry.

In some of his poems, the poet addresses anger, irritation, restlessness, and impatience. In *Restraint*, the persona dwells on the need to bridle anger, as showing anger has strong repercussions on both. Placidity depends on the recipients of ire. But in most cases, a volcano of counter-anger erupts, causing remorse for them. It has some similarity in theme to Blake’s “A Poison Tree.” We find another poem in which the speaker asks us to dispel sorrow from our frame of mind: “Likewise, sorrow engulfs us/to its entails as we obliterate/the perky from our pivot” (*Sway*). In *Anecdote*, the speaker expresses his anger through the magnificent metaphor of



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pistol: “But as my anger-pistol/births sweat bullets...” and ultimately, a poem is born. In *Helotry*, the speaker observes that restlessness and impatience will not lead us to our desired destination. However, in another poem, the speaker believes that pent-up pique can get transformed into fine arts or poetry:

By and by, umbrage condenses
into an anecdote and for some
in a painting, sculpture, or song (*Squeegee*).

The poet shows his rebellious attitude towards formal poetry: “I am the spumescent run/that wrecks formal wear” (*Preponderance*). With a beautiful image, the persona says even a little flaw warrants editing: “A squint in the mirror/informs of last-minute maneuvers.” Similarly, the poet-persona asserts in *Palette* that uniqueness is necessary, but it masks our soulful music in the age of mediocrity. He declares that there are two options to come to terms with societal rules: confront and conform. In another poem, the speaker ruefully states that no one is bothered about newness; everybody feels secure within the familiar pattern. Elsewhere, he bats for syntonic gear to express his ideas; otherwise, it would be an illusion: “It’s kosher for one in syntonic gear or awaiting a Barmecide/feast” (*Obelus*). In *Salmagundi*, too, the speaker thinks that the “against-the-grain” stance seems quirky at first sight, but it can be ahead of time. The title of this poem is captivating: salmagundi is a dish of salad, mixing disparate ingredients. Also, the poetry is a potpourri, as the poet culls different emotions and expressions.

In *Advent*, during the state of barrenness in the brain, the speaker gets delighted when some alphabets of expression sit on his mind’s *carte blanche*: “Just then, a pigeon-like rune flies in,/tracing a crib/in my page-like porch.” Sometimes, the refrain of some rune lights up many messy corners of the persona’s mind. At this juncture, I am reminded of Ted Hughes’s “The Thought Fox”: “The window is starless still; the clock ticks,/The page is printed.” The speaker also finds boons in divination: “Oneiromancy is a reward the cosmos grants its/special wards” (*Boons*). Through most of his poems, the speaker resorts to belief and faith. He says that in poetry, nuance is more important than refinement.

Gerontology is one of the recurrent themes in this collection. The poet-persona seems conscious of his aging process and can’t stand it (who can?). In a poem, the speaker shows



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disgust about his corporeality. He wishes to get rejuvenated through ecdysis. With a geological metaphor, he asks himself, “Which moraine will form the relic of my form?” (*Corporal Credos*). This poem can be compared to Roethke’s “Epidermal Macabre,” in which the speaker feels that the body and flesh bring ‘evil and despair’: “I hate my epidermal dress,/The savage blood’s obscenity.”

In another poem, the speaker equates aging and ugliness: “Aging and ugliness are in sync.” (*Caret*). He is distraught about his ageing process: “With age, the heart’s hang time has shrunk” (*Out of Mothballs*).

Sethi’s *Legato Without a Lisp* is a fascinating collection of poems that will surely leave an indelible mark on the mindscape of the reader. His poems are rich in vocabulary, magnificent metaphors, and astounding alliterations. He is very economical in his choice of words; none seem redundant in his poems. I would like to call Sethi “The Francis Bacon of Poetry” for his aphoristic writing style. Like his previous collections, perusing his poems is a rigorous cerebral exercise in the true sense. In this collection, Sethi is at the pinnacle of his poetic perfection. The cover design has been brilliantly done, keeping in mind the musical metaphor of the book’s title. If a poetophile or logophile picks a copy of this book, s/he would be delighted sans any ceiling.