

A Critical Analysis of *FUCKING UP ON THE ROCKS* by Sophie Robinson.

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The poem *Fucking Up On The Rocks* by Sophie Robinson mirrors the poet Frank O'Hara's emphasis on obstructive line breaks that Robinson borrows. Similar to his poem *A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island*, some sections of *Fucking Up On The Rocks* descend in the shape of downward steps on the page, spaced out further from each other. This could imitate the narrators' descent into despair and grief, and her trying to distance herself from her memories:

'to dip my head under

just a second too long

but in the dark death is real

like an animal up close

he was a quarter larger than usual' (Robinson, 2018, Line 12-14).

This shape of the stepped staggered structure could also signify the loss of a rigid and uniform structure in the poem, deviating from the traditional style of poetry as it appears to have iambic pentameter to begin with and slowly descends into one long stanza with a handful of line breaks to chop up the flow of the words as the readers' eye moves down. This could indicate the narrators' descent into a trauma-fuelled breakdown as the rhythm of the poem disintegrates, creating a feeling of loss of control. This structure, in relation to the stages of recovering from trauma or grief reminds the reader of the phrase 'two steps forward, one step back' or in this case three steps forward (three lines forward) one step back (one line back) and repeat. The phrase is commonly used in situations of difficulty when painstakingly slow progress is being made, perhaps giving more of an insight to our narrators' mental wellbeing.

Interestingly there is no capitalisation, and instead adopts abbreviated text language: 'nobody wld know yr name' perhaps indicating the narrator is speaking to herself informally, and the emphasis on 'text language' could indicate that the poem does away with the traditional emphasis on beautifully placed words and instead opts for an informal and almost cheap form of communication. Robinson creates the feeling that the reader is part of a text chain, a recipient of a drunken slew of words after a heavy night of drinking. This poem is informal and free verse as it lacks the normal rules of poetry having particular poetic devices. The italic text reveals a differing and more sombre narrative compared to the regular font, woven throughout the poem often interrupting the flow mid-line, switching erratically in and out. Perhaps this alludes to the voice of reason peppered into the almost nonsensical lyrics of the poem, the sobering reality to the drunken dreamscape: 'find them & laugh on the porch *the lids of both eyes were bluish black*'. (Robinson, 2018, Line 29). The emphasis of the italics could indicate the narrator's unhealthy way of expressing her emotions; they bubble up and reveal a suppressed inner turmoil which overrides her controlled speech or thoughts.

When read aloud the poem is manic and fast paced, almost desperate until there is an exaggerated gap in the line when a breath is allowed to escape. This ruptured breathing could indicate that the narrator slips into a stream of consciousness as the structure mirrors how a person would naturally speak when distressed, or even alluding to the gasping breaths of a body before drowning. Although it is un-rhyming, when read aloud the poem in most lines has a flow to it creating onomatopoeia:

‘breathing out & folding in
on itself.’ (Robinson, 2018, Line 27-28).

The elongated gaps in the text are similar to the flow of a wave and affects how the reader digests the line; it is broken and staggers the pace of reading. To further this idea, perhaps the gaps in the line signifies the narrator coming up for air then submerging under a wave again mid sentence: ‘& count the waves as they break [reader takes a breath] over my head’. (Robinson, 2018, Line 41-42). As the reader breathes at a line break, the constant erratic line breaks suggest the narrator is panicking as she’s saying or thinking the words on the page. Robinson describes: ‘ducking my head under each wave’. (Robinson, 2018, line 1). Perhaps the ‘wave’ she is trying to protect herself from is the realisation that she is an enabler of alcoholism, or partially guilty for her friends death. From the verb ‘ducking’ we can assume that the entire poem is her trying to ‘duck’ away from her issues, submerging herself underwater to silence her mind, drinking away her problems and the thoughts of her dead friend.

We can infer from the line ‘i never thought of myself as a useless drunk’ (Robinson, 2018, line 7) that the narrator fuels her self-destructive behaviour through alcoholism. By continuously mentioning drinking throughout we understand alcohol has a big part to play in her life, also by the mention of notorious alcoholic poet Frank O’Hara whom she idolises and the poem itself reflecting the structure of his poems. By calling herself ‘a useless drunk’ perhaps she is trying to feel remorse or some form of self pity for the way her friend wound up, unable to admit that she was a catalyst in her friends death just as much as alcohol was and pity herself that she is ‘a useless drunk’ and an enabler for destructive behaviour. In the final line of the poem ‘a monument to my favourite alcoholic’ (Robinson, 2018, line 61). the narrator could be referring to O’Hara, herself, or her dead friend, making the entire poems’ split narrative ambiguous as to who it is dedicated to. Robinson continually weaves O’ Hara throughout, dedicating her split narrative to his autopsy report: ‘his leg bone was broken and splintered and pierced the skin every rib was cracked, a third of his liver was wiped out by the impact.’ (Robinson, 2018, line 49-51). She doesn’t seem to be addressing anyone in the poem, just recalling her thoughts and memories indicating an internal conflict within herself. We as the reader, get a glimpse of her breakdown.

Bibliography

O'Hara, F. (1995) A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island. In: *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. University of California Press: USA.

Robinson, S. (2018) *FUCKING UP ON THE ROCKS*. In: *The Forward Book of Poetry 2020*. Faber: London.