



Review: Tom Whalen's *Dolls*

Joseph Starr

from *Marginalia* Volume 3, Number 2, Fall 2007

Tom Whalen's collection of prose poems invests in the universal notions about dolls, assuming that, to the casual reader, (of culture, not literature) dolls are the pervasive icon of childhood, facsimile of the self—most notably, the self as girl child—, emblem of an entrenched slant on gender, and repository of curious terrors. While the proliferation of schlock horror films featuring the clown, the dummy, or the doll as a formidable malefactor may evince this last notion, Whalen's read on dolls is entirely other. That is, Whalen's prose poems terrify because they take the social edicts inscribed upon the doll—edicts that sanction a certain species and quantity of violence and depravity—and push them over the ledge, a dynamic in marked contrast to that posited by *Chucky*, et al, which is only the blatant reversal of the most banal interpretation of "dollness."

To a girl, a doll is both self and other: reflection of all that is worthy and desirable within, as well as repository of all the qualities she might wish to have but does not; thus, as she loves the self, she loves the doll; as she loathes the self, she loves the doll for not being her; as she hates the doll for being better than the self, she wishes to do it violence. The doll is thus idolized and reviled and society says this is okay. The doll is a surrogate for nasty emotions, and thus an appropriate target. So once we decide to take them down from the shelf, we twist off their heads and slash off their hair; we rend their arms from their sockets and peek under their dresses; we bury them or light them on fire; we pack them away in dusty attics. Whalen is aware of all this and far more besides, and so are his dolls.

Try this one:

THE DOLL BEARS WITNESS TO ALL WE ARE NOT—we are alive, she isn't; we will die, she won't. No wonder then that the one we found on the bench the morning after a night of hard rain—the one with the glazed eyes, the pale lips, the porcelain

thighs, wearing a dirty bonnet and torn night dress, as if someone had purposely soiled her—we dismembered, beheaded, and burned. ("FROM THE LIFE OF THE DOLL," 11)

Or this:

DOLLS WANT TO CALL UP ANOTHER WORLD. They want to be Japanese. They want to tell your mother and father what you did to them last night, the little things, the secret things, in your dreams. They want the moon to take your eyes, the earth your heart. They want you to lose yourself in some dark alley, to call out for their help which they cannot give even if they wanted to, which they don't. They want you to tease them with your little doll lies, to strip and display them, memorize and mark them. "O look at my little dollie. Isn't she pretty? Isn't she mean?" They want you to burn them. They want you to blow on them. Because they love you, they want your indifference, your disdain. Whatever you can't give, that most of all they want. ("THE DESIRES OF DOLLS," 19)

Whalen's terrific achievement in *Dolls* is his having loosed the formula from the shackles: his dolls are not mere surrogates but agents, usurpers. And this agency is quite unlike that alluded to earlier, quite the reverse, actually. While not always mobile of body, Whalen's dolls are self aware: they experience pathos and yearning; they know loss; they know they have been cast off by their God; they know they are abject; they have bodily desires; they have anuses and vaginas and intestines; they want to possess our imaginations and they know that they do.

Tom Whalen. *Dolls*. Caketrain, 2007.