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The Powerhouse of Language · Edward Falco

IN HER MOST RECENT COLLECTION of poems, Alice Fulton uses her impressive verbal resources and dizzying mastery of form to explore the powers of congress. As she did in *Palladium*, Fulton allows the multiple meanings of a word (in this case, *congress*) to work as controlling metaphors for the collection. One of the powers of the United States Congress, for example, is to wage war; and several poems — “OVERLORD” and “Home Fires, 1943,” most notably — take up the subject of warfare. In the largest sense, however, in the sense that informs most of these poems, the powers of congress are the powers that generate from coming together, from union — especially sexual union. Exploring those powers of congress prompts Fulton to explore fundamental questions of being and origin.

In Fulton’s poems, humans are “towers/ of blood and ignorance” and any attainment of order is a “sculpted composure” that resists the “planless cascade” at the center of things. For Fulton, everything is something made and in time remade, from the planets to the mountains to the words we speak and the poems we tell. All things generated by congress form and reform. In this universe, there is no such creature as permanence, and our human desire for constancy leads only to trouble.

In the title poem, Fulton begins by describing a universe in flux.

How the lightstruck trees change sun
to flamepaths: veins, sap, stem, all
on brief loan, set to give all
their spooled, coded heat to stoves called
Resolute: wet steel die-cast
by heat themselves. Tree, beast, bug—
the world-class bit parts in this
world—flit and skid through it. . . .

Trees change sunlight to energy which is stored away, “set” to be released at some inevitable later time, perhaps in a steel stove which has itself been

Powers of Congress. Alice Fulton. Godine

“die-cast by heat.” All the things of this world (“Tree, beast, bug”) play their “world-class bit parts,” as they “flit and skid through it. . . .” The poem continues:

. . . the
powers of congress tax, spend, law
what lives to pure crisp form
then break forms’ lock, stock, and hold
on flesh.

I find these among the most challenging and interesting lines of the poem. They echo the constitutional powers of Congress to tax, spend, and make laws while they suggest that all congress taxes what comes together by demanding an expenditure and sharing of resources. Any congress or union that creates something new creates it in a particular form—form being the necessary manifestation of creation. The powers of congress “law/ what lives to pure crisp form,” and an elemental part of the law of congress is that in time will come the dissolution of form. One of the powers of congress, then, is to “break forms’ lock, stock and hold/ on flesh.” And if we think of congress as sexual congress, there is another possible reading of these lines. Sexual congress can create a union of spirit, a transcendent communion that allows breaking through, seeing through “forms’ lock, stock, and hold/ on flesh.”

The poem ends with these lines:

All night couples pledge
to stay flux, the hit-run stuff
of cracked homes. Men trim their quick
lawns each weekend, trailing power
mowers. Heartslaves, you’ve seen them: wives
with flexed hair, hitched to bored kids,
twiddling in good living rooms,
their twin beds slept in, changed, made.

Couples, people who have achieved a union, a spiritual, emotional and economic congress, want to maintain that union. Such permanence is hardly possible; and in the desire to achieve it, they become “heartslaves”

“with flexed hair, hitched to bored kids,” their ordered lives like “their twin beds” that are “slept in, changed, made” — and “made” here reverberates with the sense omnipresent in this collection of “constructed” or “composed.” “Heartslaves,” it should be noted, can also address the readers, who understand in their hearts the poem’s final image. Everything, this poem says, is a construct set to undergo transition. Humans, playing their bit parts, invent and reinvent their lives, like beds they make and remake and then sleep in — always in an effort to give chaos a form they can live with.

Reading *Powers of Congress* is an intense pleasure — not a small measure of which comes from seeing poetry used to see through, to see beyond our “ordered smallness” to the great, unordered powers that have always been the real sources of poetry.