

# FIELD

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## A BIG MOMENT YELLOW

Ewa Chrusciel, *Strata* (Emergency Press, 2010)

*Strata* means “loss” in Chrusciel’s native Polish, but *strata* also means the levels and layers, not of inorganic stone, but of language and experience, each adding to the other, expanding and recurring throughout one’s life, or in this case, throughout the text, comprised of four sections of poetically charged prose. A book between genres, *Strata* could be seen as a collection of prose poems or (*highly*) lyric essays; its precursor seems to be (by both affect and by Chrusciel’s own reference) the ground-breaking work of poetry-memoir *My Life* by Lyn Hejinian.

“Your first sentence will always be your native lung,” writes Chrusciel early in the collection. Part of the pleasure here is certainly the way she leaps from sentence to sentence, sometimes following a narrative or autobiographical thread, but more often progressing by image or sound: “My neighbor died in the window from lightning. Lightning is a strange apparition. A big moment yellow. In storms I close the windows.”

Like Hejinian’s “as for we who love to be astonished,” Chrusciel uses phrases repeated and recurring throughout the text to bind together what would otherwise be a very diffuse collection of sentences indeed. But unlike Hejinian, where the repeated phrases seem to be de-centering or defamiliarizing, Chrusciel’s refrains—“A big moment yellow”—are used more like musical themes, causing the reader to recall earlier pieces and the moods associated with them.

The “loss” of the text is the departing consciousness of the writer always leaping onto a new thought, but this is tempered by the layering or accretion of the *strata* so that there is always something new to be discovered, and because of the musical recurrence of images and phrases, one never feels that Chrusciel has abandoned an early line of thought, only that she is adding new lenses through which to perceive.

Consider this short excerpt from a piece entitled “today light in itself capable to paint”:

Encounter. Luminous brown calmness. You said you’ve always been fascinated by the symmetry of. Half given; the other half hidden. Do you see a mulberry in a mustard seed? Which part—insanity? X-rays of hands through layered rings. Anything carved into them heals into black scars, recording the event. Undying iterations of this moment. Flicker of memories. My mother would sit by me and point to his supposed mistresses. Her theories—elaborate. She collected the evidence.

When at the beginning of the description the sentence breaks on “symmetry of” we might at first read the interrupting period as a stylistic device designed to give more emphasis to the “half given” and the “half hidden,” but honestly the text throughout is haunted by interruptions such as these. It is only a matter of time before the reader’s relationship to the text changes: rather than only confusion or “loss” (*strata*), the reader becomes engaged with discerning the scattered narrative. Indeed what immediately follows is another description of *strata*—the tree’s rings, their scarring—that also graces the book’s cover.

In the “flicker of memories,” Chrusciel then begins recounting a story of her mother. Narrative here resides among the swells of music and lyrical explorations of time, atmosphere and mood. “If you could only grasp that you are not the center of things,” she writes, and later still, “The size of my radiance is precisely that of volcanic lavish.”

On the rarest of occasions (six times throughout the slender but dense book of sixty-odd pages) the prose pieces are punctuated by poetry. Only two of these are traditionally lineated poems, the others are more open-field compositions, punctuated with Robert Duncan-like word grids. Each of these poems meditates on the act of recalling or collecting experiences, sifting through them and working not necessarily to determine meaning but to see every surface. Like the surfaces of Hejinian’s book, the surfaces of *Strata* refract in dozens of directions at once. It is a book, as the old saying goes, that would reward multiple readings. In “annunciation of light,” Chrusciel writes:

Wherever I go you let in not enough. I stopped. Collecting.  
 Evidence. For your existence  
 I stopped collecting the evidence  
 and yet there are layers of invisible  
 belonging

There's a lot at stake emotionally for Chrusciel to try collect the details of her life, turn them around and upside down, and like other poet-memoirists (besides Hejinian, Dunya Mikhail, Etel Adnan, and Fanny Howe all come to mind), Chrusciel creates a gorgeous weave of experience, informed by both narrative and lyric by always returning to previous pieces, creating a mosaic-like or symphonic effect:

My Mother used to collect cactuses. I waited all my life to see pink luscious fruit grow out of them. What splendid flowers would emerge. *We would like only for once to get where we are already.* In storms I close the windows and open the doors. This is the size of my radiance.

Throughout these "prose poems" or "lyric essays" it is the sentence and not the paragraph that is Chrusciel's primary unit of meaning and engine of energy. So individual pieces do not necessarily cohere the way a short lyric essay might, nor do they unify as individual poems could. It is easier to think of the book, like *My Life* or Adnan's *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*, as a full unified text that depends on its repetitions, recombinations, leaps and forays and feints, to both engender a sense of loss or unfamiliarity and also give the reader the experience of multiple layered experiences at once.

As in Adnan's and Hejinian's texts, this experience of multiplicity necessarily replicates for the reader the experience of being an immigrant writer, a multi-lingual writer creating poems in her new language. *Strata* is Chrusciel's first book in English (she has published two others—*Furkot* and *Sopilki*—in Polish). A powerful, multi-valenced work, it deserves closer and sustained study.

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