

Life Beyond Football: Vern Rutsala's *Little-Known Sports*

By Chuck Guilford

“In Shadow,” the opening poem of Vern Rutsala’s *Little-Known Sports*, features a speaker who notices himself in a photograph, “staring toward the snapshot’s deckled edge, curious apparently about something going on there, some marginal event, perhaps a stranger passing by or a dog on a dog’s serious round.” That speaker might be the poet himself, looking off away from the obvious toward something entertaining and funny, something serious and mysterious “beyond the stiff margin, lying low behind the thick leaves that shade the house, watching.”

Rutsala has long been haunted by spectres and emanations, by voices and callings from another place. In this respect, as in others, *Little-Known Sports* is less a “bold departure” or “major breakthrough” than a continued exploration of evolving themes and techniques. For instance, the book consists entirely of prose-poems, suggesting kinship with the earlier *Paragraphs* (Wesleyan, 1976). Rutsala’s recent *Selected Poems* (Story Line Press, 1991), which brings together favorite poems from his first seven books, therefore, offers a useful context for reading this newest collection.

It isn’t that Rutsala’s poems are especially obscure. Quite the opposite, most are quite accessible. But the poems often play off of each other, and there’s a cumulative effect--an evolving poetic vision, not completely evident in any one poem or book yet present to some degree in all. As we notice these connections, individual poems often reveal layers of significance that could never be seen otherwise.

For instance, the imagery of “In Shadow,” gains resonance if we recall the opening of “Quest” from *The Journey Begins* (Georgia, 1976):

Driven like a fugitive through splintered shadows
 I searched all night
 for my old houses--
 for the other life, the buried one, the lost vanished life.

For readers who catch them, possible allusions to Plato's allegory of the cave and Matthew Arnold's "The Buried Life" add texture, making clear the sort of quest we are embarking upon:

Once we dreamed and woke to another dream:
 Fishflutter of leaves, sun throbbing dust awake,
 the warm stone's shape invented by our fingers.

We are stepping beyond the margin of everyday certainty to enter a more tentative and mysterious zone where we waken from dream into Roethkean dream. This is "the other life, the buried one, the lost vanished life," yet paradoxically, never far away or wholly inaccessible:

Again I met the mysteries of cupboards, the prim necks of faucets,
 The frozen mirror thawed for me.
 Upstairs I saw a ceiling light with its knotted string like a spider.
 I saw the bed and heard the music of its springs again.
 Once touched each object shivered.
 They pulsed with my old life, these blind witnesses.

The world is both the same and different. Everyday objects, the cupboard and faucet, appear radiantly new and fresh, as though remade. The frozen mirror thawing suggests Alice's looking glass, but which side are we on? The ceiling light and its spiderlike cord give the scene a slightly sinister feel, while the musical bedsprings that "pulsed with my old life," suggest a lively, if somewhat comic, sexuality. Is this "other life," the stuff merely of dream, or is the line between dreams and "ordinary reality" more permeable than we might suppose? Is reality largely what we imagine it to be--whichever side of the mirror we think we're on? Perhaps we're surrounded by "blind witnesses" to the

mystery, needing only to be touched by the imagination to shiver into life, as they did once before we can remember.

This vision of a world numinously alive and charged with spirituality is often implicit in poems that are ostensibly about other subjects. “The Orthodoxy of Routine” from *Paragraphs* is interesting in this respect because it thematically foreshadows “On Time” from *Little-Known Sports* and also shows Rutsala working with the prose poem:

We are told the age lacks faith, that no permanent values exist, that the world is unstable, but many, let us call them the heroes of punctuality, who would follow a dogma if it existed, have circumvented the problem by making their routines, protocols, schedules, and agendas a watertight doctrine which they always adhere to, as they say, religiously.

Most immediately, the poem is a light, sophisticated satire of people who become slaves to routine and convention. Part of the fun comes in the flouting of poetic conventions, as if to imply the poet’s freedom from dogma and routine, while assuring us with this skillfully crafted fifty-nine word sentence that he is no incompetent hack. A closer look, especially if we keep “Quest” in mind, suggests Rutsala is targeting not only slaves to routine, but also trend-spotters and pundits who equate declining regard for empty dogma with lack of faith. In a larger sense, then, the poem satirizes the human tendency to equate mere ritual and routine with spirituality and faith. “On Time” takes a close-up look at one of these “heroes of punctuality” vacuously following the schedule on his daily planner while the sort of spiritual experience alluded to in “The Quest” remains entirely outside his ken.

If it appears that “the age lacks faith, that no permanent values exist, that the world is unstable,” perhaps this is because we’ve become slaves to convention, bound by “watertight doctrine,” impermeable by this cleansing and life-sustaining fluid.

Turning now to look more directly at *Little-Known Sports*, we see many of the same tendencies we've been noting--a witty and sometimes biting sense of humor, a delight in flouting convention, a desire to get beyond ordinary, everyday ways of seeing experience and evoke "the mysteries of cupboards, the prim necks of faucets." It's a short step, after all, from speaking of a faucet as having a prim neck to conceiving of an ironing board as an awkward, sexless bird. Both images are essentially metaphors, but in the second case, Rutsala extends the metaphor throughout the entire poem:

Ironing Board

It can fold its legs like a crane and is thus clearly some variety of bird no more grotesque than the pelican or the stork or, for that matter, the crane. It has three legs, for better balance, an enormous flat bill, and lives, as near as we can tell, on nothing but heat. A great solitary and apparently sexless--you rarely see more than one at a time--it is extremely docile and willingly nests anywhere you put it with its three legs drawn up tightly against its bill.

While it would be unpardonably heavy-handed to subject such a playful piece to intense analysis, I can't resist noting how Donnean it feels--an elaborately wrought metaphysical conceit. For Rutsala, as for poets of the renaissance, metaphor is more than ornamental; it's a way of seeing divinely, of discovering order and similitude in the midst of apparent chaos.

In "Ironing Board," as in the other poems in "Bestiary" (Part Two of the book), Rutsala uses metaphor with grace and wit. Some pieces, admittedly, appear slight, but even these can tease the imagination, "Dust Mop," for instance: "This creature is some curious by-product in the evolution of the unicorn."

Part Three "Little-Known Sports," gives the book its title. Here, we are introduced to such grueling sports as "Being With It," "Being Second Rate," "Getting

Into Bed,” and, my favorite, “Sleeping,” the one event in which I may have gold medal potential, “an arduous contest, similar, some feel, to boxing.” Rutsala goes on to offer details supporting his claim that sleeping is a dangerous sport, and in doing so, gives us not only an entertaining poem, but also a wry comment on how concrete, specific evidence can sometimes produce dubious conclusions. Like so many poems in this section--”Getting Lost” and “Smoking,” for instance--”Sleeping” entertains on several levels; a quick smile and a flash of recognition prompt a re-reading and some introspection. You may begin reading these alone, but you’ll soon want to read them aloud to friends and family.

Unlike the playful Parts Two and Three, Part One, “The Art of Photography and Other Sorrows,” is composed in a minor key. The tone is more serious, the wit less playful, more caustic. The book’s center of gravity in several respects, this section deserves much more discussion than I can offer here and will handsomely repay repeated readings.

In the first six poems, which reflect on the art of photography and even on specific photographs, Rutsala explores the image making process, the ways in which the photographer--and by extension perhaps the poet--captures, interprets, distorts, and even creates “reality.” The poems probe the ways we enter into photographs as subjects, composers, and interpreters; and the ways we are excluded by being always, in a sense, outsiders, viewers from “beyond the stiff margin,” until, as in “Vitalie Rimbaud,” “Finally, we do not know which side of the mirror we are on or where poor Arthur may be.”

With *Selected Poems* and now his Juniper Prize-winning *Little-Known Sports*, Vern Rutsala has surely established himself as a major Northwest poet. These delightful poems can be enjoyed on several levels. Whichever side of the looking glass you approach them from, they are sure to add some new dimensions to your reading pleasure.



Little-Known Sports

Vern Rutsala

63 pp., paper, \$9.95

University of Massachusetts Press