

SUSAN SCARLATA

## On Rachel Loden's *Dick of the Dead*

*Dick of the Dead*, by Rachel Loden. Boise, Idaho: Ahsakta Press, 2009.

On her blog *wordstrumpet: Scenes from a Life Ruined by Poetry*, Rachel Loden writes, "It's tempting to feel like Rip Van Winkle: Did the '60s and '70s and '80s and '90s even happen? It's 1957 and Eisenhower's on the golf course." This question is a fitting query with which to approach Loden's latest books of poems, *Dick of the Dead*. With three-quarters of Richard Nixon's face on the cover and ideas of Loden's other books, the reader can anticipate certain aspects of these poems; but wonderfully, the likely characters are never cast in the context or referred to in the tones we might foresee. A Richard Nixon Snowglobe, or the desire for one, for instance, is not something most of us are pondering. But for Loden, it's as everyday as the Christmas Tree or Eiffel Tower we more typically imagine in that pristinely white-flecked environment. In Loden's poem "The Richard Nixon Snow Globe," an imagined character appears that "Might have physically needed to make one / So he could see Dick's head inside a dome / While hoodoo snow is falling." It is Loden's persistent use of the political on a human and personal level that makes these poems thoroughly surprising, entirely absolute in their machinations and wholly pertinent to the times in which we live. As concerned as they are with politics and the economy, Loden's poems are adeptly rooted, and exist in their own realm far from writing more typically considered to be "political poetry." These poems are never abstract without necessity, never political without humor.

The Snow Globe is just one of many instances where, as much as the focus is the iconic face of Richard Nixon, the poem shines equally banal, a refrigerator-like light, on this lone person who so needed that and *only that* snow globe. And throughout, *Dick of the Dead* is about the human desire for things, and all that those desires communicate to the world. In "I Know a Brand" Loden appropriates much of Robert Creeley's poem "I Know A Man," written in the early '50s. Loden's version acts as an update, a "where-are-we-sixty-years-later," re-po-

sitioning; and though her changes are slight, from the title to other subtle insertions, they act as perfect demonstration of how far (not necessarily forward) we have come.

#### I KNOW A BRAND

As I sd to my  
friend, because I am  
always shopping, —John, I

sd, which was not his  
name, the market sur-  
rounds us, what

can we do against  
it, or else, shall we &  
why not, buy a Jaguar XKR,

floor it, he sd, for  
christ's sake, 4.9  
seconds to 60 mph.

The speaker is always "shopping," (Creeley was talking), it is the "market" that surrounds them, and the car is a specific Jaguar model instead of a "goddamn big car." These replacements, along with the last lines, not "look / out where yr going," but "floor it . . . / 4.9 seconds to 60 mph," are the condensed, entirely apt update about what has happened to the American mind-set since World War II. One could read them even as a presentation of what the media has taken to calling "The Great Recession." *Dick of the Dead* was published in 2009, but even in this time of pulling back, the prevailing attitude seems to be a question as to when we'll be able to return to our dreams for Jaguars and serious mechanical horsepower. Creeley of course saw this in '50s America with the "dream" being an ever-larger car as individuals and families became ever more prosperous. As Loden presents, since then the shift has been toward prosperity for prosperity's sake, from "slow down," to "floor it," with little consideration for "looking out" at all. Loden directs us toward and through all of this with Oulipoean-style substitutions and, to her credit, does it without even a shade of didacticism. Loden's poems are there on the page with big ideas in them, but at no point do they turn and point the finger at

anyone, but instead at everyone (and okay, of course, once in a while directly at Dick Nixon).

In "Props to the Twentieth Century," another tour de force in *Dick of the Dead*, Loden addresses the century as if it is sitting next to her listening. In this title alone one sees how Loden escapes being the didact; her use of the word "props" demonstrates that though her poems are brimming with grave content, she is not taking any of it, or herself too seriously. The tone she achieves in this poem as it goes on also demonstrates with sincerity that Loden writes what she does knowing of her own involvement. Her culpability is never denied or shirked; these poems seem instead to be methods for Loden to dig in to what dirties her hands. The voice in this poem misses "my broken century," and feels "strange taking up / With other, paler centuries like this nymphet / Who imagines that her exquisite marketing campaigns / Would be enough to break me down or / Worse, make me forget." This last line takes us toward the center of much of Loden's project. The incessant input that is a part of "exquisite marketing campaigns," as well as "simple" daily life in this new century has a way of making one forget due to the sheer abundance of all there is to absorb on any given day.

From the poem "The Bride of Frankenstein," where Loden uses lyrics from the song "Puttin' on the Ritz," which I had not had chance to recall since it clacked its way out car speakers on family road-trips in the '80s, to "The Little Richard Story: Part II" where Loden discusses a "backlog of animal patent applications," these poems refuse forgetting. In them, Loden tracks where we are with regard to consumerism, politics, materialism and conventions. She does it poetically, with nuanced turns of phrase, subtle shifts in register and tone, and jumbings of words that reveal themselves to be sharply discerning.

The age-old question remains: Can poems be political *and* be good? Through the pen and mind of Rachel Loden, they decidedly can. To quote Creeley (and Loden, in her 21st-century version of his poem), "for / christ's sake" read *Dick of the Dead*.