

Like Lightning on the Dancing People: A Review of PF Potvin's 'The Attention Lesson'

by Michael Parker

The Attention Lesson, by PF Potvin was published by No Tell Books, LLC, 2006

In PF Potvin's poem "Less Wild, More Tiger," the poet describes the early language of a newborn babe and the celebration that takes place at its arrival in the tribe: "Firstborn's words come just after birth. They are not of human form, but guised in the gesture of an animal. And every time she shakes her fist the sun dies out as drizzle slants like lightning on the dancing people. Their chants become the clouds, fuming and echoing firstborn's cry: less wild, more tiger."

This excerpt, especially the line "lightning on the dancing people," creates an image that represents Potvin's work in its wholeness. Indeed, lightning is the perfect metaphor for describing Potvin's collection of poetry, *The Attention Lesson* because it illuminates the effects of human experience, both from his observations and his perceptions of the observed's psychological landscapes—the outward expression of inner conflict. This is evident in poems such as "Her Needle Name," "One by One," "The Trench," "Rhythm of the Bridge," and most stridently in this "An Unforgettable Nod":

*I stood at the door until she commanded.
"Get over here and fuck me. I'm not anorexic for
nothing."*

But Potvin shines most brilliantly and shows a skillful knack for observing, interpreting, and story-telling in "The Celebration Storm":

*Father took him deer hunting at thirteen. It
was his first time and he shot a spikehorn clean
through both lungs. When he came back carrying
the thrown shoulder dead, he was alive and empty.
Mother clapped his back, raised his glass to
the ceiling with an icy rattle, and told the clouds
to gather a storm in celebration of a man. That
evening the snow fell long, covering the house.
Drifts plowed up against the birch pile. I tossed
and my brother cried himself to sleep.*

Indeed, Potvin's writings are a depiction of humanity at its root daily workings — needs, longings, instincts, passions, aspirations, etc., whether they be financial, physical, psychological, political, social, cultural, etc.

While I'm writing this, I'm reminded of two quotes, one by the father of psychology, Sigmund Freud, and the other by the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Freud surmised, (and I apologize for not being able to find the source), that poetry is a science because the poet exhibits a masterful skill at perceiving and interpreting the mind of man. And Coleridge, in his work about literary criticism titled *Biographia Literaria*, deduced: "No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher. For poetry is the blossom and the fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language."

These observations by Freud and Coleridge are quite applicable to Potvin and his work *The Attention Lesson*. And I don't want this to be interpreted to mean that Potvin's prose is overly high-brow—too complicated and/or weighty to enjoy. The contrary is the case. Potvin's poetic style is exquisitely relaxed, like its lounging in the shade of a giant oak on a hot summer day. His prose, though not unique, feels fresh, thanks to a form that highlights tight images, compacted phrases, and vivid details that coalesce into a whole. Furthermore, I'm most taken by Potvin's layered meanings – we can understand and appreciate the obvious, but there is a richness laying underneath, like an iceberg whose majority of its body (precisely 87%) resides below the surface.

Speaking of images, Potvin is quite adept at creating amazing imagery. One for example, I've already mentioned – the image of Potvin's older brother, the young hunter, who cries himself to sleep the night he kills his first buck ["The Celebration Storm"]. But consider the image of the Apostle Peter, [from "The Woman of Back Cold"], surfing off the scenic mural of a train station and kissing the praying woman into silence. Simply amazing.

And consider also the image of a no-legged man ["Rhythm of the Bridge"] who madly tambourines while balancing on the edge of a bridge during a raging storm, even as the flood waters flow furiously about him.

The Attention Lesson is full of such evocative images.

Tying into the imagery of Potvin's poetry is his poetics, which are likewise grand and intriguing. Consider this sampling of some of my favorites:

You let down your guard for a second and Egypt wanders in. [Number Cats in the Hospital]

But the hand remembers, shows constant movies of miniature storms, electric flooding, magma across the palm... [The Scar]

...waking up to their medieval was magic, like finding a crack in your thigh where only the mirror can see the tiny lions inside and prowling. [Hunger Where You Can't See]

But the kites remain, persistently piercing the smog like a child enroute to Disneyland asking "Are we there yet, daddy? Are we there?" [An Independent Question]

Her smile was a favor passed around so long it grew a white beard. [The Bearded Favor]

But his tongue was a beach where no one could swim because of constant shark action. Even the sharks that died came back to haunt the place. [The Gravel Dog]

And I knew when I saw her cheeks twitch that an internal howling had loosed the dogs. [One by One]

Another fascinating aspect of Potvin's *The Attention Lesson* is that he uses the Greek alphabet, which was the first language created in order to document business transactions and oral histories, as the numbering system for his book. Because there are twenty-four letters in the alphabet, and forty-eight poems, Potvin begins and ends the book with "alpha." It seems to suggest two meanings: 1) that life comes full circle; or, 2) life is an endless cycle of beginnings and endings.

Regarding the significance of using the Greek alphabet, however, I'd like to think it symbolizes these primary points:

1. The birth and burgeoning of human civilization – the quickening of intellect, analysis, and theory across all areas of science.
2. The Greek's perspective of "ethikos" (the theory of living), or the great human dilemma.

And this brings us full-circle with the introductory thoughts above – Potvin's observances of the human experience, its common ritual, psychological effects, parade of *ethos*, and even the creation of our own mythologies and parables, stands as a reminder that the depiction of the human dilemma is indeed universal, comprehensible across continents and cultures.

Even Potvin's naming convention for the sections of *The Attention Lesson* substantiate this theme of analyzing the human experience—the individual's role to man, nature, and the gods. From the beginning of the collection, working toward its end, the sectional titles are named: Warm Up Exercises, Word Power, Case Studies, Raw Materials, How To, Puzzlers, Answer Sheets, Making Connections, Other Sources of Evidence, and Extra Credit.

Don't these titles sound like chapters in a classical language textbook or in an anthropological study worksheet or guidebook used in the field?

It's fascinating, and fitting, that the section "Answer Sheets," is empty. Potvin seems to suggest that there is no answer sheet to life, no answers to the complicated and enigmatic dilemma that faces us as we entertain fate, employ agency, and tirelessly hope or search for good fortune.

There is a famous ode from Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone* that includes the phrase "Numberless are the world's wonders, but none / More wonderful than man...."

The Attention Lesson manifests the essence of this in a magnificent manner, thanks to a thoughtful observer and resplendent interpreter.

The poems I highlighted in this review were read by Potvin at the MiPOesias Reading Series this past January (at the Stain Bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn). Potvin is a fine reader, offering good inflections. But most striking to me was his use of silence just after finishing a poem. Maybe he was merely searching for his next poem to read. Nevertheless, the five to eight second pause before he began introducing his next poem gave me time to let the images and impressions linger on the mind's stage.