

THE CRASH OF FREEDOM IN DIANE SEUSS'S "THE PARENTS TRIED TO BUILD A  
LITTLE EDEN"

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With “The parents tried to build a little Eden,” Diane Seuss creates a compounding catalog poem that invokes Biblical imagery amidst an overflow of childhood memories. The first phrase relates a childhood “aboveground pool”<sup>1</sup> to a “little Eden,”<sup>2</sup> thereby establishing the idea of an initial paradise. But the word “tried”<sup>3</sup> suspends the opening line. The Garden of Eden was a place of perfection, before corruption and the concept of sin. And though the parents aspired for this Edenic setting, the effort was not fruitful, or perhaps was more closely resembling a post-lapsarian Eden. The pleasant surface idea of Eden sets the tone for a contrasting development, as the speaker’s following memories progress into increasingly unsettling images.

At first, the reader hears of unsupervised children eating “anytime anywhere,”<sup>4</sup> and as the speaker rambles deeper into the past, she recalls the darker anecdote of the “uncontainable dog [...] smashed by an ice cream truck.”<sup>5</sup> On the surface, the descriptions of the speaker’s childhood capture the naive dreams of unrestrained indulgence, but in actuality they reflect absent parenting. The dog, in turn, behaves “uncontainable”—a word typically applied to out of control emotions. These two lines parallel each other in content: freedom leads to destruction. A lack of control seems exhilarating at first, but the ice cream truck—a token of childhood—eventually “smash[es]” down on the unguided kids. Not only do these two images relate to each other, but they also serve as allusions to the story of the “little Eden”<sup>6</sup> with which the speaker begins the sonnet. In the tale of the Garden, Adam and Eve lose their ignorance to evil, after enjoying almost total free reign. Religious symbolism allows the speaker to tie the symbols of her unfulfilling childhood to later “sins” in her life.

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<sup>1</sup> Diane Seuss, “The Parents Tried to Build a Little Eden,” in *Frank: Sonnets* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf, 2021), pp. 39, line 1.

<sup>2</sup> Diane Seuss, line 1

<sup>3</sup> Diane Seuss, line 1

<sup>4</sup> Diane Seuss, line 3

<sup>5</sup> Diane Seuss, line 9

<sup>6</sup> Diane Seuss, line 1

The internal, run-on form of the sonnet furthers the conceit of Eden and the resulting destruction from an absence of rules. No punctuation, save for a concluding period, allows the clauses to accumulate one after the other, as Seuss uses enjambment to marked effect. Each line flows into the next and requires the reader to make a decision: one either needs to stumble through the poem without breaks, or apply perceived natural pauses. “Anytime anywhere and not clean up after themselves soggy/Tupperware,”<sup>7</sup> strings together without a comma, the fundamental component of a list poem. The lack of rules, in this case of writing conventions, works in conjunction with the imagery throughout the poem on a metapoetic level. A line barrels ahead without any clear guidelines for the reader on the page: “the trampoline was impaled on a tree during a tornado the produce.”<sup>8</sup> The speaker immerses the reader in the heedless childhood through the physical act of reading the poem. As the poem concludes, the reader feels anxious and out of breath. The freedom might have made the writing process exhilarating, but the reader is left with a mess, albeit a beautiful one, for the reader to decipher on the page.

Seuss refreshes the sonnet with her juxtaposition of Biblical archetype and the chaotic structure with which she organizes her list of fractured moments. In Seuss’s take on the Shakespearean sonnet, the volta arrives in the penultimate line: “for it was all for naught.”<sup>9</sup> The phrase follows the anecdote of a failed honor system produce stand, but the line also summates the experience of the poem as a whole. Here, a reader wants closure after the disjointed lines and the difficult task of stumbling through the poem, but Seuss does not yield. Depictions of estrangement in the matters of everyday life express the negative impact of a messy upbringing and the collapse of an envisioned, elusive paradise. The reader needs to sit with the similar messiness of the piece, and accept the chaos. Seuss refuses the traditional form of the sonnet, and

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<sup>7</sup> Diane Seuss, lines 3-4

<sup>8</sup> Diane Seuss, line 10

<sup>9</sup> Diane Seuss, line 13

rebels against its most defining characteristics; the poem is no Edenic place of perfection. A meditation on childhood, the sonnet collectively works with imagism and on a meta-poetic level as the speaker envisions a fated paradise, but one that she now has control in describing.

## Bibliography

Seuss, Diane. "The Parents Tried to Build a Little Eden." In *Frank: Sonnets*, 39.

Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf, 2021.