

SELAH SATERSTROM

SLAB

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Reviewed by EMILY K. HARRISON

As a meditation on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, *Slab*, the devastating and achingly funny final novel in Selah Saterstrom's Beau Repose Trilogy, is most obviously about disaster. Inspired by the events of Katrina, the novel explores our human response to disaster, as well as the ways in which geography and culture manifest disaster, painfully wiping the slate clean—ready or not.

I first heard Saterstrom read from *Slab* in the summer of 2007, at a reading for the Summer Writing Program at Naropa University. As she began to read, I found myself mesmerized, spellbound even. For days after, I couldn't get the reading out of my head. As someone who grew up just hours away from New Orleans, in the midst of both great wealth and crushing poverty, I felt deeply connected to the work in a way I couldn't explain or articulate. This was when I realized that there is something almost magical about Saterstrom's work that makes the reader return. It's an intangible phenomenon: a shimmering, a haunting, something felt. The spell is cast, and a vanishing point of no return recedes into nothing, which is truly *something*. And one is never quite the same.

In early 2011, Selah presented me with the first complete draft of *Slab*. A slab itself, it clocked in at 286 single spaced pages, tied together in a neat package with rubber bands. She placed it in my hands and said "I want you to read it. And then: I want you to turn it into a piece of theatre." I read it and agreed. Even in its roughest, dirtiest form, I knew: *Slab* was a true work of art.

The stage version of *Slab*, which I adapted from the novel with Los Angeles-based theatre maker Gleason Bauer, premiered in the summer

of 2014, a year before the release of the novel. The work was produced by square product theatre, a Boulder-based company I founded in 2006.

I feel the need to relate this backstory, mostly to make it clear: I am not an unbiased reviewer. I am deeply connected to the work in ways that cannot be untangled, and I always will be. I have read several iterations of the book and am intimately familiar with portions that were edited out of the final version. It's a novel I have literally memorized, basically in its entirety. I played the role of Tiger, the novel's primary character, to the very best of my ability. It was truly the most difficult, most rewarding, and most important thing I have ever done, as an artist and as a human being. So I'm coming at the review of this highly-anticipated, long-awaited novel from a place of having lived with this story for several years.

Slab primarily focuses on Tiger, a plucky ex-stripper whose impoverished existence is turned upside down after a hurricane destroys her small, coastal town, (which rests on the outskirts of Big City). As Tiger waits on the cement slab that is all that remains of her home—for someone, anyone, to save her—she begins to tell her story; her memories brightly flashing to life before the reader's eyes. Her story is simultaneously horrifying and hilarious. Saterstrom masterfully walks the delicate line between sacrilege and salvation, between the blasphemous and the holy.

The novel is meta-theatrical in many respects, calling attention to the artifice of its own form. Though it is a novel, it is divided into acts and scenes, as a piece of theatre would be. Further, the novel is punctuated with stage directions, suggesting that the lives of the characters, and indeed, our very own lives, are a chaotic blend of scripted, pre-ordained material and improvised moments, populated with a colorful cast of characters who give our existence some sort of meaning (as we do theirs).

The structure is reminiscent of a traditional New Orleans funeral march, a highly theatrical dirge that ultimately transforms into the celebration of a life lived to its fullest. The theatricality is heightened by the magical presence of Barbara Walters, who appears as a hallucination to interview Tiger. As such, Tiger's life and times are structured and labeled as an "enchanted performance," a series of scenes which recount

the most pivotal moments in her life. These moments are eerily relatable, despite their seemingly outrageous reality.

Tiger herself is a performer, a stripper who, through her desire for knowledge, comes to specialize in the portrayal of historical figures, creating and performing strip routines as Maria Von Trapp, Florence Nightingale, and Helen Keller. Her work inspires Crystal, another stripper who works with her in a small club called The Five Spot on the outskirts of Big City. In her description of Crystal, Tiger notes:

Crystal had a life-changing spiritual experience in a car when she was sixteen. This car spoke to her. It was after a car accident in which she was spared and a voice, seemingly the car's, said to her, Crystal, it is not yet your time.

The novel is peppered with laugh-out-loud moments such as this: revelations and situations which are outlandish, ridiculous even, and yet completely and inexplicably plausible in a way that is *felt*. Saterstrom's characters are born of a geography, a time, and a people we all *know*, deeply know, regardless of our own histories and experiences. Their complexities are revealed in gorgeous moments of desperation and inventive instances of resourcefulness.

And Saterstrom, in true Southern Gothic form, is able and willing to turn on a dime. When Tiger recounts an initially awkward encounter with her first lover, Jesus (a poetry-reading, devil-worshipping, and perpetually shirtless young man who smokes skunk weed), he shimmers vividly into the reader's field of vision. We understand why Tiger wrote what she deems "a terrible poem" about him, "a thinly veiled dedication to his dark loveliness" that longingly ends with:

*I want to be alone with you in a swimming pool at night,
I want to follow you to the ditch. I want you to show me
What is behind the old house.*

Likewise, Tiger recounts learning "the art of Japanese flower arranging" in a juvenile detention center where, as a teenager, she served time for stealing cars. From Kasumi, her Japanese teacher, she

learns the concept of Wabi Sabi, the art of decay appreciation. Kasumi teaches Tiger and the other students that the moment it “acquire(s) the appearance of death...is exactly when a flower becomes most interesting... At the moment of its extinction, the flower is perfect. It is in accordance.”

The concepts of decay and extinction work at every level in the novel, revealing a landscape that is a beautiful ruin. In these juxtapositions, Saterstrom creates a world both refreshing and heartbreaking in its “dark loveliness,” a world constructed of layer upon layer of glorious and haunting contradiction.

While *Slab* is easily categorized as a disaster novel, in many respects, it speaks to a more insidious sort of disaster than the literal storm: the disaster of being born poor in America. Poverty, as seen through the eyes of the characters in *Slab*, is an ever-loving trap, one that gently wraps so many in its arms and whispers: *you're worth next to nothing, on a good day*. In the days and weeks and years that followed Hurricane Katrina, Americans saw just how deeply rooted this reality is. Many of the victims of Hurricane Katrina were unable to leave New Orleans and the outlying areas because they didn't have the means to do so, and it quickly became clear that, in the eyes of the government, these citizens were expendable.

Slab gives some of these people names, lives, stories, and it encourages us to remember and celebrate the divine humanity of so many who might otherwise be lost and forgotten; their memories swept away in the storm. With *Slab*, Saterstrom brings to life beautifully complex characters swirling in a powerful narrative, weaving a story that manages to be incredibly funny, heartbreaking, and ultimately, astonishingly poignant. When confronted with such visceral, haunting passages as, “In the distance, the sounds of things disengaging from their function,” the reader is provoked to wonder: In wiping the slate clean, what do we make room for? What do we cling to in the wake of such loss? What comes next?

Born from the debris of Hurricane Katrina, *Slab* explores the essential human need to create narrative as a means of survival and transition, honoring what we can take with us when there is nothing left to take: our story. And oh, what a story.