

Joanna Ruocco, *A Compendium of Domestic Incidents*  
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Reviewed by Christopher P. Shugrue

Joanna Ruocco is an author who delves, who plunges into the secret depths—to quote Hélène Cixous—"where we don't have the strength or the means to venture, to the edge of our abyss: and then to describe it." In her newest work, *A Compendium of Domestic Incidents*, Ruocco explores the depths of female knowledge through a series of tightly written tales that swing on a dime from the surreal, to the delightful, to the horrifying, to the gruesome, often in a single incident. Anyone willing to investigate the space between words will discover portals into history, into the fantastical, into our own minds. There is a depth here that can only be discovered if one is willing to do more than just scratch the surface.

The 39 stories—with the exception of a few ("Burial of a Gypsy" and "Sensation of Ligature with Beasts" actually break the one page barrier)—vary in length from a few sentences to a couple of paragraphs, and this lack of words, the overwhelming sense of white space upon each page, can have a disorienting effect. The stories themselves are like nuts stored for the winter: warm, dry, seasoned to a hardness difficult to crack. Although each incident can stand on its own, a fine silver cord—barely perceptible—runs through the lot. The character Josephine is directly named in 17 of the incidents, but the reader can sense her presence throughout.

Attempts at the deconstruction of female knowledge and the female body begin immediately in "Josephine's Father," when he presents her with a statue of the fifteenth-century Dutch Renaissance humanist and Catholic priest, Desiderius Erasmus, for her sixteenth birthday. In the opening incident, Josephine cries at the sight of the wax statue, and Ruocco writes: "Her father sniffed the yellow leather. It had a lewd smell, he realized, as of unclean bodies disporting on the humid earth, but she could hardly know that." What follows for Josephine are a series of surreal tales that revolve around the loss of her mother, her relationship with her father, and moments where death, the macabre, and the ridiculous often take center stage. The most interesting stories—and the most grotesque, the most disturbing—revolve around Josephine's interactions with the twisted Dr. Augustine.

In a May 2011 interview in *DU Today*, Ruocco states: "I like that mysterious space feeling out what could happen with the language." In *Incidents*, Ruocco clearly plays with that mysterious space with skill and precision. Her use of language is brilliant and has to be for these short tales to stand on their own. The incident "Two Crosses of Yellow Felt" is a fine example: "And so the waters which are in the upper reaches of the sky become like dust scattered by the cold, and they cause snow to fall." The incident is a mere twenty-six words, but with complete efficiency, Ruocco conjures in the mind storms brewing and snow falling over windblown peaks. What may be the most brilliant aspect of *Incidents* is what's going on *between* the words and *beneath* the surface of the tales; it is in this space that the reader should dig in.

The text bursts with references to Greek myth and twelfth-century goddesses and shares a remarkable resemblance to the old-time fairy tales: deep and dark, like the dankest forest, full of subtle humor and reference, brimming with latent violence and whispers of murder. These tightly-written tales serve as portals into other stories, providing an intertextuality that sows depth and additional context. In the incident "A Gate Made of Pitchforks," "Josephine enters the cemetery where her mother is buried but there are no headstones. Instead, she sees a field of celery. For years after, everything, even boned capon in a netting of pork fat, even lemon slices, even almonds, tasted of celery." Celery leaves were associated with death for the Greeks, and

fields of celery appear in *The Odyssey*—most notably, outside the cave of Calypso. By tasting celery, Josephine tastes death and is haunted by the ghost of her mother as Ruocco parades through her life male characters, who in no way serve her best interest.

The sinister Dr. Augustine, who dogs Josephine throughout the collection and represents a dismembering of the feminine, exhibits the most telling example of the attempt to destroy female knowledge. In "A Defiant Raiment," the doctor molests Josephine in a death chamber with a corpse the only witness; "I am the self-wounding pelican," Augustine whispers in Josephine's ear as he cops a feel. In medieval Europe, pelicans were thought to wound themselves and feed their young on their own blood when food was scarce, thus the pelican became a symbol for the Passion of Christ and the Eucharist. Throughout the *Incidents*, the reader sees the self-wounding pelican Augustine with his fingers in Josephine's mouth, witnesses the man sucking her vital fluids through a straw, and in "She Admires the Jugglers in a German Woodcut," Augustine severs Josephine's limbs "at the distal ends of the humerus bones." It's not difficult to see a commentary about the destruction of the sacred feminine by the Catholic Church percolating through Ruocco's collection of incidents, especially with the inclusion of Augustine and the references to Desiderius Erasmus. It's even easier to see Dr. Augustine as a representation of Saint Augustine, a man many hold responsible for the enduring sexism in the Catholic Church. Also consider the incident entitled "The Son of Man was Born a Maiden" or the fact that upon being married in "To Destiny," Josephine's hands are bound and her lips sewn with red cord before she's set on fire after leaving the church, and a current of sentiment about the Catholic church and its crusade against the feminine becomes even more pronounced.

Despite these blatant attacks, Ruocco again utilizes intertextuality to reveal glimpses of the Divine Feminine. These glimpses provide counterpoint to the leering intrusions and manipulations of the character Augustine and evidence Josephine has female role models from which to pull inspiration and knowledge. In the incident "The 12<sup>th</sup> Century," Josephine has a vision of Hildegard von Bingen. Bingen, also known as Saint Hildegard and Sibyl of the Rhine, was a writer, composer, philosopher, Christian mystic, Benedictine abbess, and visionary. In the vision, Bingen walks across a bridge as foam forms into gemstones. Ruocco completes the vision by writing: "Before long, she will be treating cancer with violets. The 12<sup>th</sup> century was a wonderful moment for female intellectuals." Other powerful feminine references appear: Empress Theodora, Empress of the Roman (Byzantine) Empire, one of the most powerful women in the history of the Roman Empire and a pioneer of Feminism; the Furies; and the Hyades, a sisterhood of nymphs thought by the Greeks to bring rain. Each provides an example of feminine power that flies in the face of the intrusions of Augustine, the Church, and Josephine's father.

Joanna Ruocco's *A Compendium of Domestic Incidents* is an interesting example of how far an author can delve. Her use of form, her use of visions and nightmare, her use of fragment, and a masterful use of intertextuality create a work where there's certainly more than meets the eye. For those with eyes to see, for those who like to mine the text, to look deeply into the spaces between words, *Incidents* presents the reader with a puzzle worth deciphering.