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POEMS BY DONNA STONECIPHER
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ISBN: 978-1-56689-221-6

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—John Yau
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ATAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS A great nation deserves great art.

NYC CULTURE CITY OF NEW YORK

DECEMBER 2008/JANUARY 2009 3
FROM THE DIRECTOR

When the bells at St. Mark’s Church ring, they ring for us. Really. After the 1978 fire, four bells were installed in the tower with a dedicatory plaque:

“FOR THE ARTISTS AT WORK HERE”
“FOR THE WORKERS WHO REBUILT THIS CHURCH”
“FOR THE PEOPLE OF THIS COMMUNITY”
“FOR PEACE ON EARTH THESE BELLS RING”

It’s a remarkable bit of knowledge that can snap me out of a slumpy attitude (too focused on little failures) back into a broad view of my/our work here—which is so much about engendering a system of mutual exchange, a sub-economy that continues to hum (with humans) through this massive foundering of our nation’s finances. So my head comes out of the sky, or out of the steeple, to join the multitudes of people in the Project’s community who are adept at balancing idealism and work-a-day.

I’m thinking about our Annual New Year’s Day Marathon Reading, the 35th, as a splendid and generative manifestation of this ethos. It’s an event that our community has and is deeply invested in, as performers, volunteers, and listeners. It is also a crucial fundraiser for the Project, securing thousands of dollars to go toward programming costs, i.e., paying poets for their work, creating a forum. It shouldn’t be radical, but it is. In an effort to ensure that this annual event continues to reach out and out and out, we invite 25-35 first time performers each year. If you participated in 2008 and aren’t participating in 2009 it is for this cause. People have been very understanding, which I appreciate.

It’s a strange and frightening time—then again, has there been a time in history when people weren’t uttering this sentiment? Nevertheless, in two days we’ll know the outcome of what is being called the most important election since 1860 (hello Lincoln). Obama cites Moby Dick as one of his favorite books, and I actually don’t think he wants to emulate Captain Ahab.

- Stacy Szymaszek

35TH ANNUAL NEW YEAR’S DAY MARATHON…
HERE’S HOPEING IT’S A CELEBRATION

This issue will go to print before November 4th, and as such I write from the vibrating window of “hope” that is the week leading up to Election Day. The polls look good, but after 2000 one learns not to get too excited. So I’m knocking on wood when I say I hope the mood will be high come New Year’s Day 2009. Thursday, January 1, 2009 marks The Poetry Project’s 35th Annual New Year’s Day Marathon. As always, 100+ poets, musicians, dancers, and performers will take the stage for our biggest fundraiser of the year. The Sanctuary doors will open at 2pm, and the room won’t fall still until I am at the earliest. Many of our luminous favorites will return and, as always, 25 to 35 first-time participants will be joining the ranks. For an early idea of the line-up, please check the calendar insert of this newsletter.

The Parish Hall will be full of books, food, and friends. We’re happy to advertise that we are once again capable of piping in sound from the main event, so volunteers and the like can hear what’s going on. All the more reason to volunteer! Each year we are completely indebted to the near 100 kind souls who donate a few hours of their time to our cause. We are looking for people to sell books, serve food, stamp hands, stack chairs, make change, make signs, tap kegs, meet, greet, and maintain the law. Please email Arlo Quint at info@poetryproject.com if you are interested in helping out. Feel free to tell him what part of the day or night is convenient for you, as well as which jobs you may or may not prefer.

Arlo is also the point man for food donations. Quite a bit of the day’s revenue comes from what Bill Kushner likes to call “the food court.” Every year our generous neighborhood eateries (and talented-in-the-kitchen friends!) donate delicious food to be sold throughout the day. Look forward to pierogies and pizzas, casseroles and crepes. If you would like to donate baked goods or finger foods, or if you have an in with a restaurant nearby, please step forward!

We are also now accepting donations of books, chapbooks, and other printed or recorded matter. Each year small and not small presses (and some individual authors) offer wares in good-condition to be sold in the Parish Hall. Please contact us in order to arrange drop-offs or shipments. We thank you in advance!

As much as we like to grumble about the work, we are all looking forward to this long-standing community event, and to the delirium and fun that comes with utter exhaustion after half-a-day of sensory upload. Hope to catch you there.

- Corrine Fitzpatrick

TO REVIEW...

One night to go. And drained. Let it be said, and let another say it:

My galley charged with forgetfulness
Thorough sharpe sees in winter nyghtes doeth pas
Tiwene Rock and Rock; and eke myn enemy, Alas,
That is my lorde, sterith with cruelness;
And every owre a thought in redines,
As tho that deth were light in suche a case.
An endless wynd doeth tere the sayll apase
Of forced sightes and trusty ferefulnes.
A rayn of teris, a cloode of derk disdain,
Hath done the wered cords great hinderance;
Wrethed with errour and eke with ignorance.
The starres be hid that led me to this pain;
Drowned is reason that should me consort,
And I remain dispering of the port.

Here’s to going to bed tonight a whole lot brighter.
- John Coletti

ASSISTANCE NEEDED

Bernadette Mayer and Philip Good need to raise money to pay for heating fuel. Already months behind in monthly payments. People can send money to Giorno Poetry Systems (222 Bowery, 3rd Fl., New York, NY, 10012, United States); write “Bernadette Mayer Fund” in the memo.

A CELEBRATION OF FRANK STANFORD

Thirty years after Arkansas poet Frank Stanford’s death, poets from across the country came to Fayetteville, Arkansas, to celebrate his legacy through a three-day festival held October 17-19. The experience was communal and intense. Throughout the weekend over 24 hours worth of poetry was read, including the 16-and-a-half hours it took to read his epic poem, The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You. Begun at approximately 9 p.m. Saturday night, the ten or so folks who remained at 5 a.m. did not think the last lines would actually be uttered. Then dawn broke, and folks returned. Stanford’s childhood friend Bill Willett took over and read for three hours straight from a first edition copy of the book. Then Irv Broughton, Stanford’s editor, read the last pages. By noon the room had filled to 30 who wanted be there when the final lines were uttered. Broughton ushered everyone to the stage and asked them to read along for the last five lines. Out of sync and ecstatic, the chorus grew until the last word, “death,” was triumphantly pronounced. Then the crowd gave a joyous cheer, and everyone there was changed.
- Katy Henriksen

WCW!

Proud parents Erica Svec and Zachary Wollard introduce William Cassius Wollard, born October 13, 2008 at 4:04am, 7lbs 8 oz. Hallelujahs for this elf of elves!!!

ONWARD

Reginald Shepherd, born April 10, 1963 in New York City, passed away on September 10, 2008. Hayden Carruth, born on August 3, 1921, in Waterbury, Connecticut, left us on September 29th, 2008. Friends to poets and poetry both, each will be greatly missed.
Brendan Lorber & Gillian McCain, The Poetry Project, September 24, 2008

Dapper Brendan Lorber’s carefully orchestrated roll-out of his fresh baby daughter took on the appearance of a poetry reading at the Poetry Project. Reflecting concerns about the current economic crises, Lorber’s first poem consisted of purple couplets inscribed upon $1 bills, allowed to drift to the floor one after another. The fluttering bucks landed mostly face up, circled the podium. “Every step brings us closer to nothing but the next step.” He offered a previously undiscovered Blake piece which foreshadowed this presidential election. Lorber ever treads “the line between Molotov & Mosel Tov” and has been noted for his feverish wordplay delivered via deadpan. Now influenced by Aurora, new work represents both bold new moves into the edges of sleeplessness and the joys of finding a new inscrutable editor. Old work such as “The Day Dude Looks Like a Lady Died” ever retains its bubbles. After the break, Gillian McCain celebrated the other side of the coin. A long thread celebrating childlessness permeated her poems and the chapter she read from “the novel that will never be finished,” The Car People: “It was best to stay away from babies...” It is a dread noir populated by a knife-wielding fatale. In a long numbered sequence, characters swirl in at a sinister dinner party, talk centers around California, cars, and Canada. “America along for the ride, we like the sound of baseball, too.” Concerns about invaders and real estate map a nightmare of “shaken babies of the (shattered?) elite.” “Tomorrow our car will go missing, our furniture rearranged, our cat will go borrowed.” Lorber with his Brando-esque The Wild One cap and McCain with a multi-paneled scarf left all gasping. 80 attended, many luminaries included. - Harrison Rodney

***


It was debate night in America, and a conflicted gaggle of poetry stalwarts had chosen James and Eleni over John and Barack. As it turned out, both poets were stumping on behalf of the same curious and little understood entity: the body. James Thomas Stevens started things off with a simple premise: “The body is always involved.” Given that he was reading from a chapbook about bubbles and chimeras, this wasn’t immediately apparent. But as he hit stride with new work focused on the education of Mohawk chief Joseph Brant, the body emerged in confrontation with the disorganizing force of imperial language. As Stevens enlarged Brant’s dilemma to encompass more recent cultural atrocities, he argued that the body is in fact, “the bravest book.” Eleni took a more directly biological slant, as she read from her newest book Body Clock, which details the magical amalgamation that is childbirth in all its temporal complexity. Her poems exquisitely perform this transubstantiation, calling upon “some restless meat” to cast its Spicersian spell over the shifting minutes and hours of motherhood. Railing against debate’s shoddy professionalism, Sikelianos welcomed the messy splendor of the body and even presented her “amateur” drawings, which explore maternal time as an event with pictorial and linguistic residue. Though her readings always astound with their sensual grace, on this occasion Sikelianos also doled out some straight talk: “Now go learn some animal things.” Finally, an education platform I can support. - Chris Martin
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LAB: Tell me the story again of finding Helen Adam’s rock collection.

KP: Oh, those crazy rocks! Basically, the rocks are symbolic of the whole big story about the Helen Adam archive. Helen had a very intense relationship with her stuff—she was a terrific collector of thrift store treasures: vases, art books, and bric-a-brac. Her apartment in San Francisco was jam-packed with all this stuff, and mixed in were her valuable possessions: collages by Jess, books hand-made by Robert Duncan, photographs, childhood notebooks, etc.

Unfortunately, when she moved to New York in the early 1960s, she left so hastily that she just threw everything, valuable or not, into brown paper bags, puzzle boxes, and envelopes. These ended up in Duncan’s basement. When Duncan sold his archive to the Poetry/Rare Books Collection at the University of Buffalo, he gave them Adam’s as well (she got a monthly stipend from this, which was a big help to her).

When she died in 1993 her affairs were in a similar state of disarray—the contents of her apartment were carted away by the state to some warehouse in New Jersey where the boxes sat for six years before going into public auction. In the winter of 2000, a real miracle occurred: Bob Hershon’s son Jed happened to work for a bookstore that also happened to purchase a collection of random, unclaimed boxes—papers, photos, and letters were mixed in with a wide assortment of cool books and...rocks. Jed started sorting these boxes and recognized Helen Adam, who he had met as a child (Helen and Bob were good friends). There was a box of agates—I bought three—mixed in with more ordinary rocks. She collected rocks because she believed that they contained astral beings...she saw faces and shapes in them, and used them to direct her dreams.

Flash forward to 2008. The book is finished, and I’m thinking that the archive is as complete as it will ever be. I mention Helen Adam to my neighbor Andrea Brady, who runs a little antique shop here in Greenpoint. She had never heard of Helen Adam, but somehow the next afternoon she happened to be walking by the bookstore where a box of rocks had just happened to have been thrown into the dumpster. At first she didn’t think much about it—but then she happened to overhear the guys in front of the store talking: “Yeah, those rocks belonged to some writer...Helen Adam.” She got a chill up and down her spine and was compelled to take the box. Luckily she had her van parked not too far away.

LAB: And could you please describe some other moments of discovery as you explored her archives in Buffalo? What other material did you find?

KP: Oh there were many moments. She made a ton of scrapbooks, all devoted to different themes, such as The Evil Eye, Noel Coward, Black Magic, Greta Garbo, The Ballets Russe, and the Threshold of Sleep. I would sit on the floor of the Poetry Collection flipping through these scrapbooks and passing the time immersed in Helen’s world. It was so exciting to me because I was exploring my own poetic relationship to collage and synchronicity. All the signed photographs of old film stars, weird articles from Fate magazine in the 1930s, cut-out fashion models from Vogue in the 1940s. It was intoxicating.

LAB: The scrapbook themes you describe sound strangely like Joseph Cornell, especially the Ballets Russe.

KP: Oh yes, they both had a penchant for collecting glamorous images and objects and transforming them into deeply personal manifestations.

LAB: I remember drinking in her collages when I was at the Robin Blaser Conference in Vancouver at the Emily Carr Art School on Granville Island. That’s one of the first times you
and I hung out, but that wasn’t until 1995. Did we first meet in Boulder or in New York City?

KP: Actually, we first met hanging out in front of St. Mark’s Church in 1991. I had just moved to New York and was working as an editorial assistant at W.W. Norton. Ken Jordan (Reality Sandwich.org) was working there as well—and he introduced me to Bernadette Mayer and insisted that I take her workshop. Her parties were so amazing—all these poets sitting around her table, lounging around her bookshelves. You had crazy outfits—mini-skirts and bright red boots. I remember following you and Laynie Browne up and down Houston Street one evening looking for a party. The Lower East Side was so different then. You would walk several abandoned blocks without seeing anyone at all, and then pop into a building that was dimly lit and tightly crammed with people.

But you know, I think it was through you that I first heard about Helen Adam. You sang a Helen Adam ballad at one of your readings at The Poetry Project in the early 1990s. And I remember we talked about her at a few of Bernadette’s parties. How did you discover her? Were you intentionally exploring the ballad tradition at that time?

LAB: I knew about her ballads and songs before I saw the collages in the show you curated at Emily Carr. When I first moved to NYC around 1987, Larry Fagin made me lots of great mix tapes and sang me some Helen Adam tunes. I mainly remember “In and Out of the Hornbeam Maze” and “Limbo Gate.” I remember the Limbo Gate tune differently than the sheet music, but that’s the way new tunes arise, from remembering and forgetting. I arrived at my version of “I Love My Love” from listening to Lisa Jarnot play it with her rock group, Vole, but I tend to make it sound upbeat which is a good contrast to the creepy story unwinding. When I sang it the other night, I almost sounded like Shirley Temple at one point, as she marches up and down the Good Ship Lollipop: “The naked! The naked! On Hallelujah Day!”

KP: Maybe you can talk about the deeper significance of Helen and the ballad tradition in your own work? I know you were immersed in the ballad tradition before you encountered Helen Adam.

LAB: When I was trying to figure out what a poetics statement might look like—Robert Duncan talks about the rhymes he learned from his nursemaid and how that influenced his sense of prosody—I asked myself what might those parallels be for me and realized my own childhood poetic forms were mainly hymns I learned from my Mom and Girl Scouts and church camp songs which were strangely vaudevillian. (For more on that, see “Buffalo Stance: or Paranoiy Big Destroya” in the anthology, Writing from the New Coast: Theory).

Harry Smith was around too, then, living at Allen Ginsberg’s apartment across the hall from me at 437 East 12th Street, the “Poets’ Building.” Harry taped the whole evening of a party in my apartment. He put the mic on the floorboards of the tenement by the bathtub in the kitchen to get the whole soundscape of the room. I remember Larry singing and playing Elizabeth Cotten songs with lines like “One old women Lord in this town / Keeps a-telling her lies on me.” The importance of folk culture to the poets was becoming clear to me from several angles. I don’t remember Harry talking about Helen Adam per se, but he was instrumental in getting me to appreciate the songs of my upbringing. I was showing a videotape of a childhood friend’s wedding I had just recorded on a trip home to illustrate the sexism I had to put up with in “the South,” and he got really upset that I cut the tape off during the hymn, after the first verse, to save videotape. He helped me recognize the hymns as one of the most important parts of the tape—not just the outrageous choice of Bible verses that were chosen for the wedding—the one saying a woman should obey her husband. I took hymns for granted before, thought them mainstream, that everyone knew them. In Boulder, he also recorded me and my sister Beth (who plays violin on the Daydream of Darkness CD with us) singing all the hymns we could remember and him getting really excited when a squirrel jumped on the roof outside the window at the same moment we sang “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow / Praise him all CREATURES here below” and when we sang “While Shepherds Washed Their Socks By Night” and “We Three Kings of Orient Are / Tried to Smoke a Rubber Cigar.” It was a good shot of privileging playful, ASSOCIATIONAL thinking: the mystical, the sublimity of the absurd, of paying attention to what unfolds in the moment and working from that. A good alternate mix of influence after the theory land of Brown University. There is some strange association and permission I hold about the wild elders: Helen Adam, Harry Smith, and Hannah Weiner. The three H’s!

KP: Oh yes, the three H’s! I remember that wild time when Lisa, Drew Gardner, and I were hanging out in your apartment on Ludlow Street, using the Ouij board to conjure up Helen Adam…and Hannah Weiner appeared instead! Anyway, go on…I love that idea about poetry connecting you to your childhood, your background, your “people” in some sense...

LAB: I also remember listening to a Smithsonian Folkways record with a single Appalachian unaccompanied woman’s voice—it was a moment of recognition. I later more fully realized the connection between the hymns and ballads which were my favorite minor key protestant hymns I grew up singing in the balcony of...
First Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, NC. So I started searching for “minor key” ballads and found out that many of those hymns were originally folk love and drinking songs. For me, Tuli Kupferberg first manifested the model of using other songs’ tunes to make up your own words. He did “I see the White House and I want to paint it black.” Rebby Sharp did that too. “Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall” became “Hard Acid Rain’s a-Gonna Fall.” Helen Adam turned “Black is the Color of My True Love’s Hair” into “Black is the Color of My True Love’s Skin,” that terrifying ballad that deals with lynching. It was “making it new” in a way I could relate to. Hymns were ingrained in my brain, but not so much ballads—they were further back in some cosmic memory, ancestors of the hymns I knew by heart and which taught me prosody and unison singing. Ballads are usually sung solo without instrumentation, which I liked. The air in the room changes when you sing. People pay a different kind of attention. I am also intrigued by the possibilities of ballads sung by everyone in the room at once.

KP: Did you ever meet Helen Adam? I never did. I remember the day she died though...I was hanging out in the Poetry Collection, and the curator Bob Bertholf took me back to see her archive. I was bewitched by her collages, and the rest is history!

LAB: Oh how I wish I could have met Helen Adam! When I first worked at the Poetry Project, Anne Waldman suggested we do a kind of Meals on Wheels program for aging poets who couldn’t get out much. She suggested visiting Helen, but I wasn’t to the point of taking advantage of that power, that possibility. I love that interview Anne did with Helen Adam in the film Poetry In Motion.

KP: Oh yeah, that’s a big hit on YouTube. She sings “Cheerless Junkie’s Song” and tosses her grey hair around as she sings it with great bravado. How did you get the tune for “I Love My Love”?

LAB: After living in NYC from 1987 to 1991 and working at the Poetry Project, I went back for my MFA in poetry at Brown where I met Lisa Jarnot. She played me tapes of Helen Adam from the Buffalo Archive. Maybe this is the same recording you included in the book? Most memorable was “I Love My Love,” which I always call the “Ballad of the Hair.” Lisa also performed a version of it with Vole, with whom I got to record and perform briefly. I loved the idea of how traditional the ballads seemed, plus how new and weird. Some of the first ones I remember reading like that were “My Bed is Thorny,” where she references modern San Francisco streets, and “Apartment at Twin Peaks,” where she eats her husband with friends after taking out an ad in
The San Francisco Chronicle. Such weird juxtapositions of old and new, mythic mixed gleefully with mundane detail.

Which ballads do you “know” the tunes to as versions of Helen’s tunes? Tell me about extant sound and video recording? Who else “knows” the tunes? I would love to learn more. I know there is sheet music too, which I don’t really read. I would rather learn it by ear in the ballad singing tradition.

KP: Helen mostly uses classic Scottish tunes to accompany her ballads. On the DVD that comes with *A Helen Adam Reader* there is a fantastic recording of Helen singing her ballads at the poet John Olson’s kitchen table. The tunes definitely repeat—I got a letter from someone in Scotland who recognized the refrain of “Sweet Mary from Pike” in several of them.

LAB: Or is it “Sweet Betsy from Pike?”

KP: Oh yes, “Sweet Betsy.” Carl Grundberg, a folk singer and composer who lives in the Bay Area, transcribed the tunes to several of her ballads and published the sheet music in a book called *Songs With Music*. And I published a few selections from Grundberg’s transcriptions in *The Reader*.

You and I sang “Kiltory” once, remember? I learned the tune for that one from Ida Hodes, who was the secretary of the Poetry Center in San Francisco where Helen, Duncan, Spicer, and the rest of the gang used to hang out. There was a serious cabaret scene in San Francisco during the 60s, and Ida and Helen would perform together. Those were the days!

A Helen Adam Halloween was a magically charged night here at the Church, wasn’t it? No one does “I Love My Love” like you do—that’s definitely your song.

LAB: I love singing that. I love how the horror slowly dawns on the audience—especially if I lead them in singing it themselves from sheet music. The driving rhythm keeps them going deeper into the first attack of the hair, and then when it comes back again, and especially the refrains with the high “HA HA.”

I am amazed at all the material in this *Collected* you edited: the Spicer Circle Initiation Play, the illuminating Duncan correspondence, her sister’s imagination, the intense bond of imagination they maintained, the “historical” and blues ballads. I love the discussion in the interview of how she wrote while riding a bicycle, working from “some sort of tune” in her mind. “You’re gliding along, which goes with the ballad rhythm.” And then
Kristin Prevallet is the editor of A Helen Adam Reader (National Poetry Foundation, 2007). Her most recent book of poetry is I, Afterlife: Essay in Mourning Time. She teaches writing at St John’s University and lives in Brooklyn.

Lee Ann Brown is the author of The Sleep That Changed Everything (Weslyan University Press) and Polyverse (Sun & Moon Press). She is the editor of Tender Buttons press and teaches poetry at places like St. John’s University and Naropa.

THE STEPMOTHER

My lord’s young daughter in the earth finds rest. They laid her doll upon her shrouded breast; So the waxen image, with its crown of glass, Is the child’s companion under churchyard grass.

I had little liking for that silent child, With her ways so quiet, and her eyes so wild. And the first wife’s beauty in her wistful face To stir his memories and mock my place.

She had no playmates, and was much alone. To secret cruelties I will not own. It was only, only that I could not bear His smile of pleasure when he called her fair.

This house is older than the old thorn trees. Its rooms all echo with the roar of the seas. At night, if a child cried, nobody would hear. But what should be stirring for a child to fear?

A month of sea mists, and at last, she died. He knelt down weeping at the new grave side. My words of comfort stammered into air. The headstone trembled, and the doll stood there.

My heart beat heavy when its eyes met mine. Black eyes shining bitter and malign. He lifted up his head when he heard me groan, And it darted silently behind the stone.

I looked in my mirror in the evening late. (A young child dying puts an end to hate) The flames of the candles sprang an azure blaze. As the mirror tarnished ‘neath the doll’s dark gaze.

My deep rose garden in the noonday light Was balmy refuge from the dreams of night. A rose tree shuddering where no wind blew, The red leaves fluttered as the doll pushed through.

The feet that follow me are light as air. I turn to look and there is no one there. The hands stretched out to me are weak and small, Yet hold me helpless in their evil thrall.

My husband’s kisses give me no more joy, Our bed so menaced by the sleepless toy. It parts the curtains when the moon shines clear. Its pygmy shadow is the night I fear.

It parts the curtains of the nuptial bed. I never loved her, but she’s dead, she’s dead! She lies in darkness, and her woes are done. The doll from the deep grave walks in the sun.

A month of sea mists and the end of tears. Alas! for me how many months, or years? They laid her doll upon her shrouded breast. The child lies asleep, but the doll won’t rest.
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DECEMBER 2008/JANUARY 2009 13
An Introduction to Two Poems by Karen Weiser

by Stephanie Young

“We come into the world. We come into the world and there it is.” That’s Juliana Spahr at the beginning of Gentle Now Don’t Add to Heartache, a poem about life cycles and developmental stages. Those lines won't stop ringing in my head as I read and re-read these new poems by Karen Weiser. There’s about a million ways to read this connection my head keeps making between the world of Karen’s writing, as embodied in the grail of these few poems I’ve been reading, and the world of Gentle Now Don’t Add to Heartache. Right now I’m thinking how I am at the beginning of a very particular life cycle: my development as Karen’s reader. And so I am in that stage with these poems where one is struck, hopefully not too dumb, by having been born into these works, and having begun, there’s no going back. There’s no being unborn inside the world of these poems, in being their reader. Which isn’t to say I haven’t been casting into the past of Karen’s writing, as far back as my bookshelves go, namely to the tune of Pitching Woo, published by Dana Ward’s Cy Press.

When I say Dana Ward, I mean the way that poems and readers are never born into vacuums; they’re born into families. And when I said "grail" a few sentences ago, I wanted to place my hand, the hand of this introduction, on Karen’s evocation of Jack Spicer in the introduction for her book To Light Out—particularly the infinite disturbance that is Spicer’s insistence on poetry as transmission of spaces that squeezes words like “virtue” through our very pores: “a mighty history patching up its root system / to emerge in the pause of identification as work.”

I have so much further to fall, and I haven’t even gotten to the particular struggle with which these poems engage: sight, of all kinds, mistaking one thing for another, supremely, by accident, to see further than one intended, into the blind spot that is culture, or biology, having had ways of looking and casting about, casting them off and on again in sound.

Stephanie Young lives and works in Oakland. Her books are Picture Palace (in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni, 2008) and Telling the Future Off (Tougher Disguises, 2005). She edited the anthology Bay Poetics (Faux Press, 2006). Find her online sometimes: www.stephanieyoung.org/blog.

When I Say Virtue, I’ve Fallen from My Chair

At the end of the table is an ocean to cross
and an ocean is never in shambles
like a book with thirty-four decks burns
St. Elmo’s fire against the white leaf
da door you stand to apprehend

Close your dream and push it away
a sterile miracle of your inner fine ghost
is a morgue with an imprint of sea and continents
a mighty history patching up its root system
to emerge in the pause of identification as work

Visit the planets, take your mind off your eyes
you see assembled around you
what you know. What more do you want
to push through this damaged surface
bric-a-brac hanging from every word
where the red tape should be
BUT I DAREN’T SEE

But I daren’t see in the clumsiness of my thoughts
upholstered with ideas continually there
heart beat vistas with a bundle of damp
personal papers, hands, errors, light
wet with inheritance dress, mutation’s habit

While you wait to return your lace, your furniture
is copied, and by furniture I mean DNA,
spiraling into its own pulse
drinking the ancient transparent dream
emanating from the mattresses that are
our bodies. Put a finger on that run of notes
this is life and its laws are merely habits
bedding gravity with panorama in mind

Can you see—
those things you taught yourself to ignore
the colossus of them, with a historian’s pity
and the corresponding failures of office
inside our herd of selves, a golden network
of selves, under the thatched roof-shade
of our present shepherd—
sink into the gravity of indistinct sound?

Karen Weiser’s first full-length collection To Light Out will be published by Ugly Duckling Presse in the not too distant future. You can read her correspondence with the indomitable Anne Waldman in Letters to Poets: Conversations about Poetics, Politics, and Community (Saturnalia Books, 2008).
DECEMBER

MONDAY 12/1
OPEN READING
Sign-in 7:45 PM

WEDNESDAY 12/3
ED ROBERSON & GAIL SCOTT
Ed Roberson is author of seven books of poetry, most recently City Eclogue. He has climbed mountains in the Peruvian and Ecuadorian Andes, motorcycled across the U.S. and traveled in West Africa. Retired from Rutgers University, he lives in Chicago where he is Writer in Residence at Northwestern University. His next book, The New Wing of the Labyrinth, is due out this year. Gail Scott is current recipient of the Quebec Arts Council New York Studio grant. She co-edited Biting The Error and her books include My Paris, Spare Parts Plus Two, Main Brides, Heroine, and Spaces Like Stairs la théorie. She teaches Creative Writing at Université de Montréal.

FRIDAY 12/5 [10 PM]
HEY, WHAT’S ALL THE HOOPLAH?
Forget the impending breadlines, grab your polka-dotted canvas bindle, bundle up and bustle your way over to hear the tales of times past. Polka-dotted canvas bindle, bundle up and forget the impending breadlines, grab your polka-dotted canvas bindle.

MONDAY 12/8
LOUIS CABRI & KEVIN VARRONE
Louis Cabri’s current projects include a study of Zukofsky and the Language Poets, a collection of essays on contemporary poetics, and anthologizing a poets-in-dialogue series he edited and curated (PhillyTalks, 1997-2001). He wrote The Mood Embosser, a book of poems. Kevin Varrone is the author of g-point Almanac and g-point Almanac: id est. He lives and works in Philadelphia.

JANUARY

THURSDAY 1/1 [2 PM - ]
THE 35TH ANNUAL NEW YEAR’S DAY MARATHON READING

MONDAY 12/15
DAVID LARSEN & C.J. MARTIN
Newly relocated from the Bay Area, David Larsen is pursuing postgraduate work. His first book of poetry is called The Thorn, and he has translated Names of the Lion by Abu Abd Allah ibn Khalawayh. From 2005-2007 he was co-curator of the New Yipes reading/video series at Oakland’s 21 Grand. C.J. Martin edits the Dos Press chapbook series, as well as the online journal Little Red Leaves with Julia Drescher. He’s the author of Lo, Bittern, and CITY.
The Poetry Project

Monday 1/5
On Contemporary Poetry, Launch Reading
ON features twenty-one essays by poets ON poets of their approximate generation. Come find out what’s going ON and celebrate this new publication featuring exchanges ON contemporary poetry and poetics. Contributors include Taylor Brady, C.A. Conrad, Michael Cross, Thom Donovan, Jen Hofer, Sawako Nakayasu, Brenda Iijima, Alan Gilbert, Andrew Levy, Tim Peterson, Alii Warren, Suzanne Stein, and more. Readers include C.A. Conrad, Thom Donovan, Brenda Iijima, Tim Peterson, Andrew Levy, Kyle Schlesinger, and more t.b.a.

Wednesday 1/7
Mitch Highfill & Katy Lederer
Mitch Highfill is the author of 7 books of poetry, including Moth Light and REBIS. His work has appeared in OCHO & Critiphoria. Katy Lederer is the author of Winter Sex and The Heaven-Sent Leaf as well as the memoir Poker Face: A Girlhood Among Gamblers. Katy was an Iowa Arts Fellow, and serves as a Poetry Editor of Fence Magazine. For many years, she edited her own journal, Explosive.

Monday 1/12
Cyrus Console & Jessica Dessner
Cyrus Console is from Topeka, Kansas. His first book, Brief Under Water, is available from Burning Deck Press. He lives in Lawrence, Kansas. Jessica Dessner is slowly making the transition from dancer/ choreographer to poet/visual artist. Her chapbook, Wit’s End with Bric-a-Brac, was published in 2006. Her drawings will be featured in the artwork for two record releases, the Welcome Wagon’s Welcome to the Welcome Wagon, and Osso’s Run Rabbit, Run.

Wednesday 1/14
Samuel R. Delany & Renee Gladman
Critic and novelist Samuel R. Delany published his first novel, The Jewels of Aptor, in 1962 at the age of 20. Since then he has gone on to become one of the most widely influential science fiction writers in America. His latest novel is Dark Reflections, and Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders is forthcoming. He is a professor of English and creative writing at Temple University. Renee Gladman is the author of four books, most recently Newcomer Can’t Swim. Toaf is forthcoming this fall. Gladman is editor and publisher of Leon Works, an independent press for experimental prose, and she teaches fiction at Brown University.

Friday 1/16 [10 PM]
Michael Basinski & Justin Katko
Michael Basinski is the curator of The Poetry Collection at SUNY Buffalo. He performs his work as a solo poet and in ensemble with Buffluxus. Among his books are Of Venus 93, All My Eggs Are Broken, Heka, Strange Things Begin to Happen When a Meteor Crashes in the Arizona Desert, and Auxin. Justin Katko is a poet and publisher. He edits the small press Critical Documents, which specializes in contemporary poetry from the UK and the US. He is completing an MFA in Electronic Writing at Brown University.

Wednesday 1/12
Bob Perelman & Craig Watson
Bob Perelman is the author of numerous books of poetry, including If/ Life, Ten to One, and, in collaboration with painter Francie Shaw, Playing Bodies; and two critical books, The Trouble with Genius and The Marginalization of Poetry. He teaches at the University of Pennsylvania. Craig Watson currently serves as an associate artistic director for a professional theater in Rhode Island. His eleven books of poetry began with Drawing A Blank and most recently include True News and Secret Histories.

Monday 1/26
Talk Series: Jim Dunn & Michael Carr — On Editing the Work of John Wieners
Michael Carr and Jim Dunn will discuss elements that have shaped John Wieners’ published works since the early 70s. What constitutes his poetic work at that time comes as readily in prose, notes, jottings, ad-libbed readings, and interviews. From that time onward, Wieners’ books have been seen through from manuscript to print with someone acting in the role of editor. This dynamic continues to shape the work of the poet John Wieners as interest in his work continues to grow and more of his writing comes into print. Michael Carr is the editor of Wieners’ A Book of Prophecies (Bootstrap, 2007) and Jim Dunn is editing Wieners’ A New Book from Rome (forthcoming from Bootstrap).

Wednesday 1/28
Ed Sanders & Kazuko Shiraishi
Edward Sanders, poet, historian, and musician, is the author of America, a History in Verse, a nine-volume history of the United States, 1450-2000. Other books include Tales of Beatnik Glory; 1968, a History in Verse; The Poetry and Life of Allen Ginsberg; The Family, and Chekhov. Sanders was the founder of The Fugs, which has released numerous albums and CDs during its 44 year history. Kazuko Shiraishi is one of Japan’s foremost poets. Her books include Seasons of Sacred Lust, A Canoe Returns to the Future, Sand Families, Let Those Who Appear and The Running of the Full Moon. At the age of 17 Shiraishi became a member of the VOU surrealist group. Her poems have been translated into more than 20 languages. New Directions will publish her collection My Floating Mother, City in 2009.
As after all disasters, after Katrina one needs new language forms to recover event from the abuses of media and historical representation alike. In their own ways, both Brett and Frank’s **Ready-To-Eat Individual** and Rob’s **Disaster Suites** have recourse to lyrical poetry, though not without qualification, and significant renovations. As Rob’s post-face to **Disaster Suites**, “Post-Disaster,” recognizes, the language of lyrical poetry cannot disavow its complicity with the social formations (and the language effects of those formations) which contribute to, and produce, disparity and injustice. Not least of these effects is one that has been most privileged by “avant garde” and mainstream poets in the past forty years: irony. As Rob elaborates:

I’m afraid there’s an all too familiar irony that occasionally enters the poems, and this unsettles me. A voice seems to take shape around a comfortable air of fakeness—“I am cronyism’s phony double”—the irony of direct statement, the swagger of rhetorical effect as if what will have happened were what is already happening now. Some of the poems thus dispense fatally with the promising gap between tenses, and instead presume the suppression of time’s discontinuities, filling in the fault non-contemporaneity, time’s disjointedness that the mind, like ideology, passes over and seals. The performance of smoothness, the insurance of the present by way of a contracted voice, sometimes sounds like a bad imitation of empire’s temporality, as the tone of time hardens into structure, and amplifies what can’t be heard this being the sound of everything deafening rather than toning, readying. I’d prefer a song more delicate and exposed, where the risk of address risk of hearing something other than myself remains vulnerable, as opposed to, say, the false note of a voice turning away from distraction, hollow gesture of absorbed autonomy poetry’s last line of defense, commodity’s front line of attack a dire stand against disaster, perhaps, but insincere. (p. 69, **Disaster Suites**)

I am interested in Rob’s description of his poems’ voice(s), as they correlate his own book with Brett’s and Frank’s. That one should attempt lyrical poetry after disaster—though it risks a “hardening” of the voice and thus the reproduction of “empire”—is to rethink address—who is speaking, who is being spoken to—as central to the poem’s meaning.

While **Ready-to-Eat Individual** is constantly critical of conditions in New Orleans, and with the United States at large in relation to geopolitics, what makes this critical position most successful is the pleasure it yields through humor, wit, and prosodic valuables. Puns move the work from line to line, and page to page; so does a certain cartoonish gallows humor, with reproduced (head)lines (in bold letters, and with a page all to themselves—as though film intertitles) like “My other car is a martyr.” As with
the work of Judith Goldman, Louis Cabri, Gregg Biglieri, Kyle Schlesinger, and others (in terms of contemporary poetry), or much Rap music, I find this use of punning as a critical vehicle particularly effective, inasmuch as it invites participation in the poem’s discourse, its various levels of meaning.

In terms of the sonic and rhythmic qualities of the book, *Ready-to-Eat Individual* takes up the idiom(s) of New Orleans natives (Creole, Black, and white Southern English). The insistence of native voices and speech rhythms grounds the poetry as both part of a local conversation and as an artifact of voices now threatening to disappear as New Orleans threatens to disappear as a cultural center. What also grounds the poetry, as a poetry of “local color” and discourse, are the many references to proper names specific to the city, and to news coverage after Katrina.

My mama your mama what color was the brood?  
Shape of Dome mothership ex haust and okra for the horse  
to keep at bay Bill Jefferson action fig. in Nosferotutu bangs out a Gus Ferrote—Hey Voters

why not
have this
thick dick
on a stick

(*Ready-To-Eat Individual, xvi*)

In the spirit of Charles Reznikoff’s *Testimony* volumes, Langston Hughes’ *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Ed Sanders’ *America: a History in Verse*, and other “documentary” poetics, one may consider *Ready-to-Eat Individual* an extensive, documentary poem. Throughout the book are peppered numerous headlines from newspaper, television, and internet sources; lists of objects found at construction sites; post-storm graffiti, public signage and overheard speech; lyrics from Rap songs; doggerel and limerick. While much of this material is recognizable from national media about New Orleans after Katrina, much of it is also bringing news of Katrina only someone on the ground (like Brett, a native of New Orleans, and Frank, who helped to rebuild after Katrina) could bring.

Something the book shares in common with certain poems from Rob’s *Disaster Suites* (as well as Tonya Foster’s post-Katrina writings and visual art, which I would have also liked to address here) is their intimacy of address. Nearing the end of the book, especially, the poem’s tone becomes increasingly close-by and warm, as the “I” of the poem locates itself in relation to a “you”—the reader, a lover, the citizens of New Orleans forsaken after Katrina, left to feel “at-home in / the post-apocalypse”—and a “we” emerges to address another form of “you”:

I appreciate the instructor deeply but I’ve already mastered the lessons of misunderstanding

the city is too dirty
for you You’re right
you might be too clean

for me though my doubts are arousing I want you dirty enough to be comfortable

& relax  How did I get so at-home in the post-apocalypse?

(*Ready-To-Eat Individual, liii*)

I see a lot of raw material but tonight is not someday & we want that shine to guide us home  
We can smell our way through this world but why should we have to Give us what you got mother fucker  
Give us what you got

(*Ready-To-Eat Individual, lxxi*)

While in *Ready-to-Eat Individual* there is a sense that one is being invited into a local conversation, full of anger and frustration and concern, but also emboldened by a sense of solidarity—that people are bound together by the same fucked-up situation—it may be interesting how Rob provides a similar feeling in *Disaster Suites*, however in a non-localizing way. While Brett and Frank overcome the hardened, ironic voices of empire through a site-specific dialogue—the fact that their book prioritizes local particulars that necessarily touch other localities and global situations—Halpern allegorizes lyrical poetry’s complicity with an entire global network of social disasters which include Katrina, and even become determined by Katrina (Rob’s book was begun immediately after the storm, and completed as the first draft of a manuscript following the death of his close friend and colleague, kari edwards; *Disaster Suites’* cover also features drawings, drawn from memory by the artist, after photographs of homes devastated by Katrina), but also encompass movements between sites, and beyond site itself towards all that is being made invisible, occulted by the fatal abstractions of capital.

To trace all that *Disaster Suites* relates would be too difficult a task for a short review like this one (please see my pieces at Wild Horses of Fire blog, at the Nonsite Collective’s website, and forthcoming at Jacket for more on Rob’s work). There is the
Iraq war, the military-industrial complex, organ harvesting, genetic engineering, genetic modification of crops, land use, commodity exchange, labor exploitation—all of the bad effects of a beefed-up neoliberalism. But if I could emphasize a connection between these two books, it is the sense that both are searching for a new relationship between the writer/poem and reader, one mediated by affect, and the affective modalities, specifically, of one’s being related by inextricable disasters across an entire social nexus.

Through affection (which is not the antithesis of irony, and, in fact, probably its complement, or inversion) the form of the poem wants us to feel anew, as well as think anew through some felt aspect or tonality of the poem. Similar to some works by Robert Creeley, or the breeziness of much New Narrative, in the poems of Disaster Suites the reader finds themselves in the throes of a projectivist (that is, breath-based) negative dialectics. But whereas Creeley’s poetry is distinctly straight (despite recent attempts to queer it, such as in many of CAConrad’s wonderful poems from Deviant Propulsion, or Michael Davidson’s and Charles Altieri’s takes on Creeley and embodiment), Disaster Suites opens up to new erotic possibilities—erotic possibilities activated by Rob’s unique person of course, but also by an unprecedented historical situation that lyrical poetry and the arts at large are trying to respond to and find their way out of (as though from the singularity of a black hole). The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and forthcoming in any number of geopolitical “hot spots”; the intensifying regulation of social space; the Siren’s call of the mass media; the anesthetization of large parts of the population through...

Domestic oil turns disaster into peace-making
Opportunities, renewed production, settlements
—and money, which is what I thought I had

Dreamt you thinking. Out loud, we were leaden
As the sun. We were out harvesting wind
—selling smog and low-population land

But now I only want you to hold me
The way you might hold a mirror to my fat
Fertile slopes, these bodies at rest

—not knowing what our flesh can do.
(p. 61, Disaster Suites)

What inspires me about Rob’s work in relation to Bretts’s and Frank’s is the opening upon new ways to be intimate, and create new affective situations through a lyric that does not disavow disaster but makes of disaster coevalness, intimacy, and thus possibility. Such situations of poetic address may lead the way towards reimagining a commons, and ways of talking to each other when it is too easy to get bogged-down in all that is depressing and morose about our particular historical moment (post-Bush, pre-something else perhaps even scarier).

Watching Sarah Palin speak on television and internet recently (and realizing once again the post-Reagan power of gesture-driven political performance) these new modes of affect are everything for my generation (and future generations, I suspect), and perhaps something setting us apart from our parent generation. That the affective must lead to new forms of thought and civic responsibility is something Spinoza thought through centuries ago, before the Enlightenment swept in and colonized all that was radical about his philosophy. Post-disaster, we are realizing anew how to render affect effective for discourse, and create new locations for engagement, intimacy, social interaction and, even, love.

Thom Donovan is an active participant in the Nonsite Collective (www.nonsitecollective.org), a coeditor of ON: Contemporary Practice (oncontemporaries@wordpress.org), edits Wild Horses of Fire blog (whof.blogspot.com) and curates Peace Events (formerly Peace On A). He lives in New York City, where he is an archivist, teacher and writer.

MARCELLA DURAND AREA
BELLADONNA BOOKS / 2008
REVIEW BY PAUL FOSTER JOHNSON

AREA, the first of two new poetry collections by Marcella Durand released this year, is admirable for its interdisciplinarity. Durand applies a range of knowledge from urban studies to the physical and natural sciences in a series of spatial and ecological engagements. The poems also make frequent reference to visual media, especially painting, as means of demonstrating perceptual relationships in these environments.

A book that places such emphasis on seeing could be expected to calibrate its observations to the viewing subject. While there is an “I” in many of the poems, perspective is mobile and the eye functions as a relay point for the flow of information.

As a face emerges in an automated identification program, the last to appear are eyes: as the most visible. It takes opacity to capture light. The tapetum lucidum at the end of the eyes is the most reflective object. In translucency it appears dark. At the end of the eye, the retina amplifies light. At the end of vision, another you, me, more phosphorescence, shimmering in a trail we made moving through space. (“Remote Sensing,” p. 26)

Here perception belongs to no one, and eyes are seen rather than seeing; interiority is rejected in favor of pure movement. Throughout the book, images shift rapidly between human and telescopic scale. As the poems create an ambiance of surveillance, they call on us to track each viewpoint relative to the others, as a sort of provisional map.

These maps sometimes ground movement in a social context and a knowable totality. In just two lines of “False Color View,” invis-
ible and odorless carbon monoxide is traced from industrial fans into a river, then into the mouths of migrating fish, and finally to the dinner table. Such passages are recognizable as concrete examples of environmental injustice.

Yet there is also an equally familiar paranoia about that which lies beyond the limits of sense. For each closed loop, there is an instance where sensory capabilities are unsuitable or unavailable to capture all of the data, to force objects to disclose themselves fully. Later in the same poem, we are told that “to be wary means discovering the drippy spring” as it emerges from a hidden source under a rock and runs on to an unknown destination. For this reader, wariness is next to the queasiness produced by gazing at the mysterious, colorful film on the water in the Gowanus Canal.

“The Orange Line” playfully explores these boundaries of perception. The line operates in the poem as a physical limit, as aesthetic appearance, and as a materializing or dematerializing force. Trying to make sense of the phenomena, the viewer contemplates whether the line is spiritual or corporeal and, accordingly, whether she is “too practical” or “too abstract.” The line thwarts all deliberations, and the exasperated viewer ultimately determines that the line can only be “defined in negatives.”

Many of the poems in AREA are in longer and/or serial forms, which provide an excellent vehicle for sustained treatments of specific sites. “The Anatomy of Oil” recounts extensive exploration in the vicinity of oil deposits. While being driven through a desert, the viewer is fascinated by a massive rock and fixates on her inability to stop the car and take a closer look. It is not clear whether this curiosity is scientific or aesthetic. It could be a geological interest or a visceral response to the inaccessibility of the rock’s sublime magnitude. This excerpt from the poem would suggest both:

what are we but
separate one I you
another over there
no stone fits each
layer different
each other color
red and brown and
orange dark, we are
not we us no we
but then what
is oil? but millions
of creatures crushed
one into another
shoulder
to shoulder (pp. 71-72)

Despite the incomprehensible number of creatures required to create this commodity, it can nonetheless be recognized, at least partially, as “us.” Fissures and seams delineate “I” and “you,” but they do not achieve identity, instead registering negatively in the “layer” they occupy. In its objective properties, the place from which oil is extracted manages to tell us something about ourselves. (This powerful interrogation simultaneously casts the global exchange of oil in a new and ghoulish light.) Throughout the book, Durand brilliantly shows how space is constituted by history and by everyday life. There is a remarkable rigor to these investigations as they move through technological and geographic force fields, yet AREA is at its most challenging when at a loss to provide a complete account and troubled by the remainder.


LISA JARNOT
NIGHT SCENES
FLOOD EDITIONS / 2008
REVIEW BY EDMUND BERRIGAN

Lisa Jarnot’s fourth full-length book of poetry, Night Scenes, is a bastion of glorious gibberish and rhyme, digging into poetry’s roots, namely song, to create a fresh-feeling and thoroughly enjoyable read. Okay, it isn’t all gibberish, but it’s about as fun to read, and the spirit of “Jabberwocky” is present, especially in the beginning. Jarnot also summons or mentions Tennyson, Malery, Keats, Phillip Sydney, and Hardy. Their various metric influences give her a stable structure to exploit for her playful language treks, which add a nice twist to Jarnot’s various repertoire of effects.

The first time I saw Lisa Jarnot read was in Buffalo in the summer of 1993. She was wearing glasses, a suit, hair pulled back, smoking a cigarette, and had a chapbook called The Fall of Orpheus. A rather poety-poet is what I probably thought (I was 19, and had a surplus of shallow observation). A few years later in San Francisco I read Some Other Kind Of Mission and was excited by it…in a Velvet Underground & Nico way but without the leather, etc. It was a book/collage project full of exciting work, the kind of poetry I wanted to be reading & writing—seemingly ‘experimental’ but messy, and not a hammer-to-the-head textual disquisition. In subsequent years, Ring of Fire and Black Dog Songs appeared. Good books: delineating catalogues of finely cut logos and wildlife with varying shades of Whitman, Ginsberg—even a little biblical— but short-lined and embracing of obscurity. The poems are playful, with repetition as a borderline mannerism.

Jarnot’s writing in Night Scenes bears some similarities but begins with a deeper dive into sound play than usual for her work. The first poem in the book is titled “Sinning Skel Misclape.” Here’s the first stanza:
O sinning skel miscrape thy lock
from frenzied felpred feefs
and longitudes of long tongued fuels
unpebble-dashed deceased.

Not sure what a “Misclape” is, nor a “Gemingfeld” as appears later
in the book, maybe some extras from the Dark Crystal. I used to
have a pair of earmuffs I liked to think were a fizzgig. Anyway,
rolling syllables off the tongue, letting sound do the driving, but
keeping the feel loose seems to be a mode in a number of these
poems, as is letting alliteration and classical rhyme structures order
the points of song. “Husband Sonnet One” and the adjoining
“Husband Sonnet Two” are good examples of the latter trait. Here’s a bit of each:

like Dante in his mid-life’s wood,
a sheep’s mid-life is stout and good
like beer that ambers from a tap
or maple running wine tree sap
you sheep of silence play along
in dreams my husband sleeps among

(from “Husband Sonnet One”)

like Malory without his bail
who labored over Arthur’s death
while he himself in prison depths
molester of the nuns and cows,
my gentle husband, he’s not thou.

(from "Husband Sonnet Two")

Over the course of her books, Jarnot has shown a great adeptness
at handling forms. Night Scenes balances its sonnets and playfulness
with a few other kinds of work that hint at some other directions
Jarnot could take. “Self Portrait” reads more like a transient still
life, portraying the details around her rather than engaging in any
kind of self-analysis, though she does let some joy slip in:

was thrown out of the Charleston,
with a wheely-cart for my luggage,
two tranquilizers, four Prozac,
minor elk viewing, movie stardom
an the greatest waves of
happiness this sixth day of July.

Jarnot seems as at home in this kind of writing as in more audio-
phillic works such as the opening poem, and in the more repeti-
tion-heavy style she sometimes employs. Balancing the book in the
middle is a collection of fifty numbered couplets including “Whole
Hog,” an amusing work written after Barrett Watten that initially
reads somewhat like a minimalist political manifesto by Snowball
from Animal Farm, or perhaps just a condensed short story:

1
The pig is complete.
Barns demand limits.

2
Pigs fall down to create drama.
The materials are hoof.

3
Daylight accumulates in work yards.
Farm hands substitute for suns.

Night Scenes is interesting (ha-ha), in that it seems very personal
without being revealing, and is expansive through its technique
and use of certain kinds of details (historical figures, wildlife repres-
entations) rather than, say, political commentary or over-reaching
thematics. It seems a bit on the short side with only 60-ish pages
of poems, but that length also suits the kinds of quiet joys that
make it such a pleasure to read.

Edmund Berrigan is currently editing The Selected Poems of Steve
Carey, due out from Subpress in 2009.

SESHHU FOSTER
WORLD BALL NOTEBOOK
CITY LIGHTS PUBLISHERS / 2009
REVIEW BY DIANA HAMILTON

with this unique experience you should be able to
[defibrillate the dead
with this fishbone you ought to be able to fix your car
with this terrific amigo you should be able to buy some
[shoes
with this chilly reception you should be able to get wild

(from “game 53”)

The poem excerpted above from Sesshu Foster’s World Ball
Notebook implicates the book in hand as the “with this” in question:
with this book of poems, it asks, each one titled “game 1” through
“game 118” (inclusive), what should you be able to do? The list
given sets a pretty high standard for what to accomplish with small
tools, but the utilitarian mantra stands in contrast to the book’s
more looming repeated item: this is all a game. In a game, you
should be able to win, or lose, but not much else. And if the book
itself fails, we’re to get wild with the chilly reception instead.

The use of the word “game” as every poem’s title has many
implications, but after its first allusion (soccer), it highlights
Foster’s decision to use many different forms—including the let-
ter, the list, fill-in-the-blank, prose, linebreaks, instructions, and
multiple choice—without attaching much meaning to form’s
choice, allowing “game” to remain playful, even when it begins to reference writing rather than sport. If he’s just playing, it’s enough to try things out.

Which gets to the bulk of World Ball Notebook, a book very much about trying. First, you have one main speaker trying, through various forms, voices, and poems, to pin down a set of contexts that make up the larger game implicated in the claim to worldliness the book’s title makes—trying too to navigate literal roads, less literal identities, and shifts between time that get in the way of narrowing scope—trying finally to make room for other characters within all this—all the while not trying much for resolution. There is also the constant trying that is parenting, that is wanting to say, and most of all, wanting to record. At its most serious moments, World Ball Notebook is trying to witness. In “game 4,” which reads much like a spell or a prophecy, we learn,

The person without ideas or imagination is to pour one teaspoon of ashes on the back of a running pronghorn antelope, or try to; pour one teaspoon on the back of a buffalo, or try to; pour another teaspoon on the first new snow anywhere;

The poem details how various people ought to get rid of their ashes, getting at some need to bury the dead, but it also reassures the instructions’ target that it’s enough to try these things out. Throughout, the types specified are referred to as “the one” or “the person”; Foster uses vagueness as a way to get towards a less confining specificity. He exploits the ambiguity of pronouns to conflate the people and experiences of those he occasionally names, making use of some sort of memory (or ashes) without reducing the poems to history. Sometimes, this seems to happen to “protect the innocent,” so to speak, but often, it does just the opposite, implicating others (especially the narrator himself) in circumstances in which they would not play a direct role without the accusation of grammar, of sentences’ proximity. In a poem midway through the book (game 49), a list of sentences involving a hesitance to speak produces a pair of lines that gets closest at how nearness can imply guilt:

I never told her I was standing on the balcony and saw
[them through the window.

She had not said she’d been raped nor did she ever
[mention it.

(from “game 49”)

Comparing this to the other lines from the same poem, the accusation is just a result of the latter sentence taking on so much weight; these two events are only simultaneous in the experience of reading. But somehow, throughout World Ball Notebook, the nearness gets to be too much to claim innocence, and part of the game is becoming aware of the games happening nearby. That is how a scene describing helping his daughter’s soccer team set up the nets in the morning is changed, later in the book, by Foster’s description of a different game entirely, “game 66,” in which, The black boys attach a chain to the big chainlink gate of fence running along a field, the playing field at night; the chain attached to the other end to the bumper of a car whose driver cannot hear them scream when the chain, becoming taut as the car drives off down the street into the dark, loops around several boys yoking them together...

while back in “game 43,” when “the girls would roll out languid, cold and sleepy,” a premonition of danger comes: the poem/game ends abruptly with the sentence, “Something might break.”

In an interview with Eileen Tabios from Black Lightening: Poetry-in-Progress, Foster said, “I have a background that I often have had to simplify for people...who come from outside that experience.” World Ball Notebook works through that tendency to oversimplify, offering explanation of heritage mostly through the contexts and experiences to which the speaker is or has been submitted, while at the same time allowing identity to remain in its simplest, most dangerous form: the implied unity of the persistent, emphatic I/me that rolls throughout the book, or the ball that many games have in common. In the middle of all this, the book invites in what might not belong—a shopping list creeps into one of the poems, or Che shirts appear across a scene—but also makes some acknowledged omissions, substituting blanks for words, or beginning lists with numbers that don’t seem to begin where prior pages left off. Because so much of the book is based around a single actor’s perspective, such choices can be seen to mirror the act of perception itself, where some things simply flicker in and out of view, and where meetings between previously unconnected characters or events are forged within one person’s ability to notice. World Ball Notebook is at its strongest in those moments where the notebook itself takes on that role. The ruled lines of a notebook take control in a book where the logic of the list becomes the backbone of urban collectivity, and where the game becomes written instruction as much as an invitation to play.

Diana Hamilton is a co-coordinator of the Friday Night Series at the Poetry Project.

DANA WARD
GOODNIGHT VOICE
HOUSE PRESS / 2008
REVIEW BY MIKE HAUSER

What is “voice?” Ron Padgett’s poem from the 1970’s “Voice” pokes fun at the idea of poets “finding their voice,” as if it was something they’d lost, like a misplaced copy of The Village Voice. The poem ends with the declaration “I hope I never find mine. I / wish to remain a phony for the rest of my life.” But the sense of a voice is evident even in that poem, and in a lot of poetry that isn’t simply flattened-out monologue. In her essay “Voice” in Coming After, Alice Notley argues for a vocality that’s located in the text. “Poetry is vocal,” and voice comes from the body, which is a part-source for the poem. Or, put it this way, no one that I know of has ever written a poem without having a body.
Notley’s essay ends with this prescription: “the voice must be clear about itself in some way, believe itself, and be consistently unafraid.” Dana Ward begins the titular poem of Goodnight Voice this way: “As a simple container of impulse I hew / to her book.” In these lines you can feel the exhalation and inhalation. But it isn’t just Dana speaking. In the dazzling “That Alice Notley & Jay-Z & Dana Would Speak Through The Imperfect Medium Of Dana,” several voices are channeled and cross-channeled:

No one can separate my owl ferocity out from my supine champagne slouch my immanent flow from my metrical dead lock my dreams from my knowledge of death or my grief.
The self I make up from constituent loves is a singular thing that the market can alter the horror of being unloved, selling poorly & each new occasion may it change forever from standing on that corner hopping to finding the measure I need

Here’s a poem echoing Notley’s “Jack Would Speak Through The Imperfect Medium Of Alice” through her and Jay-Z’s vocabulary simultaneously. The word “media” is substituted for “medium.” A psychic mixtape is delivered on the tongue. Can one voice be peeled apart from the next? No need! “As a simple container of impulse,” this is a book where multiple ascending helices of voice are heard, but no intimacy of address is lost.

It’s all in how the flow, as in an MC’s “flow,” through all manner of fluid concatenations, keeps us on point. A large and varied nebula of icons appear in those head-bobbing measures—John Lydon, Caravaggio, The Millennium Falcon, and Beyoncé each near the other the way the things, or could we say various media, strewn around a person’s room are. The voice takes up these materials in its polyamorous measure.

In “Imaginary Bay” a kind of permission is asked:

what I dreamed would be such supple measures that [there’d be no suavity lost from my line as if Berkeley light sprang from the old boards youngly & I walking them]
dipped head to toe in their gradient shimmer could make limpid song of all my mannered breath.

Is being permitted to return to a meadow really that different from shouting “I got next?” Or more urgently, Who’s got the mic and who wants it most?

Once the voice is coming through the mic, we can hear its complexity as maybe the speaker’s own complexity, but more importantly as a complexity of “agency teneble.” And it’s an agency attained by bestowal more than aim:

I have traded my gun for a butterfly net it’s a deep adamantine hue staging each atom

en route to its ‘probable flesh’

(from “More Of The Same Quasi-Mystical Fight”)

This agency is always imminent and transitory. It shifts and can’t be worn easily, and maybe even requires a little swagger. But the poem finally and always does emerge in its “probable flesh,” we recognize it by its changing voice. And unexpected and constant pleasures are had. As a chapbook, Goodnight Voice contains more passion and a stronger voice than just about any “full-length” you’ll read this year:

In the middle or late early middle of my life I went to the [woods like Gucci tote full of horse tranq’s, cougar cub on a leash Who’s world is this?]

(from “It Belongs To Someone”)

Dana! The world is yours!

Mike Hauser lives alone now but welcomes guests.

MAXINE GADD
SUBWAY UNDER BYZANTIUM: POEMS, 1988-1996
NEW STAR BOOKS / 2008
REVIEW BY MACGREGOR CARD

Or, rather not a subway under Byzantium at all but its acronym, sub, as in submarine, substitution, subversion, and sub-. The sub will help us take our bearings in Maxine Gadd’s clamorous epic of underworld descent, whose movement is unusual in katabatic tradition not only for its elemental domain (submarine instead of subterranean) but for its sheer verticality. The book is less a narration of descent into the underworld than of an instantaneous plunge. And less even a narration than an operator’s restless turns from transcription to sense-making of the noise emanating from any and every descent story’s collapse into one disturbed simultaneity.

As though laying ground for a woolly rebuke to classical drama’s rigid temporal measures, the book proceeds through five acts, whose headings trace what would ordinarily be a straight course for the journey. We begin with “Loon,” the waterfowl that moves whose headings trace what would ordinarily be a straight course for the journey. We begin with “Loon,” the waterfowl that moves from air to water surface and immediate depths, followed by “Boatload to Atlantis,” a destination not only submerged on the ocean floor, but astray in the historical record. At the next chapter, “Styx,” we are at the utmost passage not only geologically but metaphorically. The familiarity of these signposts seems almost a willing deceit on Gadd’s part. For in actuality there is no partitioned sequence in which we “put me on this boat” or “let drop” “a crash at the lake” without already having been “suspended in the power of hell” and “beyond the ultramarine blindness of the inner spheres.” Setting out is everywhere concomitant with arrival and return in Subway Under Byzantium. To put it to the Greek, katabasis (the going below) finds vexed implementation through
For all its abrupt substitutions of distant and variously speculative civilizations (we’re given not only Byzantium, but Atlantis, Illyria, Babylon, Bedlam...), the work is not aimless but agitated. Its agitations are political and situated in present, lived time and space—Canada, British Columbia, Vancouver, 1988-1996. Maxine Gadd is unequivocal in her political convictions, doggedly anti-capitalist and, with a few intermissions, has been part of Vancouver’s radical Downtown Eastside scene since the mid-sixties, a community with a long (especially in that it yet continues) history of direct action for workers’ rights and fair housing. After I finished Subway Under Byzantium, I wanted to know more about who it was who had just punched out my lights. I checked out her contribution to “Woodsquat,” a special issue of West Coast Line dedicated to the 2002 Woodwards Squat. Herself a member of a sanctioned fair-housing concern, the Four Sisters Housing Co-Operative, Gadd’s piece telescopes from local solidarity to a scathing critique of B.C. premier Gordon Campbell’s leadership. I have to admit I’d never heard the name. For that matter, how much do most of us even know about the Liberal Party of Canada? Or Canadian governance generally? For example, Saskatchewan is a legendary and really abominable hirsute blond snow-ape occasionally sited in the Himalayas. We favor large portions in central North America, so it is for our neighborly blindspots, large enough to eclipse a country second only to Russia in landmass.

The lack of attention is not, of course, mutual (and it’s the “of course” that packs the most shame). This seems to go for poetic community as well. As far back as 1962, the Vancouver community received Robert Creeley with an enthusiasm and attentiveness unheard of in what were more often cordial but puzzled U. S. audiences. As anecdote has it, the overflow crowd hissed when the reading was “cut short” at two uninterrupted hours, and after a spirited question-answer session, Creeley addressed the audience, “It’s been a long time since I’ve experienced such energy and attention, and I’m very, very grateful.” Though Gadd would have been a teenager at the time, it says a lot about the community she came up through. Meanwhile, state-side, there seems to be a nagging suspicion that the experimental tradition in Canada begins with Blaser’s expatriation, skips ahead to Steve McCaffery and then finally proliferates with the Kootenay school. Reading in and around Subway under Byzantium, one is struck by just how giant this abridgment is. “There comes a point where you can’t refuse yr neighbour at the price of being inhuman. There comes / a point where yu must flee a Black Hole.”

Maegregor Card is a poet living in Brooklyn. His first full collection, Duties of an English Foreign Secretary, will be out in Winter 2009 from Canarium Books.

**BOOK REVIEWS**

**JULES BOYKOFF & KAIA SAND**

**LANDSCAPES OF DISSENT: GUERILLA POETRY & PUBLIC SPACE**

PALM PRESS / 2008

**REVIEW BY CAROL MIRAKOVE**

Imagine—and witness—public space that is produced by us. In Landscapes of Dissent, Jules Boykoff and Kaia Sand remind us that there is a long history and ripe presence of intersections between poetry and politics. Don Mitchell is quoted in these pages as saying that public space is “decisive.” Boykoff and Sand investigate a host of opportunities for public space, including its potential and its vulnerability, the situation and capacity of modern-day guerilla poets, how we might connect with an “inadvertent audience,” and ways in which conditions of public space inform authorship and collaboration.

The book is nicely organized into what I read as three sections: the first section of the book defines public space and language-based art; the second section documents case studies in which guerilla poetry has been applied to public space; and the third section extends points of action to the reader.

*PUBLIC SPACE AND POETRY*

The book opens with four essays by the authors. In “Public Space is Political Space,” Boykoff and Sand examine the meaning and function of public space in our present, neoliberal moment when the controls on that space are not interrupted. They write, “We are poets who are interested in ways poetry and politics intersect,” and here they offer that there is “there is plenty of historical evidence that poetry can make something happen” (7), where they go on to substantiate that claim.

In “The Public Sphere & Public Space,” Boykoff and Sand look at descriptions of the public sphere, such that we might understand how we might assemble and realize collective power. They write, “Poets can be marginalized through participation in a culture that conforms poorly to the logic of capitalism” (15), and remind us that we develop our own structures in which we “sustain the work” (15) of publishing and reading. Clearly poets know how to organize. In Landscapes of Dissent, Boykoff and Sand “are interested in tactics poets use to move out into public spaces” (16).

We are warned about the legalities of acting in public space in “Public Space and Litigation Nation.” Boykoff and Sand write, “Culture workers operating in public space must contend with a thicket of interrelated laws that attempt to channel how people can
BOOK REVIEWS

act” (18). They delineate the ways in which spaces are classified within U.S. courts.

Now that we’ve got a handle on two of our three tools—our space and ourselves—Boykoff and Sand explore the third, our art, in “Language-Based Art & Poetry.” In this chapter they reflect on the work of artists including Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Heriberto Yépez, and Raoul Vaneigem, and look at the differences between public poetry that is sanctioned versus that which is not, i.e., guerilla poetry.

FOUR CASES

The center of the book looks at four cases of guerilla poetry. PIPA: Poetry Is Public Art was born in NYC. Kristin Prevallet is quoted at length on the intentions and actions of the collective’s projects, and we’re treated to many images from public actions and installations in NYC.


The Agit-Truth Collective was founded by the authors in a rural region on the East Coast and has since moved to a West-Coast urban area. They have installed outdoor signs such as one that read “You have the right to remain in perpetual fear,” bearing John Ashcroft’s face. They have also staged an action on a freeway exit where one member paraded as “a dancing George W. Bush” holding a satirical sign that was followed by faux-CIA agents recording license plate numbers (72).

The final case documented in Landscapes of Dissent is Sidewalk Blogger located in Kane’ohe, Hawai’i, and led by Susan Schultz, inspired by Freeway Blogger. Signs were posted and altered in public space. This group addressed the Bush Administration, impeachment, the occupation of Iraq, and threats against Iran.

YOUR TURN

Now that we’ve seen how it’s done, the final three chapters in the book provide us with considerations for taking the baton. Boykoff and Sand examine tactics employed by the groups profiled, and the context of their demonstrations, all towards illuminating factors for effectiveness.

Anticipating the argument, “But That’s Not Poetry!,” they explain, “[w]hat is called poetry comes down in part to group identity” (107). They acknowledge that some of this work may be classified as graffiti art. Their discussions of definitions of poetry and graffiti are provocative. Under either umbrella, we are reminded that working in public space is crucial.

Boykoff and Sand close with a chapter called “Your Turn,” in which they urge the reader to affect public space. They write, “we believe keyboard activism will never supplant boots-to-the-pavement dissent. Supplement, yes. Supplant, no” (114).

Ultimately, this is a book providing models we can apply to our own landscapes.

Landscapes of Dissent is informative, indeed: the explorations of what public space and guerilla poetry do and can mean are substantial and smart. But I recommend this book to you because it is a pleasure. Boykoff and Sand are energetic and graceful writers who present us with an ample array of photographs to drive home the excitement of their proposals and proofs. Furthermore, Landscapes of Dissent is a thoroughly beautiful object, from its format to cover art to typesetting to layout.


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In reading this book—and daydreaming on its many images—I am left thinking about what belongs to us and how we might belong. In an age in which alienation is among our most prevalent health hazards, *Landscapes of Dissent* demonstrates that poetry may be newly, again, good for you. This book is a gift. Take the power.

Carol Mirakove is the author of *Mediated* (Factory School), *Occupied* (Kelsey St. Press), and, with Jen Benka, 1,138 (Belladonna). She lives in Brooklyn.

GEORGE STANLEY
VANCOUVER: A POEM
NEW STAR BOOKS / 2008
REVIEW BY DANA WARD

I’ve been madly in love with George Stanley’s poetry for a few years now. It’s been a total “affair” for me as a reader—his books blowing onto my desert island list, displacing old loves, holding steady on the night stand while others come and go. My romance with the work has gone on long enough that its myriad particular tones and its preoccupations feel now like these organic parts of my language, my heart, and my mind. Freaky! But totally sweet. And totally not without precedent for most of us who have fallen really hard from time to time. So I’ve been flinching in the face of my devotion, telling myself there’s no need to crusade or say everything I feel I’d love to say about Stanley’s work. Telling myself there’s no need to insist on too much. Because we’re in a season of petty insistence, of political or, more accurately, electoral insistence, dressed in rhetorical certainty, hardening quickly, making it difficult, in Stanley’s words to “see the sun through the murk of ideologies.” I want so badly to bring Stanley’s tonic uncertainty into my life, make that my “Vancouver,” and write this from there. But hell, that’s no way to write a review.

So, to begin again. George Stanley was born and raised in San Francisco. He was educated there, among the Jesuits, among poets slightly older (Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, Robert Duncan) and peers (Beverly Dahlen, Stan Persky). In the seventies, Stanley moved north to Vancouver. He moved yet again, still farther north, to Terrace, B.C., and has returned now to an altered Vancouver, in the era, our era, “of vegetarian pizza / disappearance of the Government, and of the people.” “Vancouver” is a book-length poem, a city poem, modest in length but incredibly rich. The temporal scale of the piece neatly mirrors the brief, civic life of the place he’s attending. The abiding depravations and pleasures of contemporary urban life are all here—walks, train-rides, bars, and commerce. Saints of urban modernity pass through from time to time; Baudelaire, Verlaine. Williams’ *Paterson* cameos throughout, appearing as sounding board, talisman, & the object of loving derision. The writing oscillates between bursts of prose fragments separated by dashes, and unadorned yet sumptuous verse.

That’s the boilerplate, and it’s true, but what else? Well, there are two things that keep coming back to me that I’m trying, perhaps wrongly, to connect to one another. First, there’s the melancholic sense that an engaged civic life for a person in this city is no longer a viable option. “The people” have been disappeared as a meaningful figure around which to organize place. Commerce, it goes without saying, shapes all. The second is what does this mean for one’s mind, trying to organize itself amid “the real” so configured: “The city weighs tens of thousands of tons—or more—wherever you look at it–from–motionless.” And then, a few lines later: “it’s just an image in the eye—it doesn’t exist.” There is a constant tension between the outside (the physical fact of the city itself) and the mitigating (mitigated?) human subject at the site of apprehension. An all at once devastated and playful mistrust of “the real.” One of the book’s most heartbreaking passages plays out with this dynamic in mind. Stanley has heretofore been struggling to accept even the avatar of the city, and then with disarming gentility and brilliance, he writes of Vancouver this way:

Once it’s made sure you were drained of the need of the will for everything to be...
marshalled
the city
is not unknowable
it’s real.

Vancouver is also about mortality’s hastening saturation of experience as one becomes a “senior,” to use Stanley’s word for it here. Departed friends’ voices echo often through the streets. There are hospital visits (terrifying and sweet), the loss of desire and its sudden, gorgeous recurrence, the bittersweet feeling (of which he’s written elsewhere) that the world indeed is for the young. “& yet I feel as young as / unconsciousness can” he writes, holding through, holding on.

Then there’s Stanley’s method, or method is not the right word, his alighting on a way in which he’ll make this poem work: “write carelessly.” He reminds himself of this from time to time throughout the book, as if to suggest that another approach, too insistent, too hard and imporous, would stop the book dead, would quiet the city’s transformation in his mind, as it moves there, from malign figment to later, a lover, a body in his bed, turned just so, so he can see him.

All of that, and it’s true, and it still feels like boilerplate, somehow, it feels too “not enough.” I guess that’s love for you. My love of this poetry, coming up short in the language I have to address it. I started by telling you I would not be able to tell you. And in that I guess we’re not at all unrequited! I wish that this were a poem instead. Or a private note I could write any of you, allowing myself more room to fuck it up, get things wrong, on my way toward what I really think and feel. There’s something in this book, and in Stanley’s poetry in general, that slips away just at the point of the telling, the uncanny I guess I could call it. The real. Or a pleasure that has gone just a little adrift, away from my rote means. Whatever it is, read Vancouver. No, seriously. I insist.

Dana Ward is the author of Goodnight Voice (House Press, 2008). He lives in Cincinnati, BC.
within empire both for intimacy and everyday acts: reading, urban walking, sleeping, loving, musing. On the one hand, rollicking rhymes mock patriarchal figures of power and the gestures they make to keep the public feeling disempowered: “Mister Two / knows what to do, / not me or you. // A master cook, / he wrote the book, / and we can’t look.” On the other hand, intervening poems note that, within a seemingly totalizing rhetoric of empire, citizens can resist power in ways neither fatalistic nor naively optimistic: “Will celebrate what is / and that it is / and assume responsibility / for this Belief.”

In refusing to resort to only one affect or single mode of discourse in responding to power and its abuses, Albon enacts what Butler might call a strategic exceeding of “the logic of noncontradiction”: the sequence as a whole is neither singular nor communal, neither subject nor subjected to, neither either nor or. And though “Momentary Songs” both counters subjection to power by eliciting identification with its anger and staves off political fatalism through humor and intimacy, the result could have been otherwise. As Albon himself writes, “Thinking about a certain poet’s work, he imagined it as taking the reader by the hand, leading her to a place of aporia, and leaving.” Instead, “Momentary Songs” insists on staging the aporia of complicity with power not as an impasse of conscience the reader deals with in solitude, but as an ethical ambivalence both she and the poet share, something they just have to work with: “Another long way was requisite / taking from studied words / their letters / to throw them in a haze.” Thus taken as a whole, the sequence makes for the rare coupling of exhilaration and exhortation:

A private blank space
time passes in
one’s eden alone

but the dark jagged trace
fills the room with others
who will write as they can
a choking
crowded scrawl
it could be a lyric
heard the hard way across...

If we take for granted Butler’s idea that “social categories signify subordination and existence at once,” “Momentary Songs” could be said to recognize the social as an organizing force while choosing to explore alternatives to dwelling within its province exclusively: “in a civitas / of hints and tentacles,” “Those who endeavor / to go underneath” must “empty…self / of whole and safe.”

That “Momentary Songs” occupies the first fifty-four of the book’s ninety-four pages means that we inevitably read its strategies...
BOOK REVIEWS

and strivings into the book’s remaining three sequences—“Reading Pole,” “Sunflowers, A Testimony” and “Seven Admissions”—each of which could be said to explore a mode of coding communication so that its essential meaning passes through normative discourse unnoticed. For instance, “Sunflowers, A Testimony” and “Seven Admissions” utilize procedure to transform the public forms of testimony and admission into records of alterity. While collage wrests difference from personal prose narrative in the former, an acrostic logic sculpts the candor and wit of the latter, a stunning sequence of queer love poems in which “Detained by the touch police they can send / each other paper that looks like a city.”

What makes Albon’s work both admirable and likeable is that familiar poetic strategies—whether postmodern parataxis or eighteenth-century rhyme—take on in their repetition a new valence. Collectively these repetitions constitute “a reiterated ambivalence at the heart of agency,” as Butler writes, and it’s this heart that beats in Albon’s body politic. Case in point: a “reading pole” is a message board on which hobos leave symbols to communicate with each other about what resources can be found nearby—food, clean water, shelter, charity—as well as what hindrances—stingy or indifferent people, dirty water, thieves. In Albon’s sequence, reading the hobo symbols that head each page becomes for the reader a direct line to the subliminal polis, a way “to receive bread and a bowl, a story, on the inside from your wandering, your bowl of events.” “Going on with everyday attentions, from a known quantity to an unknown,” his speaker is proxy for the citizen-reader who must “Observe, audit” both “Shape of travel” and “Action around it” in order to survive. A companionable, indispensable guide through the signs of empire as well as a “strange educator,” Momentary Songs reminds us that to traverse the wilderness “can be easy passage if you act clear” and that “You can also do it by writing.”

Brian Teare’s next book is Sight Map (University of California Press, 2009). He lives, teaches, and makes books by hand in San Francisco.

LAURA MORIARTY
A SEMBLANCE:
SELECTED AND NEW POEMS, 1975-2007
OMNIDAWN / 2007
REVIEW BY SARA WINTZ

One would expect that Laura Moriarty—whose first book was published almost thirty years ago—would title a selection of her writing something other than A Semblance. After all, a semblance is something that seems to be, words that require the naming of second glances in order to quantify/qualify.

And yet, doubt and uncertainty are omnipresent in Moriarty’s poems: lack of absolutes existing as matter of fact. Or, as the Omnidawn description for Moriarty’s book suggests, these poems strive “...to make each lyric phrase into a portal where we find ourselves turning at once in two directions…” Take, for example, her poem “Six Histories”:

   My entire forget
   not thought to have him
   turn me to hope again
   ...
   One entire piercing
   me hard thoughts for once
   for me they’re both him

   Again he turns to him
   for me not caring
   to hope my thoughts over

   Pinned to some shoulder turned
   away my breast again
   entirely him (33)

Moriarty’s thoughts turn her lines into circuitous descriptions. “Me” and “he” exist in “Six Histories,” but where do their bodies begin and end? Instead of asking readers questions, Moriarty writes about a tenuous and transparent relationship with a ton-bearing knowledge. And then, this next poem, on page fifty-one of A Semblance, is much different:

   Why am I divided from him?
   A continuous line begins with the brow
   And becomes the nose by agreement
   A piece of linen simplifies
   The features of its women like
   Masks or any other kind of quiet
   A beautiful arrangement by convention
   Only if accepted or if not
   Why am I divided thoughtlessly?
   A stylized head bisecting two scenes
   Of life or its embroidered equivalent
   House man clouds a child suspended from
   Parentheses that by balancing unite and yet
   Why am I silent in the foreground divided?

Here, she questions the divisions between a “me” and a “him.” As though asking, what difference does it make, what differences are there? In so doing, she is also saying that there is no difference between two people with differences in name. She uses questions to make a point.

Questions usually expose a lack of knowledge, a form of intellectual weakness, or so we suppose. Moriarty champions questions, and the questionable then stretches into a way of knowing.

These questions asked of gender bring her work into a distinctly feminine light. Again, Moriarty uses inversion in relation to a female character:
She had lips for his eyes  
A man fucked  
A woman from behind  
Pressed between them  
Or buried  
The one you don’t want to lose  
Or blending on the street where  
He put himself inside her mind  
She had lips painted gold  
They close around him  
Because beaten or flattered  
From inside a shudder  
She took it  
She had enough. (58)

At first, the subject of the poem seems to be involved in a very physical dispute: lips, eyes, fucked, pressed, buried. Then, halfway through, the tone changes. Her lips can enclose him, from inside of beaten, flattered thighs. “From inside a shudder,” she had what she wanted—she had collected—and taken what she wanted from it. Suddenly the female character is in the power position—not taking it, but collecting it, then walking away from it with enough, defiantly.

Moriarty reinforces our belief in questions. A Semblance implies doubt: uncertainty that is a matter of fact. After all, there is more to come. What seems to be a sign of completion is just the beginning.

Sara Wintz’s writing has appeared in Cricket Online Review, TIGHT, and as a chapbook called Lipstick Traces. She co-directs the press gang: with Cristiana Baik.

DANIEL COMISKEY &  
C.E. PUTNAM  
CRAWLSPACE  
P.I.S.O.R. PUBLICATIONS / 2007  
REVIEW BY JEN COLEMAN

Say you woke up one day, and the “sense” of your world had burned away like a cloud. And in the lifted fog, you realize that meaning—what’s significant and real—has all along existed not in the words you listen to, but the words just barely within your range of hearing: monster movies, consumer warnings, internal monologues, ambient chit-chat, business lingo, and hypothetical questions.

You’d be in the Crawlspace created by Daniel Comiskey and C.E. Putnam.

The collaborative book of poems put out by P.I.S.O.R. Publications in 2007 promises to be a “one hundred ton creature with a five hundred foot wingspan” whose home is a volcano barn. That it is, but it is also an artfully constructed disambiguation that, with both humor and terror, reveals the absurdity of human social being. Crawlspace makes a reader want to call out, as if to a horror flick ingenue, “No, no! Don’t get up early to check the percolator! Stay in bed until the sun comes up!”

We believe, Crawlspace tells us, and we go about our lives, as if it is all perfectly reasonable. Or, as the poets put it in “Carny Casting Couch”: “I was down / the street humming / the dominant themes / of leisure and industry.” But Crawlspace shows us how such commonplace routine is actually hysterical and dangerous. As the Yak’s voice in “The Island of Dr. Mauer” tells us, we are “unfortunate” in our “calmness in what should be / to most / an occasion for total fucking / panic.”

Crawlspace explores the portent of bewildering moments by giving a twist to the ordinary and shining a spotlight on it. Take this scene, from “Which Lunchroom?”:

The Monkey said hello to the Pig, and the Pig said  
“I don’t speak Monkey,” in Pig, and then the Monkey said  
“would you like a bite of my sandwich” in Monkey.

It’s funny, but it is also tragic. It would be mundane if it weren’t a pig and a monkey speaking; it hints at something terrifyingly human. And so it fits that the book should open with an epigraph from the notoriously temperamental actor Klaus Kinski, from a 1985 Playboy interview:

About 25 years ago, I was in an apartment and next door they put on a radio so I struck the wall with my fist but they did not put the radio down. I took a tool and banged until I made a hole through the wall. It was like a comedy movie.

Kinski is perhaps best known for his Dracula role in Herzog’s Nosferatu, but he also appeared in 130 other films—including the 1986 horror flick Crawlspace. The movie was originally in 3-D—as is the Comiskey/Putnam poem.

It’s true: A copy of the P.I.S.O.R. book comes with a pair of 3-D glasses for viewing the cover, as well as an Audio CD. Give the CD a listen and you’ll understand that the book is a libretto, and the blank space on the page comes to life in the CD with a brilliant sound collage.

Comiskey and Putnam launched Crawlspace in a one-night-only event in Seattle at OseoO Gallery’s Leg to Stand On reading series. But it’s not too late to catch your own Crawlspace event. You can get the book and CD at http://www.pisor-industries.org/crawlspace/. When it arrives, get popcorn, put on the 3-D glasses provided, turn up the stereo sound, and let it wash over you from ear to ear. The poem becomes a thriller of a radio show—or a 3-D movie made up mostly of real life.

Jen Coleman—formerly of Brooklyn, NY, and soon to be of Portland, OR—is former co-editor of the poetry journal experiment Pom2. Her own poems have appeared in Ixnay Reader, EOAGH, and elsewhere.
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