

LITTLE REVIEWS

of a few books of poetry published 1998-2002

Brian Kim Stefans

Introduction

The “little reviews” that I have been posting to various listservs over the past three years have usually been first drafts -- or rather, “long” drafts -- of anonymous reviews that I wrote for pay for print publications. Usually, an editor would require that I write a 250-350 word review and I would hand in something much longer -- a burden on the editors, of course, and so I owe a great debt to them for permitting me to continue this practice, and also for permission to “republish” the reviews on my web site.

My aims are fairly modest: to provide a readable introduction to new books of poetry that are most likely not going to get much attention elsewhere (these are usually “experimental” works but occasionally not), to offer an opinion here or there as to their quality as writing, and to create a sense of a “living culture” for these books to exist in -- all aims that make this type of writing much closer to journalism than anything that could be mistaken for theory, or even “Criticism” with a capital c. (My more ambitious, if occasionally more turgid, critical writing can be found on the misc. writing link above.)

I’ve written, at this point, about 120 of these reviews, but many of them won’t appear on the site as I don’t think they’re worth revising, or the books that they dealt with don’t interest me any more. However, I plan to include little reviews which were never rough drafts for print publications and are exclusive to this site. The first one of these, of the book *poetics@*, a collection of writings from the Buffalo Poetics Listserv, appears below. These new reviews might be more considered, a little longer, than the little reviews written for other publications (but they’re still “little”).

If I possessed a sense of responsibility equivalent to the scope of the project that I am pretending to embark on here, I would go back and reread every book I’ve reviewed before posting the review to this site, but I don’t want to do that. I’ve looked over several of these again, sometimes with great pleasure, and have made little adjustments here or there, but for the sake of getting some sort of word out on these books, of contributing (I hope) to a climate of useful opinion (i.e. the kind that might get us more interested in the “world” of poetry and not frustrated with its oft-noted insularity), I’m going to be a bit of slacker and just shovel them into HTML and ftp away.

I hope other people do this kind of thing as well (you can read a similar venture by Steve Evans, called the “Notes to Poetry,” in the e-books section of this site). I never thought it was necessary to be shy on the internet -- if the internet can do anything for “poetry” it might be to provide a place where people could take productive stands on issues relating to aesthetics without being entirely ignored. Sometimes, it seems people struggle very hard to be ignored on the internet -- writing meanly, too much, too irreverently, etc. -- so that one simply has no choice but to delete. But seeing as one is bound to have at least some audience -- one teenager in Canada, two lady cabdrivers in Adelaide, an entire freshman seminar at U Penn, the “future” should we decide to have one, etc. -- one might as well try to write well.

I’ll save the grander theoretical gestures to myself. Most of these books have been published since 1998, so this is the output of a short time in history. Maybe seeing them sitting in the same family photograph might present a unique, enlightening, perhaps unsettling, new view of what’s happening in poetry today. Or maybe not. Whatever the case, the “little reviews”

should dramatically increase traffic to my site, which the web geek side of me likes very much.

-- BKS
7/19/02

Note: The reviews and introduction above are from a discontinued section of arras.net which I've decided to take down and fold into a single .pdf file. I've taken out all of the linebreaks in the poetry quoted, replacing them with a "/" (including a "/" for double-spaces) and have returned the reviews to their original single-paragraph format. 12/23/03

The Pretext

Rae Armantrout

Green Integer, 2001

1-892295-3

Armantrout is one of the quieter, more reliable writers associated with “language” writing, and is usually considered the “lyrical” one in a group often associated with longer, process-oriented works (“new sentence” writing or the works of Hejinian) or, when writing “lyrics,” with a subversion of the genre (Bernstein, Perelman, Howe). Her 1998 autobiographical work, *True*, demonstrated that she could write a compelling, if not virtuosic, prose, and that her greatest strength as a writer is not stylistic pyrotechnics, grandiose theoretical syntheses, or encyclopedic references but – like William Carlos Williams, to whom she owes a debt in the curious torquing of her sentences – an original and quirky turn of mind. As her brief introduction to *The Pretext* suggests, Armantrout likes to work by juxtaposition – “[The poem’s] interesting to the extent that the divisions and fitting together arise spontaneously, without pretext” – and the best poems in this collection are resonant coincidings of short bursts of insight, chance meetings that disclose the meanings inherent in all situations as they exist beyond the deceptive assurances of everyday reason: “I miss circumstance / already – / the way a single word / could mean / necessary, relative, / provisional / and a bird flies past / leaving / the sense that one / has waved one’s hand.” [69] The careful slowness of her lineation – which rarely rises above the tone of a nearly bureaucratic stating of facts despite the often deft use of off-rhyme – recalls George Oppen, and some of the pregnant silences of this work are not necessarily aimed at metaphysical revelry (as in, say, Louise Gluck or writers of the “ellipticist” tendency) but toward an ethical dimension to being: “How do I look? / meaning what / could I pass for / when every eye’s / a guard” [58] she writes in “My Associates,” and later: “Time’s tic: / to pitch forward / then catch ‘itself’ / again. // ‘We’re’ bombing Iraq again. // If I turn on the news, / someone will say, ‘We / mean business.’” [67] She describes exquisitely the elusive interactions of time and thought, suggesting a quasi-Buddhist code of behavior: “Still / one should be patient / with the present / as if with a child. // To follow its prattle – / glitter on water – / indulgently / is only polite.” [25] Armantrout’s idiom, and her philosophical predisposition, is one of nearly monkish spareness – if she were more despairing and hysterical, she could be a character in one of Beckett’s novels – and sometimes her writing seems to be about the huge distance she feels from her own perceptions – her surroundings, her thoughts of what to do next – a distance that may be tied to her sense of herself as a middle-class, more-or-less comfortable Californian: “In my country / facts are dead children. // When I say ‘dissociation,’ / I may have said ‘real-time action.’ [...] // Words / can be repeated. // The Distractible Sparrow, / The Smallest District. / The Strictest Definition. // Astronomers know / a signal’s / not an answer.” [88] But for all of that, there is a recognizable human at the center of these poems, one who often comes through with an understated humor, “swinging his arms high / like a drum major, / ghost-of-a-prayer / kind of thing.” [57] Fans of Armantrout’s work might be disappointed that this sequence is not more allusive, more grandiose, something to point to as the pinnacle of a reasonably long writing career, but it’s clear that her dedication to poetry does not lie in an ego-bedazzled goal to create dramatic gestures across the literary horizon, but rather the desire to get it right in writing – “Identity is a form / of prayer.” [58] – even if in modest bursts.

As Umbrellas Follow Rain

John Ashbery

Qua Books, 2002

0-9708763-0-0

“Red Skelton asked me if I had a book coming out. He seemed drowned / in lists of trivia and itching-powder dreams – / you know, the kind that make you wake up / and then sort of fall back asleep again. / His brother was cleaning up after the elephants” [...] [34] While unambitious for the Nobel-shortlisted author of the pomo answer to *The Prelude*, each of these 30 short lyrics displays the quite, attentive mastery that has become Ashbery’s trademark since his collection *April Galleons*, when he seemed to put away his avant-garde party suit permanently and adopted the “French zen” persona he credited his old friend, Frank O’Hara, for founding. One poem has him ruminating nostalgically on the now-extinct “pancake clock” – “It had tiny Roman numerals embedded in its rim” – while another, “Random Jottings of an Old Man,” starts as a Suess-like spectacle of evicting an unwanted poetry-jotting houseguest who could or could not be the author himself and evolves into a wistful, Proustian revelry of sounds and senses: “The pianola never recovered from the loss.” [8] “Runway,” the poem quoted above, is one of the more slapstick of the book, but ends on a note that effectively mingles the ancient metaphor of the sea voyage with some Dada non-sequiturs that, if anything, make you feel a little more comfortable in your own two-sizes off skin: “Soon we were leaving home / forever, to be pitched about on storm-tossed seas, / flagrant to be back amid multiple directions. For though there are some / who can live without compasses, it dissolves all complexity / if one is perpetually in the know.” [34] If only for this new emotion he’s invented – “flagrant” longing to be perpetually “out of the know” – Ashbery’s new book is worth reading, as it tirelessly bucks the tide and challenges our habits of thinking and feeling.

Halo

Stephen Berg
Sheep Meadow Press, 2000
1-87881879-1

Porno Diva Numero Uno

Stephen Berg
Lingo Books, 2000
1-889097-39-X

Berg describes a sort of *ars poetica* in *Halo*, a series of short quasi-religious paragraphs: “Curtains she calls it ‘curtain of the world’ mercy behind it on the other side cruelty here in the God-world no-God, whenever I read to her – ‘I have to know that as a thinking, finite being I am God crucified’ – it shreds me, no-time which is God God everywhere everything we are, often in great heat I write to a friend say everything that shames batters inspires won’t send it burn it on stove papery ash God’s words, woke in the dark again clawed the unwalled dark again.” [19] In these two smallish books of prose poems, Berg strains for the visceral transcendence of the saints, but something seems either entirely naive or slightly forced about the pieces, as their basic form – the run-on sentence that drops elements of normal syntax as it seems spoken in a “white heat” – is both not very beautiful to read, and not nearly as gregarious, image-laden or charming as his New American models, such as O’Hara in “Meditation In An Emergency” and Ginsberg in his major early works such as the confessional “Kaddish.” While it is somewhat refreshing to see someone write from what one presumes is the core of the “soul,” few of the poems seem especially candid, nor do they seem to have anything contained within them that society is necessarily suppressing – Berg is not being “suicided by society,” to use Artaud’s phrase about Van Gogh, and he has no counter-culture to expose. Nor are the poems philosophically resonant, and so one wonders whether a craft-obsessed poet – a Williams, say, or a Creeley, neither of whom would let a line of poetry run past three words if it failed to be *interesting* – would have been able to find profundity, syntactic, spiritual or otherwise, in the rather colorless formulation of “Of”, which runs in its entirety: “That death is what you cannot do that death is what you cannot be that death is not the opposite of nothing.” [24] *Porno Diva Numero Uno* is more successful, as it takes as its central theme an imaginary relationship between the author and Marcel Duchamp around the time he was constructing his final work *Etant donnés* [1946-66] (housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, from which city Berg edits and publishes the *American Poetry Review*). But once again, Berg’s form stumbles, as even interesting speech seems compromised by the poet making excuses for the language by applying – even where a dialogic contrast seems necessary – elements of his “signature style,” the run-on can’t-be-contained-by-syntax mode: “[...] until I could name anything just by touching it but it was only after a period of disgust with visual art with the quality of distance it depends on that I decided – and this was the only reason for my decision – to do some of my things so the idea was touch not art how would you like to eat an apple drink a glass of wine if you didn’t have hands anyhow put a bicycle wheel and a stool together black white and you’ve got the wildness of an impossible combination combined you almost don’t know what to do with it touch look spin sit eat what? so I’m like a blind artist I *am* a blind artist a man with no ideas only the memory of that early lesson” [...]” [13] *Porno Diva*, as its flashy title suggests, seems framed as a deep, candid investigation of eroticism of the cheap suburban brand (think *American Beauty*), but while Bataille is clearly the godfather, here, Berg doesn’t make many of his own investiga-

tions – very few images, digressions, infatuations, etc. seem particularly inspired by Berg’s sexual imagination. Though an interesting image may point one somewhere in that direction (“...in our age two removes from the viewer first the door then the wall then her holding the puny lamp of orgasm up there dream of faceless leather...” [66]), for the most part it seems Berg is undecided whether to be Duchamp’s Boswell (though much of Duchamp’s material seems taken from common sources), the hectic but image-dry visionary of *Halo*, or a collage of art-related non-sequiturs. Berg seems to be more focused when he introduces odd low-brow matter that genuinely intrigues him, such as the long section on the mating habits of rhinoceri, in which the sentences become suddenly rather narrative, obedient to trying to hit the right tone for conveying the slightly perverse subject matter. Perhaps that is a lesson, for though Berg calls himself an “apostle of the ordinary, one wonders why he doesn’t opt for material that will work against his tendency for run-on, hence leading to more complex, engaging aesthetic solutions.

My Way

Charles Bernstein

Harvard University Press, 1999

0-226-04410-6

“What is a poet-critic, or critic-poet, or professor-poet-critic?; which comes first and how can you tell?” asks Bernstein early in *My Way*. Turning his always playful, but never less than informed and precise, poetical eye on the new elements of the shifting literary landscape, his collection is eclectic both in its range of interests and its forms of expression: scholarly essays, interviews, encomiums to poets like Charles Reznikoff, Larry Eigner, Hannah Weiner and Susan Howe, quirky poems, and forms that are hybrids of all of these. One of the key theorists of the now-adequately historicized Language poets, Bernstein’s purview has expanded greatly past the formal concerns of that group to take in issues of multiculturalism, “standard” vs. “non-standard” forms of language usage, the ossified conservative agenda of literary institutions in the United States, poetry in performance (both on the page and on stage), and graduate-level pedagogical practices, as in “Frame Lock,” which is: “a kind of logorrheic lock jaw, or sandy mouth, or bullet-with-the-baby-not-just-quite-then-almost-out-of-reach, as a mood swinging under a noose of monomaniacal monotones, the converted preaching to the incontrovertible, the guard rail replacing the banisters, stairs, stories, elevation, detonation, reverberation, indecision, concomitant intensification system.” [90] The many slips and holes permitted by the many forms in this book grant one peeks beneath the surface of Bernstein’s discourse. A long autobiographical interview with Loss Glazier, for instance, covers the poet’s attitudes toward Harvard where he was educated, his sense of being (in Isaac Deutscher’s phrase) a “non-Jewish Jew”, and his maturity during the sixties. Poems such as “A Test of Poetry” – deceptively “accessible” in its surface – uncover some of the traumas foreign-language poets have had translating Bernstein’s, or anyone’s, poetry, pulling the sheets from under that in-between language that Benjamin wrote is the space of translation, but which had never-before been so giddily problematized. “Water Images of The New Yorker” is a fine little investigative piece, discovering that 86% of the poems over a 16-week period contained images of water, while “Dear Mr. Fanelli,” a poem in skinny Schuyleresque lines, takes the language of a subway administrator’s “request for comments” literally, highlighting how even bureaucratic language is vexed with double-meanings. “Pound and the Poetry of Today” is an important follow-up to his essay “Pounding Fascism” in his last book of essays, *A Poetics*, investigating the contradiction of Pound’s overdetermined politics in the light of his collage poetics, while “Poetics of the Americas” creates an important bridge between the ethnically marginalized practices of poets like Claude McKay and Paul Lawrence Dunbar and more self-consciously “avant-garde” writers like Louis Zukofsky, Basil Bunting and the Language poets themselves. This book, for all of its centrifugal activity, is a singular yet globally relevant perspective on the literary arts and their institutions, an engagement that is both in good faith yet just cranky and poignant enough to not be easily ignored.

Republics of Reality: 1975-1995

Charles Bernstein

Sun & Moon, 2000

1-55713-304-2

At once the most controversial and popular, most “accessible” and yet most thwarting-of-expectations, of the “Language” poets, Bernstein is also the writer of that group who strove early on to experiment with both extremes of these newly discovered methods, from the use of the word in its isolated, destabilized but utopian expressivity to the restaging of the plain phrase at it operates in daily, even bureaucratic, life to convey our most heroically banal thoughts. This collection of long out-of-print chapbooks – none of these poems have appeared in any of Bernstein’s many breakthrough volumes, such as *Islets/Irritations* (1983) or *Dark City* (1994) – provides a compelling, substantial overview of his career, meanwhile adding to the range of his impressive canon of major and minor (sometimes upsettingly so) works. If one associates Language poetry with the non-referential, the unemotive, and fetishization of textual form and the language of theory over that of speech – in other words, opaque writing that “resists” lyrics forms in the service of a political/aesthetic argument that is far from obvious – one will be immediately surprised with the opening poem from the 1976 volume “Parsing”, titled “Sentences,” practically a litany of anxieties, attitudes and stuttering intensities, produced by the need to be social: “I feel too dependent. / I feel no sense of myself. / I continually need reassurance. / I feel she won’t really express her feelings. / I feel shut out. / I can project everything and be reassured of nothing. / I am constantly feeling left. / I see in her silence and distance the same fear and pain I have.” [20] If this poetry is defiantly “un-poetic” – the lyric subject, not to mention the concluding lyric whoosh (e.g. O’Hara’s “and everybody and I stopped breathing”), is nowhere to be seen, and odd instances later in the poem (“He said, ‘Bring me the holy bible with all y’all’s names in it.’”) seem lifted from other works entirely – Bernstein’s restraint and confidence with this method puts him at a distance from his more technically stalwart peers who might sacrifice any humanistic nuances for fear of appearing compromised in the throes of cultural warfare. His interest, then, is in language and how it is used among people, and not after it has been santized through excessive theorization. This basic understanding renders such dense works as “Poem” (from “Shade,” 1978) both welcoming and discomfoting. There is a cinematic element to this poem – its focus plunges into suggested social and interpersonal vignettes while remaining with none of them – all of which seems in service to an undisclosed satiric narrative: “a sound of some importance / diffuses / “as dark red circles” / digress, reverberate / connect, unhook. / Your clothes, for example / face, style / radiate mediocrity / coyly, slipping / & in how many minutes / body & consciousness / deflect, “flame on flare” / missed purpose.” [72-73] One figures Mallarme’s proto-Lettrist *Throw of the Dice* – a verbo-visual manifesto for the poetics of chance that has probably been reprinted more in the last five years than in the whole century before – as a founding text for Bernstein’s poetics. Each poem seems a snapshot of language’s movement as caught on the page, and yet Bernstein is democratic mirror to the aristocratic French Symbolist, replacing the holy sanctity of the aesthete’s mind with the polyvalent chatter of Grand Central Station. In his later poems – the short poems collected in “The Absent Father in ‘Dumbo’” and “Residual Rubbernecking” – Bernstein takes the project far from the austere, dystopic fragments of the early works into near-totally banal, or oppressively purple and unbeautiful, lyricism: “Such mortal slurp to strain this sprawl went droopy / Gadzooks it seems would bend these slopes in girth / None trailing failed to hear the ship looks loopy / Who’s seen it nailed uptight right at its

berth” [353] Only Bernstein takes the promise of materialist poetics, and the desire to make language visible, would attempt such a distance from the norms of good taste, and though one is not sure if these later poems are the best encore to the fabulous and ambitious early chapbooks (those poems that resemble the early works but don’t attain their power seem mere improvisations, inattentively included), the volume as a whole presents as many promises as it does problems, beauties as it does strange new things, all of which there are many.

With Strings

Charles Bernstein

University of Chicago, 2002

0-226-04460-2

“Readers are cautioned that certain statements in this poem are forward looking statements that involve risk and uncertainties. Words such as ‘bluster,’ ‘rotund,’ ‘interstitial,’ ‘guerilla,’ ‘torrent,’ ‘prostrate,’ and variations of such words and similar expressions are intended to identify such forward-looking statements. These statements are based on current expectations and projects about the aesthetic environment and assumptions made by the author and are not guarantees of future performativity.” [73] writes Bernstein in “Today’s Not Opposite Day,” one of many cagey, slapstick satires in his large new book. But even when this poet – in his best vaudeville bureaucrat’s voice – just tells you what to expect, buckle up for a plateful of much weirder fare (the mixed metaphor is apt). Bernstein has never been an easy pleasure, from the early minimal work of his Language years to his recent incarnation as professa-widda-(Yiddish)-attitude, but the more recent work reflects a growing comfort with his role as public intellectual and avuncular proselyte for all things counter-hegemonic, hence a huge turn toward satire and even lyric in his work. The Bernstein “lyric,” of course, takes on every convention one could imagine lurks close to the humanist heart: “the toilet seat is down now / it’s there I plan to sit / until I find that doggy bag / I lost while just a kid” [39] By making the poems so nail-scratchingly obvious in their form – as in “Besotted Desquamation” in which every line in the poem contains four words beginning with the same letter “marshalling muted might majestically” – Bernstein anchors the aesthetic object (art always want to rise into the aether) in deep engagement with the most mundane modes of culture. This rationale for writing very “bad” poetry makes one put all aesthetic – and by extension social and moral – judgments in scare quotes, pitting the reader against the very value system that may have brought him or her to the poem itself: “& the moral of that is: Better / a loose potato chip than a / hot tamale. & the moral of that / is: It is a rocky road that’s / filled with bumps. & the moral / of that is: If you kill the spirit / in others, you kill it in yourself. / & the moral of that is: Watch the / slings and arrows & the automatic / weapons will get you every time.” [33] While some of this “companion to *My Way: Speeches and Poems*” (as he states in the intro) seems filler – those few poems that avoid kitsch and in which the poet seems merely to have failed achieve an effect – or maybe too annoyingly bathetic, there is no real way to determine where “filler” ends and the “quality” writing starts, and where the poem ends and the jacket copy starts, which just goes to show that everything good comes with strings attached.

Disarming Matter

Edmund Berrigan

The Owl Press, 1999

0-9669430-0-7

“I have a desire to transcend conscious speech, / not to the exclusion of words or letters, / it is not a scholarly wish, must be removed / from the present past future inclusive everything / beyond understanding.” [76] While not always so heady, the underlining feature to this debut volume – ranging in tone from the beat goofiness of a Gregory Corso to the Symbolist-tinged collages of early Ashbery, from the rich dailiness of a Bernadette Mayer to the more heated “bohème” of Rimbaud – is a negotiation between the dream-like irrealities of daily life, a polyvalent sexuality that is not out of tune with much Gen X flirtation with self-contradictory identities, and a figure called “God” who occasionally drops in as something like a placeholder for the channel to the “other world.” The beautiful long sonnet sequence “Cross House” is a mysterious affair, like a trapeze through a virtual haunted mansion, with figures of love and desire teaming among the threat of limitless possibility: “The persons I have seen in patterns / were so torn as to be absolute traps. / [...] She had never seen him trusted above all / earthly things. They were leaning on the / screen before the fire. “You bear your / wrongs more gently than I can bear / mine.” He bent over the group / in a caressing way, with renewed violence.” [54] The quiet surety of Berrigan’s meters are perfect for the wavering between “violence” and the “caress,” and he resembles a 17th century metaphysical – Herbert the closest – in his decorous rhetoric, which he dons most strongly when asking the “big questions”: “Oh, but never, I have something, a major contribution / to the record of life, in a world winter-obscene, that / works with fingers peel back a series of inventions / for mortality. Armchair comfortable for those who desire it. / Absence from the physical being as strong a security as any.” [34] These are big issues for such a poet in his mid-twenties, one who, consequently, doesn’t take himself too seriously, and is as pop-sensible, funny and crazily improvisatory as any grunge lyricist: “I am a heartfelt bulging crotch / when I take on the swiss initiative [...] I made love to Nico a lot, I dug her a lot / it was like hanging out with a guy except / she had girl pants” [16] This combination of addresses to the higher powers with a mischievous running-with-the-disaffected-youths of the present makes Berrigan a true Hamet-like figure for the nineties, not the highbrow of Eliot, but a thoughtful, late-century rebel engaged in his deep, “irrational” discourse with Yorick while the world only dreams.

Eunoia

Christian Bök

Coach House Books, 2001

1-5245-092-9

“Writing is inhibiting. Sighing, I sit, scribbling in ink this pidgin script. I sing with nihilistic witticism, disciplining signs with trifling gimmicks – impish hijinks which highlight stick sigils. Isn’t it glib? Isn’t it chic?” [50] Besides being glib and chic, Bök’s new book strikes one with the force of being the most incredible literary curio – each of its chapters is only allowed to use one vowel, out-gunning the Oulipian Perec by four – and yet a sort of heroic, epic undertaking. Taking seven years to write (the time it took Joyce to write *Ulysses*), *Eunoia* – which means “beautiful thinking” and is the shortest word in the English language to employ all the vowels – uses other constraints, including the same length for each paragraph, parrallel sentence structures and tons of internal rhyme. Furthermore, each of its chapters must “allude to the art of writing [and] must describe a culinary banquet, a prurient debauch, a pastoral tableau, and a nautical voyage.” This hyper-mechanization of the writer’s craft sets the stage for a welter of eccentric, yet universally appealing, tours-de-force, such as Chapter E’s retelling of the *Odyssey* from the viewpoint of Helen: “Whenever Helen seeks these perverse excesses, her regretted deeds depress her; hence, Helen beseeches Ceres (the blessed Demeter): ‘let sweet Lethe bless me, lest these recent events be rememberd’ – then the empress feeds herself fermented hempseed, her preferred nepenthe.” [37] Each vowel infects the writing with its specific tone and content: the “a” chapter, the tale of Hassan “an Agha Khan”, is the most mellifluous, an Orientalist playground of Arabs and naphtha lamps, while the “u” chapter presents the most intense vision of lustful excess under the stress of arbitrary restraints, in which “Dutch smut churns up blushful succubus lusts,” and Ubu and Lulu burp, hump and bump for five delirious pages, exhausting, in the meantime, the entire range of English words that only contain the vowel “u.” “Oiseau,” the second half of this book, is a collection of shorter works such as Bök’s homage to the “w,” a poem that uses no vowels but the letter “y” (more than you’d think), and his phonetic translation of Rimbaud’s sonnet “Voyelle,” thus cementing this poet’s allegiance to a language that literally seems to write itself, provided it find the perfect obsessive and linguistically adept host.

Polyverse

Lee Ann Brown

Sun & Moon, 1999

1-55713-290-9

Brown occupies a unique place in the “scene” of younger American poets in that her poems appear something of a throwback to a set of classic bohemian values – “free love,” spontaneity, return-to-nature lyricism, the “voice,” etc. – that have somewhat disappeared, at least among serious poets, during the influx of such phenomenon as poststructuralism and Language writing. In this sprawling first collection of poems, Brown explores – with an engaging, faux innocent but candidly libidinal energy – a wide variety of forms and subject matters, ranging from “Sestina Aylene,” a buoyant love poem that is also mediation on the writing of verse, through the “Two By Fours” written in collaboration with the poet Jack Collom (reminiscent of the famous “Pull My Daisy” of Kerouac and Ginsburg), to the long unpunctuated prose meditation “A Long Sentence Distance,” a tour-de-force of grammatical hijinks and tonal shifts which excessively catalogues Brown’s loves of life. “Write the most beautiful sentence in the world and fill the whole page with its sinuous references to longhand inquisitive beauty despite always remembering you girlfriend suicided and world may not give you everything you ever wanted asking yourself should I grow up [...]” [tk] starts “A Long Sentence,” and continues at breakneck pace with breathless candor for six unpunctuated pages. Play is the order of the day, here, and even the shortest poems combine humor and thoughtful insight with a need to keep afloat, such as “Poetry”: “a condensed form / of food & time.” “Dreams Listing” is a light exploration into surrealist autonomy: “A small purple bird is on its androgynous animal shelf. I ask it to step out onto my wet finger. It does and turns into a tiny man dressed in a grey suit, “ while “To Jennifer M.” is a girl-power anthem, one of many quasi-erotic poems in the collection: Let’s make out in the girl’s room / Let me write you a wild heart [...] \ But it couldn’t surpass yours / beating so multivariably / in your left aligned margin.” [tk] Split into three parts which are sometimes divided into subsections, *Polyverse* is an encyclopedic argument for poetry at every interstitial moment of life, including collaboration and imitation as a sort of cerebral sexual activity, with a sincerity and child-like greed that is addictive. The first section, “Her Hearsay Book,” has sections titled “a museme” – process poems that use their titles as the pools of letters from which its words are formed – and “CoLabs”, poems written in collaboration with other authors, ranging from the well-known to the up-and-coming – both “experimental” sections that don’t fail to invite the reader in for the fun. The second section “Velocity City,” contains poems written in homage to popular singers, capturing both the energy and immediate satisfaction of rock music, and strongly contributes to the portrait of an ephemeral social scene that the book portrays. Brown’s polyglot, easy mastery of a variety of forms may be distracting to readers, who may suspect that she is not doing justice to her obvious talents as a writer by including so many spurious, in some cases entirely unrealized, poems, many of which seem like momentary jottings in a notebook that still seemed interesting a few days later. The “Comfit” section, for example, while very charming as modern-day haikus, don’t seem that distinguishable from similar poems from the 50’s and 60’s. “The A,” for example, a sort of snapshot from a subway – a type of poem Paul Blackburn, who died in 1980, excelled at – runs in its entirety: Young / Black / Exec / Books / on / his lap: / How to Get on the Fast Track / Nods / Exhausted / Somewhere around 125th.” [tk] The weirdness of the concretization of the metaphor “the fast track” when it appears on a subway held by a dozing aspirant is amusing, but somehow the sentiment is either just not very exciting, or just hearken back too

much to a sort of faux-zen, daily record sensibility that one has already seen. A later untitled poem in the book, noted as being dedicated to Bruce Andrews and written in the matter of his “Mobius”, sounds very much like a Lee Ann Brown poem but utilizes some of the constructivist spatialization and fragmentation of “Mobius” – in other words, it is a complete departure from the earlier urban plein air notebook jotting of “The A,” not to mention the various imitations of Emily Dickinson, Ted Berrigan, Bernadette Mayer, and Gertrude Stein, or the poems that sound like Southern folk songs, that appear throughout the book. The questions that are being asked, then, is whether a system of values is inherent in the form of the poem itself, whether the “form” of the poem can be truly divorced from the “content” (i.e. is taking a form invented by a Language poet and filling it classic “Brown” content subverting the form or the poet?), and most importantly, perhaps, whether a poet’s “sincerity” is tied to the type of expression that is being used in a poem. The surprising thing about this collection is that the reader rarely becomes suspicious that Brown is merely showing off her facility with formal variety, nor is she ever simply adopting a “persona” for the length of a poem that she later discards – there is a complete continuity between the individual poems, even with those written with other writers. That she can write a Dickinsonian stanza in one poem, a New York School run-on the next, seems to fit in easily with the Brown project of simply doing everything, trying everything, and most importantly interfacing with as many people as possible. Brown probably can’t claim to have ever invented a form, and she is often quite honest in her work on her use of formal strictures or permissions as ways of getting in her work; “Taxi, Thank You,” for examples, is quite obviously a list of taxi cab drivers with odd names like Ulysses Flaubert and Simon Ng, while “Demi-Queer Nation” starts off with an obvious allusion to Frank O’Hara and doesn’t disappoint: “As I pinch my nipples and think of you / I’m sorry Frank O’Hara isn’t as cute / as you expected... “ [tk] Like many of the most vital cultural products of its generation, *Polyverse* combines optimism, a collage “pop” sensibility, shameless narcissism and yet a tremendous Whitmanic generosity and gregarious social sensibility in a way rare in books of poetry today; it has justifiably gotten a fair amount of media attention, at least in comparison to other books published by Sun & Moon.

World On Fire

Michael Brownstein

Open City Books, 2002

1-890447-29-3

Apocalyptic grandstanding, even after the turn into the new millennium and especially in the Crusader-like light of the “war on terror,” will not go out of fashion soon, but it may never find a more passionate, lyrical, and moodily entertaining outlet than Brownstein in this eleven-chapter litany of pre-mortem griefs, post-modern anxieties and poetic calls to higher consciousness. Recalling some of the urbanized Old Testament rhetoric of the Beat writers in their peak – Ginsberg in “Kaddish,” Corso in his “happy birthday of death” days – but lacking their Dada whimsy or decadent posturing – not to mention their innovations in form – *World on Fire* struggles to reconnect a floundering humanity with the gaea, or “earth spirit,” and to sever our inexplicable, but all too salient, pact with death as manifest in our wholesale pilfering of natural resources, our toxification everything from the atmosphere to the sperm cell, and our lack of diversification – in mind and body – through such phenomena as the reptilian mind-meld of global monoculture and the commercialization of genetic cloning. Wavering between documentary (quotes from Chomsky, Shiva, and other renegade thinkers abound), an erotic love letter to an unnamed other who could be the gaea itself, violent stand-up tragedy in which the reader is confronted directly with her own indifference (“Your life’s fish tank a Mobius strip vista of degraded landscapes projected on ever-larger TV screens.” [89]), and an inexhaustible, volcanic vent (“Rage – how can I control it?”) that would traumatize any op-ed page, *World* is also incredibly readable, stopping no place for very long and yet honed in on one – potentially grating, but sickly cathartic – theme: how defeat social and political indifference when fear and self-loathing are the engines of the economy itself. Brownstein’s method is primarily through the negative charge of “look what’s happening now” than with the positive of “look what we can do,” though he occasionally hits this latter note, as when he salivates over the vulnerability of the oil industries to “hardly unproven or experimental” ethyl-alcohol fuel technologies, painting the “house of cards” image of their inevitable downfall. *World* occasionally plays to oft-discredited tropes, such as that of the natural fitness of “primitive” peoples to the environment, even while later acknowledging – as in the anecdote of Pego, the Huaorani warrior who killed women even as the population of females was dangerously low – that these peoples were no wiser than the moderns. *World’s* Socratic moments never wend far into the speculative adversary’s court, and a note of obsessiveness suggests the associative fluidity is more the by-product of insomnia than the fruits of Brownstein’s labors since the 70s as the author of several collections of fiction and poetry. Nonetheless, this is one of the first serious works of poetic literature to open itself up to all of the downsides of social progress during the nineties, and to cry out for a counterpunch – to call for a negating, spontaneous consensus out of those who know and do nothing – against the manipulations of humanity by the “empire” of today, the transnational corporation. This could be the little black book for responsible protests of decades to come.

Other: British and Irish Poetry Since 1970

Edited by Richard Caddel, Peter Quatermain

Wesleyan University Press, 1998

0-81952-258-9

Though England has seen a spate of recent anthologies of alternative U.K. poetry, this collection marks the first published in the States in over two decades. Editors Caddel, a noted poet, and Quatermain, a prominent critic of postmodern poetry, collect a provocative and diverse range of work that is balanced between such trends as Caribbean dub poetry, the mellifluous, baroque lyric as it has been developed in Cambridge, London-based performance and concrete poetry, and outsider figures such as Bill Griffiths (an independent Anglo-Saxon scholar) and Tom Raworth, who first found strong support among stateside poets like Ted Berrigan. The compelling introduction traces a nation's literary history that has had to come to terms with a number of factors: the troubled importation of globally influential American poetic practices (Projective, Beat), post-colonialism and the subversions of normative English by dialects or Caribbean "nation languages," and – perhaps foremost – the fact of an experimental English tradition that pre-dated twentieth century modernism, and which "stretches back to Claire, Blake, Smart, and the two Vaughans, Henry and Thomas" [tk]. The result has been a "fair field of folk" in contemporary British culture, which the editors see as "packed with chaotic overlays of cultures" – certainly a different impression than conservative poets such as Larkin, Hughes, Hill or Heaney would ever have us believe. The selections from the 55 poets are brief yet significant. Barry McSweeney, a self-styled Rimbaudian, is represented by a number of terse, direct poems that flaunt provocative language in a way that suggests his model: "Small / crawling piety, you deserve / many bombs / & / guns. / \ I ate your Christian fish." [tk] Denise Riley's subtle, tradition-conscious ear helps surface lines that are unexpectedly comforting: "Rain lyrics. Yes, then the rain lyrics fall. / I don't want absence to be this beautiful. / It shouldn't be; in fact I know it wasn't..." [tk] Tom Raworth's "That More Simple Natural Time Tone Distortion," a sonic joy-ride of one-to-three word lines, is a contrast to his traditional lyric "Out of a Sudden": "the alphabet wonders / what it should do / paper feels useless / colours lose hue / \ while all musical notes / perform only in blue" [tk] Tom Leonard's Glasgow Scots, not unlike John Agard's Guyanese-inflected idiom, brings to eye and ear a sweet, alien yet confident music that is unlike anything in the States. Leonard's portrait of lower middle class apathy is both vulnerable and boldly realist in a way suggesting Williams: "yi surta / keep trynti avoid it that's / thi difficulty bitty it / \ jist / no keep findn yirsell / sitn / wotchn thi telly ur / lookn oot thi windy / [...] wiv nay / cookn oil nwi need / potatoes" [tk] Veronica Forrest-Thomson, a poet and critic who died at 28, cheekily mixes the linguistic investigations of Wittgenstein, the stagey learning of Eliot and the languor of Keats, to create monologues that entertain as they dally with subversion: "Though my deserted frying pans lie around me / I do not want to make it cohere. / Hung up to dry for fishing lines on the side of grey wharf of Lethe. / Old, we love each other and know more." [tk] Chris Cheek, Maggie O'Sullivan and concrete poet Bob Cobbing are all well represented, as well as important figures responsible for the influx of New American poetry to the islands, Eric Mottram, Roy Fisher and Andrew Crozier. This is an important sourcebook to a literature that is probably more marked by the postcolonial condition than that of the United States, with fewer heroes but with, perhaps, more fruitful divergences from the main modernist line.

The Garrett Caples Reader

Garrett Caples

Black Square Editions, 1999

0-96751-440-1

Caples is part of a younger generation of writers trying to reinvigorate poetry by combining the angular expressionism of methods such as Surrealism with the sheer enthusiasm, lustiness and fuck-all attitude of youth, retreating from the formalist methods of, say, the Language poets and reviving the fun, sometimes pure “amaze me” value, of this French cadre of aesthetic outlaws. If this sounds like a self-conscious “project”, and hence a betrayal of the “automatic” and pure lyric poetry, don’t worry: the performative is much alive in this work, as Caples can be as arrogant and shock rock as you would want any younger poet to be. The dedication to an alternative world, one in which love and eroticism mix in never inelegant dances with the “things” of a virtual dream-space – “A can opener found in Brooklyn meets the tailfins of Alabama,” he writes in *Resonant Cylinder* [73] – is stated quite frankly in the second poem of the collection, the “First National Anthem,” which begins: “an homage to places I’ve never been: / to the skies I haven’t seen unroll red saddle blankets / and tuck in for the evening / and the birches whose teeth I’ve never brushed / and the buildings whose looms have never woven shadows into nets” [4] Caples’ love poems, of which there are many, step out into the open from what might be a psychedelic core, straddling the line between Syd Barrett stream-of-sweet-nothings and bachelor-machine eroticism of Duchamp: “Mr. Baritone-Man, tell my love of me, and do it in a way she’ll be impressed. Paint me on her eyes in your dark, rich tones, and ignore the fact she’s not too crazy about the saxophone. There’s a tendency to take these things personally, believe me I know, but you’re my last resort, your deep craters of sound, the prod of your twisted horn. Gouge her with your bull-like strength, as you chop your meaty way through innuendo and crescendo like red Hungarian wine. Show her brochures made from glossy squalls, depicting the castle we’ll occupy on the banks of the Tigris [...]” [38] A salient quality of this work is the turn toward an anthropomorphic center, or in other terms a “pop star” cult-de-moi, for the lyrical subject; i.e. though there are “process” poems (the words of one of which is entirely alphabetical: “A basic concern demands extreme finesse, generating hollow increments, jealously knocking low minds...” [81]), most of them are clearly celebrations of will and vigor in a somewhat demoralized, but not entirely hostile America. This is accentuated by the cover image, which is a full head-shot of the author though heavily tinted by an orange electric fog, the combination of the image and the title of the book suggesting that this is a posthumous work, hence elevating the living poet to dead-poet cult status a little before his time. That Caples is conscious of his stance toward the impersonality of contemporary poetics comes through most clearly in “Humped by Barrett Watten,” a quasi-essay that accuses the Language poets of being “Victorian” in their attitudes toward sex (hence the over-the-top vulgarity of the title). Like in another poem considering Rene Char’s awe at a pair of lace panties (for which Char receives no drubbing for, after all, he’s honestly enraptured) in which Caples discourses with an imaginary W. S. Merwin (“No!, it is his hushed awe in the face of women’s mystery!”), he deftly, if pretty obviously – the sarcasm makes a barnside-wide target of his object – employs a dialogic technique for presenting counter-arguments regarding Watten’s work: “Don’t you get it? Watten’s text was an ironic, postmodern take on the erotic, which was not constrained by the illusionary and arbitrary requirement that it *be* erotic. And the erotic is an ideologic construction anyway, imposed on us by an oppressive society.” [76] Caples says “Maybe so,” but provides throughout this “reader” – by turns bril-

liant and/or over-clever – what he clearly regards as an alternative to this irony which is itself oppressive: a song of the self that revels in the possibilities of dreams, of thought, of literature (homages abound) and, indeed, of language itself.

Manifesto: A Century of Isms

Edited by Mary Ann Caws

University of Nebraska Press, 2000

0-80326-407-0

As Caws states in her breathless introduction, the arts manifesto, which first made its appearance in the late 19th century (about forty years after the Communist Manifesto) relies on an arrogant, overblown stance that was a “deliberate manipulation of the public view,” as unquestioning about the value of the “new art” and as it was about the bankruptcy of the old. During what Caws calls the “Manifesto Moment,” from about 1909 when the Futurists first broke out to 1919 when Lyubov Popova wrote her “statement” for non-objective Suprematist Art, the manifesto had a “madness about it,” but always, even when positing an “us” against a “them,” invited the reader to become one of the new breed, a whole new way of looking at things from just the other side of the paradigm-shift (a strategy and optimism that has since been taken over by the technology industry). The manifesto was not a symptom of a world “waiting to be born,” but was at once a diagnosis of its narcolepsy and the crashing of speeding trains that would cure it forever. In this anthology, Caws expands the definition of “Manifesto” to include milder statements of principles (from the Language Poets), poems (parts of Whitmans’ “Song of Myself”), fragments from the writings of Cage, Duchamp and others that are more seminal moments than statements, Oscar Wilde’s Preface to *Dorian Gray*, Poe’s “The Philosophy of Furniture,” one of the few writings of Jacques Vaché (Breton’s early inspiration for Surrealism), Schwitters’ offbeat “Cow Manifesto” and more. Nitpickers will note certain important exclusions: Rimbaud’s proto-Symbolist “Letter of the Seer,” in which many of the tenets of movements from Surrealism to Beat and Language poetry were to be first found; the Brazilian concrete poets’ “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” which was unique in mating a postcolonial agenda with an aesthetics program for “exportable” art; and Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” which if anything was the most concise, most ecstatic and yet most complete expression of the mores and methods of the Beat Generation. Since the book contains visual as well as literary manifestos – writings from Odilon Redon and James Ensor, not to mention Salvador Dali’s “Yellow Manifesto” – an excerpt from Jan Tschichold’s *The New Typography*, which outlines the relationship of type and paper-size to social consciousness, would have helped tie several strands together, such as the included manifestos for new architecture and new music (relying on experimental scores), not to mention the valuable, if not entirely satisfying, Lettrist manifestos. The Vorticism section is adequate, though one misses Gautier-Brzeska’s fabulous letter from the front (published in *Blast 2*), in which he described carving a sculpture out of the butt of a gun, a more charismatic, powerful piece than the Vorticist manifestos themselves authored by the noxious Richard Aldington, who ironed out Lewis and Pound’s language (several of Lewis’s *Blast* pages are included, typefaces intact). Readers of Language Poetry will wonder why none of Bruce Andrews’ famously propulsive essays (recently collected in *Paradise & Method* from the University of Alabama) are included, nor “The New Sentence” by Ron Silliman, which more than the writing of Nick Piombino and Michael Palmer satisfied several of the classic aims of the manifesto and was superlatively influential. Since poetry has been included, a short poem like Ashbery’s “And ‘Ut Pictora Poesis’ Is Her Name” would stand nicely beside O’Hara’s “Personism” (which is included) as a brief, provocative statement of the New York School’s aesthetic purposes that is both subverting of accepted literary values and – perhaps too warmly – inviting. Nonetheless, most of the classics are here, including Whistler’s “The Ten O’Clock,” several essays by Apollinaire and Marinetti, the Dada Manifestos by Tzara,

the Russian Futurists' "Slap in the Face of Public Taste," Pound's "A Few Don'ts by an Imagist," South American manifestos by Borges and Huidibros, Olson's "Projective Verse," and writings of Negritude by Cesaire and others (yes, it's quite male heavy). This enormous book is the great companion to the Rothenberg/Joris two volume *Poems for the Millennium*, and in some ways a less fragmented portrait of world (though not Asian) Modernism. Though the scholarship seems often rather quickly written – Caws is like the Harold Bloom of this material and seems to exhale introductions and scholarly editions at will – it is a challenging, comprehensive read.

Three Bell Zero

Miles Champion

Roof, 2000 0-93780-482-7

Each page of this young English poet's first stateside collection (*Compositional Bonbons Placate* was published by Carcanet in 1996) is brimming with the conflicts of intentionality and chance, design and improvisation, or perhaps simply work and fun, but not in drawn-out meditations so much as by well-honed linguistic breaks, taking the project of the Surrealist explosion of the veils of reality to the level of the word. Champion takes his lead from the American Language poets, and his poems sometimes resemble, page for page, works by Bernstein, Di Palma, Andrews and Coolidge, but his attention to this heritage – for him an overseas import rather than “native” – operates as an engaged criticism of the conservative nature of English poetry in the century of Modernism. But rather than take “innovation” as his guiding principle, Champion creates an entire culture or sensibility that, for all of its completeness and, at times, lyrical coherence (the metrical regularities of the quasi-narrative “Clovis,” for example, greet aesthetic closure at every step), strikes always in the other direction, or as many “other” directions as can be contained in these careful, spare poems: “Signs the ever / Water & wine to form an oblong cut-off / Or baffle at social what's / That is, in Hegelian terms, the scarf cigar / A man is than made / I think ex-Parisian liver suit or difference / Perfumes the harder focus / Road or dog brains rise / Light is eat / You is in pellet-type pole / The clearing colour sort of adding the twig / & I found a kind of digital dried dill / Stick” [15] Champion rigorousness, adeptness with staccato meters, and learnedness measure up against any in the Language camp, especially during their “heroic” phase, but because he doesn't cling to the principle of author as originator, or even copyrighter, of his words or works – such that a Romantic or individualistic strain creeps in (this has affected a number of second-generation Language poets) – he is able to focus on the central, universal concern, which is to make readers see and hear words. His near-utopic faith in this project can bring on a Symbolist, quasi-mystic undercurrent: “The nod / dis- / members the / tactile / echo of / a solipsistic / gesture. Diffuse / summa-. I / mean, to / provide you / with layers. (Target / fit / mists.) I / was in / the twenty- / four-hour / metaphor, laundering / an intense / & crystalline / hush.” [45-46] However, for all of his graceful maneuvering among the most difficult postmodern practices, the spirit of community always peeps through in the generous imagery and the sheer pleasure in performing language: “Candour disposes the lustre / tinctures for what chance / the person's mount or invisible taipiece / free brochures impressing the indefinite fold / cuffed hands spool to avert / is pierced or will burst / sewed / knees together partly knot / or stick that lies therein whetting [...]” [66] Though a slender 68-pages long, the poems in *Three Bell Zero* will remind everyone of what it felt like to read poems for the first time, with excitement and a sense of belonging and purpose.

The Little Door Slides Back

Jeff Clark

Sun & Moon, 1997

1-557133-14-X

Clark, along with such poets like Garrett Caples and Will Alexander, signals a return to the interests of Surrealism, but he is somewhat different in that he is interested in a wider swath of French poetry extending back to Symbolist aestheticism – the hallucinatory quality of Odilon Redon’s charcoals comes to mind, or the restrained, tormented eroticism of painters like Popp – up through writers of the *Tel Quel* period, though Clark stops short of any sort of fetishization of *écriture*, not to mention any of the concerns of Language poetry. Clark tends to recreate some of the ambience of the mystically-inflected culture from which avant-garde French poetry sprang, and even goes so far as to invoke a “Lord” (it’s unclear whether Clark is a believer, but one tends to assume that he is not) against which to contrast his more Dadaistic tendencies: “This morning from his bed Lord / I led him to Flesh Ornaments / This morning from his bed Lord / I led him to a Pink Gamepiece Manufacture / This morning in his bed Lord / I hummed him old Hopi numbers / This morning from his bed Lord / I gave him an orange plastic crab that honks.” [75] That plastic crab may well be Nerval’s lobster, and the suggestion of immanent madness is another example of what appears to be Clark’s channeling of the crepuscular mental landscape of the 19th century Parisian. He appears to be writing from the shores of “ecstasy,” but, as if thwarted by his own time and place as a mid-twenties Californian, one could say he is painfully aware of the irony of “ecstasy” being the über-drug of the synthesized generations, one not quite as toxic as absinthe but still inducing fretful reveries, not to mention the illusion of “correspondences.” The “bad boy” aesthetic of lingering Beat poetics undercuts any sort of pieties, formal or philosophical, in his writing; the screens of “beauty” and “faith” are constantly being erected, and they are not so much torn down by the dada-ist drop as being rendered more real by a dialogism with a chaotic, mad and often black humor: “Who follows one to the park / Who’s behind one all the way / Whose scent is cat’s ass and fed breath / blown down past one’s head / by breeze that in one’s mind is Wind / Whose refrain behind one on the walls / is drowned by wild parrots.” [tk] One might think that Clark is merely rewiring some of the tactics of Ashbery in its total trust of the color qualities of words, but he has little interest in collage or “found language,” and rarely approaches the urbane ironies of the New York School poet (Clark would not start a poem “We find these truths to be self-evident,” for example). In fact, Clark seems to be making a conscious decision to forego many of the techniques investigated during the hey-day of American postmodernism from the 50s to the 70s and to strike a simpler, more approachable posture; despite his often grandiose gestures, he always remains somewhat intimate with his imagined reader. A distinguishing quality of this book is Clark’s fugal use of single words like “dormer,” “cock,” “Lord,” etc., all of which reappear in different poems or in separate sections of the same sequence, to take on interior, symbolic qualities that move them from their use in normal “social” language. By repetition, these words enter a more purely imaginative (and not entirely rhetorical, but nominalist) realm, one that makes one forget how these words may have been used otherwise. The representation of nature and society in this book – the trees, streets, bordellos, moons, etc. – do not have a documentary quality to them, nor are they in any way related to “thingness” (think the chickens of Williams). The long prose poem “Invaginations” takes this particular attention to the word to a different level, using a single word to suggest entirely conflicting identities for its protagonist. Clark writes: “Tonight he calls himself a

‘nympholept’,” then “This evening he was ‘blind’, so that I was able to approach and watch him,” then, “This evening he was ‘small,’ so that I was able to approach him and hold him in my arms.” Finally, with a bathetic dive: “This morning he was ‘foam balls,’ so that I was able to approach and gather him up and stuff him into my Polaroid case and take him to the ocean...” [tk] As in much of Clark’s work, the piety of the lover and the “foam balls” of the disaffected interchange, neither entirely stripping the other of its charms but creating, mutually, the language of Clark’s world. Clark’s poems – which run through several genres, including the fable, the love letter, the chant, the “tercet” (a series of three lines poems at the end of the book), and a Michaux-inspired form of autobiography, “Some Information About Twenty-Three Years of Existence” – are devoted to the idea of possibility in the poet who operates as free agent, looking to the weather not for the springs of dailiness but for some message from the aether.

Spinoza In Her Youth

Norma Cole

Omnidawn Publishing, 2002

1-890650-09-9

The experiencing “self” and the pragmatic value of “identity” – often appearing to be a priori because one can’t know whence it came – is wonderfully described in a brief poem from this new book: “the idealization of the face / in the year -1 / nothing but a shadow / she so became her name / so first, this faith, it was / a social tool.” [91] Cole, who hales from Toronto and moved to San Francisco after a time in France, is distinctive in her use of poetic methods often associated with a “French” style – a reticent, spare rhetoric suggesting a classical education, a loving deconstruction of narrative tropes to offset a free use of abstraction. She resembles Michael Palmer most among American poets, though some phrases suggest a kinship with Lyn Hejinian (“to say explore the experience the very thought of thought or a unified theory of the sensesÖ” [71]), or – at her most impenetrable – a writer working through a *Maximus* hangover. *Spinoza* is often forbidding in its restless need to escape summation, and often the drama of the poem – exaggerated by italicized phrases and a halting, breathless expression – doesn’t convince the reader that there is a volcanic agonism antagonizing conventional lyric expression: “*how people use each other* like serotonin / linked by formaldehyde to protein / the antibodies will find you / if you hear hoof-beats / they must be zerbras. Ils sont tres sensibles a / la motion – it’s motion they notice –” [24] In the verse poems, there is an air of importance to the poet’s quest to decode the riddle of experience, to estrange the “everyday” in the hope of super-real objectivity, but the fragments – perhaps because they are so willing to be hermetic – often fail to add up to a drama that demands interpretive attention. The short poem “For shade” nicely suggests what Cole is after: “Now the woman lives alone. And / what does she do while she’s alone? She / lives / its uncommon austerity / dreamlike not in its sense of / being vague but / rather in its clarity and vividness” [96] But the “clarity” is often threatened by phrases like “recursive paradigm” and a penchant for being ludic – linguistically, philosophically – without any really joyful play. The prose poems – such as “My Operatives,” the “Artificial Memory” sequence, and parts of the title poem – are more successful, following through, in a subtly twisted fashion, on their initial premises rather than leaping away at the first sign of a resonant white space: “The newspaper reproduces a photograph of Helen Keller beside the famous Indian poet. Her youthful and animated face lifts and turns affectionately toward his, her left arm extends toward him, the left hand, fingers spread, masking the lower portion of the elderly poet’s face. What the photograph says: the poet’s eyes stare straight out of the picture, at you.” [79] Cole’s great skill might be as a photographer, trapped before her subject – “Here is the camera’s inanimate lens, and here is the operator whose gaze is of an unprecedented interiority” [38] – rather than as a dancer who leaps in circles around it.

Bathwater Wine

Wanda Coleman

Black Sparrow Press, 1998

1-574230-64-6

Coleman's seventh book with Black Sparrow is an encyclopedic, moment-by-moment accounting of rage, witness and transcendence that moves agilely from a tragic but comedic resignation – a seductive blues or be-bop style – through fecund rambling hijinks that show off her verbal acuity, through postmodern collage and pastiche mimicking of traditional genres (such as the newspaper account), on to direct, sixties- and rap-inspired in-your-face declarations of resistance and anger. The strong opening sequence, "Dreamwalk," is a poignant, quasi-confessional, free associative account of the author's adolescence: "ugly and more ugly. you are a card carrying / member of the FBI (Fat Black Idiots) and you arrest and / jail them in your mind for crimes against your heart." [tk] Later in the sequence, the need to escape inspires a fecund, but suspicious, alternate reality for the young poet: "you become a shadow in pursuit of shadows. you / smoke imaginary imported German fags while sipping / imaginary English sherry barely clad in blood red / silken fantasies while straddling a rattan chair on / the balcony of a Cuban bordello." [tk] Primarily a collection of disparate shorter poems, the volume is punctuated by longer sequences. "The Ron Narrative Reconstructions" wavers between poetry and prose, and between modes of rhapsody, philosophical discourse, fiction and documentary, demonstrating in microcosm the range of Coleman's style. It opens with a pastoral couplet – "a half hour before the advance of sun / the red-winged sparrow begins its song" – that invokes an ideal "poetic" setting, but, as if to emphasize the absence of such an organic unity of nature in her native Los Angeles (and in the mode of the pastoral itself), it jarringly cuts to a haunting, very contemporary, set of images: "helicopters whirl around, claim this lesser heaven, wolf-eyed pilots with an infrared snoop, scope for / a collar. coal-colored mountains of thunderhead, gather. there's rumbling in the recesses of distant western / panorama." [tk] Matching, and hence countering, the power of the panoptic gaze of the police helicopter (and other forms of technological control, including that of normative syntax), "The Ron Narrative Reconstructions," with their vignettes ("in the midcity laundromat, we two-step to a piped-in salsa..."), wry theoretical musings (a digression on "poetoerotic rape": "the plundering and transmogrification of another's form... a physical release akin to sexual orgasm"), and reliance on the eternal powers of language and the basic need everyone has to be a part of another's life, succeeds in mapping the activity of a poet's mind where the less generous and attentive have failed. The poem is emblematic of the best qualities of this large, somewhat sprawling, formally diverse yet occasionally loose, book of poetry.

Alien Tatters

Clark Coolidge

Atelos Books, 2000

1-891190-08-3

Coolidge's latest collection of long poems – hot on the heels of his massive group of loopy lyrics from *The Figures*, *On The Nameways* – takes the reader to a delicately upsetting space which seems run by the evil twin of Descartes's god, replacing every object in the room until, like in a swoon, one falls squarely into the lush language: "Just kind of a nice frying person. The rest was on the latch moved over. I could just see a foot or threat of one because my head was lying on my head. A bit. Then another weighted hand, sort of spoollike and in spots and dashes. Gaming room with a spread to it." [72] "Puzzle Faces" is framed like a discovery narrative, an air of mystery being created by the author's subjunctive sense of meaning and lack of agency as he/she, in a partly lotus-eater state, tries to avoid panic and indecision: "There is something heavy being lifted like a blot from the paper. Are you all prepared? There will be little fun in thin rooms. Might have to barter for favors. This is an uneven clime. I'll have to eat when I can, there being no rooms for it here. Where purest night is considered a sort of vitamin not just anyone should ingest. I watch the lights popping out all the way down the cabin. There must be creatures here who would overlead the populace, just a feeling." [140] However, like the other four long prose pieces in this book, it soon breaks down into his idiosyncratic stand-up-parataxis comedy mode, and so rather than follow though, Beckett-like, on the implications of its shady premises, the work becomes a play of surfaces on which anything can strike from a number of angles ("I can't believe the underwear that comes with America"), though always returning somehow to that discovering voice: "Lower on the block was half a chicken. There may be people here who roam, but they are not the semblables. They are mildly warm and senseless. I have to send away and enclose my vocabulary. I am small and that is my name, "Small"." [145] As Coolidge writes in the afterword, he was very attentive to reportings in the papers of UFO sightings and alien abductions, and had a "huge desire to participate somehow. If I couldn't go, then perhaps at least I might learn to speak the language, and use it to take myself further in, or out, to what?" [199] The long first poem, "Alien Tatters," takes up this theme most strongly, seeming to describe what happens among these creatures, though they never seem to escape his head: "At first there was so much light in the room with me that I thought it must be the dog. But no. Okay, but I will explain that the grass was green. They gave me the kind of Jello where it still came in a set. Then I got launched somehow and let's forget all about ceilings. When I couldn't see what was below the eyes I always breathed heavily in short pants. But I'm not even sure about the eyes. I can't even see the eats." [63] But speaking this language – as challenging and seemingly whimsical as trying to learn dolphin mating calls – seems to have been Coolidge's desire since his early minimal poems (collected in *Space*) through his bee-bop Kerouac prosody (in *Sound as Thought*) and his other long prose works (*Book of Daring*, etc.). That he decides on a quasi-science fiction theme for his latest book – though one thoroughly absent of technological fetishism and/or the humanist reclamation of weirdness and otherness (cf. Kinsella's *The Visitants*) – is not so unusual given the sheen of philosophical depth that popular culture and digital technology, not to mention the freakish alienation talk shows grant to panopticed suburban life, have given the genre. While Coolidge may not be for everyone – one has to really be able to get over long works with no significant "themes," linear narrative or apparent correlation with social realities to read him – this is a thoroughly enjoyable book and unlike anything else one will find on the shelves this year.

On The Nameways: Volume One

Clark Coolidge

The Figures

1-930589-02-6

Like Ashbery in his recent “Girls on the Run,” Coolidge indulges in fantasies of serious play among grownups, creating, in this long series of short poems (for which there will, presumably, be a Volume II), a landscape in which words themselves become characters, suggest psychological dimensions, and in the end depart having pleased, perverted or deceived: “In the Land of Oo Bla Dee / stooping distance from the Renal Tailpiece / wore the uniform to the very edge / clasping of the mudguard / \ Progress Hornblower was a liar / they never set his pants on fire / it all came due on Whiteman’s Day / metallurgy of a log / \ But there’s a lowline limiter / and Jimmy Semester is lifting it / riffs and breaths all hauled away / a general snuffing a total rolling / just no end to these shifting witnesses / but there’ll come a day” [42] There is something that is not so much anti-intellectual but defiantly slap-happy about the way Coolidge uses language, and it’s not because he always quite sure what he’s doing (as he freely admits): “The Pillgollick has soiled himself again / stop fishing for end rhymes / would you paint beer cans? / I laugh at myself in Backwardsland / is there a brain at the end of this line? / Tsathoggua?” [64] If the Americans could not be given credit for having invented Surrealism, Coolidge proves that the basic premises of automatic writing – separated from Freudian symbolism and card-carrying Marxism – still thrum as the undertone to our mutually scrambled, consumerized, and even infantilized, consciousnesses, as he takes his digitized bee-bop prosody – there’s a touch of Kerouac still here despite the “word-centered” Langpo nuances – to the people in witty, electric doses: “The Indian on the penis / the sign of the only stable seating / in this country / BRAP / but it seemed like to me it wasn’t / as hot as it had been / the porcelien fart had a flame embossed / in time to come a bone to lend / and the ovens came crashing from / the fly granite scars / an umbilical wallet it was / the engine on my father’s hands / (bent).” [13] The cumulative effect is of hearing a quirky, jazz-suffused, horny, literate, art-induced, troubled, lazy, friendly, rhythmically polyglot, Stein-bobbled, cranky and constantly energized mind-at-play, scribbling while watching an old Jack Nicholson video on the television. Fans of Coolidge might be disappointed that *On the Nameways* doesn’t extend beyond the exciting, hallucinogenic writing of his earlier collections of short poems, such as *Solution Passages* and *Sound as Thought* (not to mention his long prose works), and at times doesn’t rack up its effects the way it could – the more minimal poems, for instance, suggest Creeley, but Coolidge fails to go for the kill with a stunning finish – but for newcomers to this important American poet, this is a great, mostly entertaining, place to start.

The Grand Hotels (of Joseph Cornell)

Robert Coover

Burning Deck, 2002

1-886224-52-8

Although childhood is the source and model of all architecture, grand hotels included, the Grand Hotel Nymphlight is the only one known to be specifically devoted to ‘the child within,’ as the hotel brochure puts it. [27] All of the grand hotels that Coover, best known as a fiction writer and proselyte of hypertext, describes in this small book of prose poems are each the flower of a meditation on one of the “hotel” series by the American surrealist Joseph Cornell, but also coyly reveals the stories of the fabulist “architects” – the author himself? – that created them. The chapters can be thought of as brochures to the marvellous, user-friendly summations that suggest lighter versions of Borges and Calvino, or maybe the seductive metaphysics of the glass elevator that never stops rising in Willie Wonka’s chocolate factory. The Grand Hotel Night Air Balloon – “originally designed as a colorful hot air balloon” – boasts a lobby filled with caged tropical birds, a musical fountain, and rooms without walls, all enveloped in a “blue haze” – recalling the helium of the balloon itself – that cloaks and permeates its residents like a gaseous membrane. “For those who are regulars here, as are most, it is upon entering (or being entered by) this curling blue mist... that one begins to feel at home.” [tk] The Grand Hotel Galactic Center is exactly that: the place, or non-place, where one has a ring-side seat to the cosmic denouement of the entire universe, warts (of black holes) and all: “Of course, gazing fixedly upon infinity is not without its risks. If the guestbook is to be believed, many have been driven mad by it, though it’s equally possible they were already somewhat crazed, or at least eccentric, when, drawn by alluring sadness, the alluring terror, they first came here.” [19] The Grand Hotel Nymphlight temporarily transforms its residents into innocent, joyful childhood versions of themselves “while yet knowing what one knows as an adult,” [27] while the Grand Hotel Sand Fountain, a “hotel of brief encounters,” provides the ultimate therapy for the alienated wallflower, never permitting anyone do anything alone – opening a door, riding an elevator – except leave. Coover, with diligent simplicity, orchestrates countering strands of pathos and wonder, decadence and innocent glee, in these ten short chapters that are sure to make anyone permanently dissatisfied with the run-down bed-and-breakfast we call planet Earth.

Comp.

Kevin Davies

Edge Books, 2000

1-890311-08-1

What gets *me* is / “The robots are doing / *my* job, but I don’t get / the *money*, / some extrapolated node / of expansion-contraction gets / my money, which I need / for *time travel*.” [v] So Davies sets the tone in his long-awaited follow-up to *Pause Button*, somewhere between the ridiculous of having aspirations, the sense of survivor’s guilt in a world of indifferent social and economic commerce, the oddness of feeling one has a job and that it should be “fulfilling” – indeed, of having a value-system at all. Davies’ poetics derive from the cross-roads of “projective” speech-based verse – his challenging, never imprecise cocktail of alternating line-lengths, swift-moving fragments and page-splattered stanzas are its noticeable marks – and Language poetry, which unapologetically divorces the fragment from constraints of organic form, plunging each unit of the poem – rhythm, word, punctuation – into the realm of social critique. What strikes one is the elegance he brings to project; not a line is wasted, not a “white space” trampled on by some ego-driven drive to sully emptiness with authorial presence: “Yet / what if there is a perfectly natural / form, and god wants us to kiss it and talk dirty?” [49] The long central poem, “Karnal Bunt”, is a sequence of single-page arrangements hanging on the presence of the dot, the period; like a Calder mobile, each one seems just tenuous and balanced enough to maintain its tensions. But Davies isn’t one to fetishize aesthetic moments, as each line is spurred on its incisive, cerebral comedy that would fail on HBO but cuts to the heart of the post-leftist, cerebral literary community from which he emerges. “An edited Scotch ambiance of translated Chinese reads to itself” would not bring down the house at Comedy Central. “Untitled Poem from the First Clinton Administration” takes the project one step further, adding the note of duende – a sort of heatfulness that runs up against his constructivist leanings – as a stream of melancholic invective aimed at the free-trade-flattened globe and its promise and pretensions: “They don’t care about the details but fuck with the structure and they’ll crush your spine / A shell of other people / Reflowered / Pressed into action / Figures of demented nostalgia / With diplomas, credit histories / Unbridgeable gaps where their eyes should be / The cramp as such / Because it is written / Veins in the forearms of Satan / Like unanswered mail in a bag of donuts / The entire earth / Trembles in the throes of its decision-making process.” [85] Davies humor – like the best of the counter-culture sixties – aims from the darker corners of the room, shattering the false light of economic progress and globalization. Nonetheless, he is not without light himself, bursting from the clashes of social contradiction and a not-defeated utopic urge: “Why be sad? / Kissinger will die / before they can upload him.” [49] *Comp.* is one of the best books of poetry to have emerged from the alternative American poetry scene in years, and is sure to revive many a reader’s faith in the possibilities of poetry to speak, construct, goad, amuse, teach and, incidentally, survive the absurd, valueless stasis of the present time.

Poemas/Poems

Gerardo Deniz (edited and translated by Monica de la Torre)

Ditoria / Lost Roads Publishers, 2001

0-918786-51-7

As the biographical appendix to this rather luxurious edition – measuring 8 x 10, illustrated on glossy pages, it is a bargain for the price – Mexican poet Deniz’s first passion in life was chemistry, and an interest in the sciences, including zoology, cartography, linguistics and anthropology (he is a translator of Claude Levi-Strauss), informs not only the content of his work – polysyllabic words abound – but the bemused “outsider” nature of his approach to life. Not unlike another poet with a science background, Gottfried Benn, or an avowed influence, T.S. Eliot, Deniz’s writing is often clinical and unflinching, and yet the mundane, not to mention the shocking, sports freely among his abstruser musings. The poem “Auditor” reduces its protagonist, a somewhat sycophantic student, into a pair of steaming hands “cooked... in a thick sauce, the color of a sparrow, / with peas, mushrooms, nuts, capers,” while “Dawn, August 15, 1983 (From memory)” recounts the pleasures of thinking about such things as the “biogenesis of picrotoxinin,” only to conclude: “all this which we minor spirits do with major issues, / bites and penetrates reality (in case it means something) / a thousand times more than the sordid medicine kit of abstract powders, intellectualoid / mouth washes, dialectic suppositories, / with names of thinkers (so many German, now also French) on their labels.” [19] There is a mythic quality to his imagination, but one which never leaves the realm of the physical even when considering abstract subjects, as when he recounts how he took “gluttony by a braid” and broke her leg – “it sounded (and felt) as if I were breaking a loaf of excellent bread” – or in the poem “Crime,” which begins: “Every afternoon analogy takes her demon out to pee on deck. / With leaden forearms, knees, thumbs, on all fours, it crawls by iron sheets, / it sniffs bushes, shrubs, either recognizing them or growing passionate / and tugging at the leash.” [65] Deniz, born Juan Almela in 1934 in Madrid and the son of an exiled Spanish socialist and bookmaker, is undoubtedly a major poet, and for all of his erudition and uncompromising concision is supremely enjoyable, especially for lovers of intellectual tour guides of the possible like Borges and Ashbery. The volume, divided into thematic sections with titles like “Freudian Poems” and “Poet in the classroom,” has been beautifully translated by de la Torre, conveying the unique ironic tone and generous breadth of this poet who has been, until now, nearly unknown in the States.

Paramour

Stacy Doris

Krupskaya, 2000

1-928650-05-8

As Doris writes in her introduction, her task – influenced by the “current technological unconscious’ restructuring of space... in which locations and identities shift with radical illogic” – was to explore, primarily through palindrome, the “demonstration and distortion of many kinds of lyric verse” and “human sexual response.” The book that results is something both mythic (in the spirit of the *Satyricon*), medieval (with its gothic complexity and road-to-Canterbury social cast) and somewhat counter-Enlightenment (in the exhaustive, excessive manner of Sade) – one of the more unusual, troubling books of contemporary poetry you will likely encounter. *Paramour* is a landscape strewn with figures from the cultural tradition who meet again and again in a large box of mirrors to revisit their amours, like a Joseph Cornell – nymphomaniac sexuality, exquisite box-stage and all – come to life: “Pipe drives the kids wild, / Piping sprinkles bright goo, / In a cloud of chewy fluid, / And Pipe laughing sing to all /: \ ‘Pipe a game about a toy!’ / So kids pop with happy guns /. ‘Pipey peek in fun again;’ / So shoot too to tickle here.” [15] Like Lee Ann Brown’s *Polyverse* (Sun & Moon), *Paramour* skids through a variety of formal poses, transmitting its carnal logic through pun and prose, epigraph and song – no stone left unturned in its quest for momentary satisfaction: “Get all fuzzy Gets all mixed / when your body feels so rich / and in me But in its / so fully seeps all destructs / may a new / a hand’s more than / *in all, more in!*” [19] “A Four-Tongued Version” from the chapter “How to Love” is a beautiful long sequence of shorter, quatrain poems that are like versified fortune-cookies, each one either a sharp, beguiling puzzle, some kernel of “wisdom”, or a telescoped narrative: “While she slept / he suffered her sister /. Whose weather / could be nicer?” [33] Included is a calendar of valentines (one poem for every day of February), a manual of love and war based on the writings of Sun Tzu, several pages that seem like games, etc., all of which walks the cusp of this book’s question, which is: can form itself be the only content, or must it ever point to a “moral” to justify itself? Doris’s book is both refreshingly free of the sentimentality of love but, as well, free of much of psychology most of us – in less extreme moments – identify with love.

Last Instance

Dan Farrell

Krupskaya, 1999

1-928650-01-5

Each of the twelve longish prose poems of *Last Instance*, by Canadian-born poet Dan Farrell, is an exploration into the dilemmas of agency amidst a world dominated by routine, the ubiquitous plays of technology and other narrowing systems (even the innocent one of the days of week), and the failure of memory to fully relive one's past to create one's present. While maintaining close ties to the linguistic explorations of the Language poets, Farrell's work departs strongly in that his surfaces are backed by the cold drama of an existentially hindered subjectivity which bobs its head and breaks the pure play of syntax and grammar, such that even in its most heavily-reduced moments, the poetry creates an atmosphere reminiscent of Beckett in his novels, and Kafka in its ever-recursive replays of alienating social formulas. Indeed, the poem "K" resembles fiction in that it centers around the narrator's "phone tag" relationship with the ever-ambiguous "K": "So K would call, begin to leave as though a message, then get me. Would K's roommate pass on this message, any? For the while, exchanging mail seemed a way. Letter, number, letter; number, letter, number. Letters add up to nothing." [15] Even the paratactic "Avail," composed entirely of sentences from questionnaire-answers with people about their health, builds by Oulipo-inspired excessive repetition into a deadpan, sometimes Stephen-Wrightish character that just can't determine what the hell he means: "My current level of physical fitness is very pleasing to me. I have positive feelings about the way I approach my own physical health. Whether I recover from an illness depends in large part on what I myself do. My feelings of anger do not interfere with my work. In order to have good health, I have to act in a pleasing way to other more powerful individuals." [27] "My Recognizance" is a wonderfully rich, possibly autobiographical (but most likely as constructed as "Avail") skitter through Joycean sentence constructs and surface play, a sort of Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man that never gets past the childhood stage to maturity: "And around geared Tom Swift, grasping for switches to toggle, tactics to jettison. Somewhere sprawled. Then to flood with haggard drops the reminder of an awkward cough, syrup or sticky camphor, resin to excessive phlegm. While outside in crowd cards of skilled hockey players I saw my own reeling life clasped and slipped to clipping spokes." [33] This sort of neologistic wordplay – he later describes himself as "Pufferbluffing like a blowfish in a chowder" – seems as effortless as the excessive flatness of "Avail" and the last poem in the collection, "366, 1998," whose main modus operandi is the linear recounting of the days of the week, such that the cumulative effect is one of a rich desperation among the passage of time. The sameness of "366, 1998" makes even minor linguistic and narrative events oases of suggestion: "Saturday, floor sawing, Sunday, dust making, Monday, thrust frump and center, Tuesday, Wednesday, last and relived, Thursday, flutes on backward, try again, flukes on forward ..." [59], it continues for five jammed pages. *Last Instance* is a confident trek into both language's capacity for creating boredom and anxiety – a parody of the most domestic version of late-capitalist life – and its potential for explosive, neologistic self-creation –approaching utopian drive of the most radical Modernists – whose cumulative effect is as a sort of comprehensive essay on poetry, one that is fun as it is responsible, elegant and classical as it is – like punk rock or a slacker's stoicism – gleefully nihilistic.

Metropolis 1-15

Robert Fitterman

Sun & Moon Press, 2000

1-55245-063-5

Fitterman mates a certain classic “Objectivist” style (in the manner of George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky) with a hip, contemporary sensibility which borders on the techno-ambient, thus sacrificing some of the angstier concerns of his Modernist predecessors for an interest in pure, accessible verbal pleasure. *Metropolis*, an on-going work which should reach 24 sections when completed, is very much a New York poem, filled with the chatter of that city’s highly social scene with the everyday weirdness of an often nomadic life lived deep in the shadows of skyscrapers. The first section, despite its cross-cutting collage style, nearly recalls Breton’s Surrealist masterpiece *Nadja* (itself an homage to a city, Paris) in its roving-eye view and the heady, decentered feeling of its urban phantasmagoria: “But grander than that / L’Hotel actually happened / scaffolding in some circles / gone twilight & Lex essences / sipped down subdeveloper more (bestial, residual, / \ festive red clay livery / homespun depot some yellow western atmospheric glib hog / I was there / but there was no espresso bar / did you *time* this? the connection / between us is sheerly residential / minus crossed our paths are starred / in an awkward upper west side hey-day” [9-10] Part of the beauty of Fitterman’s style is that it lets him drop odd, potentially dull stock phrases that one remembers from somewhere – “we got / a situation here” from the police radio in a b-movie, or “lighting fixtures the last word in / chrome” from sales parlance – and puts them in contact with more purely poetic ones – “a lay sky plurals dusk about us,” or the last lines of section 1: “the dead lose / their defenses” (which he then undercuts: “that’s been my experience”). This technique creates a strange floating sensation that elevates the individual units of the cliché – the chrome, the situation – while not letting the classically poetic moments get precious or sententious. Section 7 is a sort of fake dictionary utilizing many of the formal devices – quotes from literature, dates, abbreviations, etymologies – to create a difficult but familiar surface in which the humor of not quite knowing what a word means combines with a quasi-exposé on the mystical nature of words that dictionaries, with their lexical depth psychology, suggest. Like a series of brief portraits of the dreamlife of spoonerisms (later in *Metropolis* he writes “My favorite opera is *Il Trattoria*”), section 7 pushes the limit between poetry and goulash syntax: “Fade -[~]^^^ I. droop, whither, a company of hunters, any sawed-off weapon that has lost taste to corrupt, weaken. **1303** *Syn.* neuer gres, ne neuer sall, bot euer-more be.. falow, and fade. 2. barber’s term, *Life began to vade*. 3. shrink. *Lit.* and *Fig.* OE. *fadian.*, WGer. ORG. **fadia*. 4. v.3. *dial.* to dance around from town to country. 5. *Spec. Cornish.* *A passel of maidens... begin’d for... to fade so frisks.*” [60] Section 8 is a “libretto” in which several landmark buildings – the World Trade Center, the Flatiron, Rockefeller Center – take part in an orderly but disjunctive choral crown: FLATIRON: “Open up / your heart / and see it / the other way / . \ What makes / a hat felt?” [70] Other sections use odd word breaks to shimmy grammar back and forth in a flotsam/jetsam manner: “loo / ming sud / den a mall / all ang / el & la / ttice at aw / ning’s va / se & sparkl / es pill / ars lewd ac / cusa” [22] Reduced forms like the three word poem (“Life / long / fishcakes”) or other manners of verbal dislocation create stucco-like surfaces over which the eye roves for meaning, getting hooked there and being let loose elsewhere. It is perhaps useful to compare Fitterman’s technique (which relies very much on arrangement on the page) to that of an abstract painter, like Robert Ryman or Cy Twombly, who deals with single colors (in this case, white) over long stretches of canvas to highlight sculptural surface play. In such works, the

“white space” becomes more than a unit of composition and dominates the terms of engagement, such that attention is turned to the minor things – paint flecks, the chiaroscuro effects of small shadows – the art becoming both “busy” and calming, but in any case not making huge, impenetrable philosophical gestures. Fitterman’s sensual relationship to words – in both sound and color – and his light touch makes reading *Metropolis* a uniquely satisfying aesthetic experience.

Juice

Renee Gladman

Kelsey Street Press, 2000

0-932716-55-5

“About the body I know very little, though I am steadily trying to improve myself, in the way animals improve themselves by licking, [88] starts Gladman in this philosophical but warmly personal first collection of fictional prose poems. Like her fellow San Franciscan, the young writer Pamela Lu (in her book *Pamela: A Novel*) Gladman is focused on describing an individual/collective identity and the strange dilemma of selfhood in a post-identarian, self-conscious age in which all sorts of structuralist analyses – psychological, sociological, ideological – threaten basic ontological certainties. “Translation,” only 12 pages long, adopts a tale-of-the-tribe breadth to describe a people who “migrated off the ‘declining’ coast” intent on discovering, via archeology and some odd logistical gestures, the secrets of its occluded past. The sentences themselves, shooting off into several directions, don’t respect the norms of a leading-sentence paragraph, so putting things together while reading becomes an archeological feat in itself – is she alone remembering? has the community really abandoned her? But pushed to the task of native informant by the act of recounting itself, she struggles to explain: “Bear in mind, this is a land without normal science. The Floyds’ oldest boy was the only one to decipher that science, but he was sick. I’m trying to tell you how I knew we were a tribe. It was not by the length of our feet or color of skin on the inner sides of our hands that I knew it. We were tribal in our language, in the way ideas came to us.” [16] Having surfaced from this nearly cultish communality into individuality, she is at a loss about how to provide her own “feedback,” what scales of meaning to use to describe herself: “You can’t just walk up to someone, or in my case a plant, and say, ‘Hey, look at how I’ve grown,’” and earlier: “There are games one plays while one is waiting for a mass return; they are mostly sexual. I cannot help but be sexual before these mountains, their flirtish behavior and exquisite face. I find that I am moved to ecstasy – ecstasy being my most treasured activity. I would rather have the town, but will miss the nakedness of these years.” [16] In “Proportion Surviving,” the “juice” of the book’s title is revealed to be an aspect of an identity that has been, at least temporarily, othered, only so that at a later time it can be re-imbibed and returned to a unitary subject – a search for balance when there is nothing “out there” to weigh against. The narrator becomes obsessed with juice – fresh juice only, but also to the point of stalking the juice aisles at grocery stores: “When my friends came by – they liked to suddenly show up with all kinds of breads in their hands, thinking they knew what I needed and planning on forcing it on me – I had to tell them I was busy with my juice.” [22] A crisis involving a lover gets her off the juice, and though now she is a “weaker character,” she writes: “Today all my ideas are liquid.” In “No Through Street,” the narrator’s sister, who seems some sort of figment of the “evil God” in Descartes’s imagination, acquires great fame in constructing useful, if puzzling, signs that have a meaning in their intended geographical locales (like stop signs) but don’t make sense in a museum context, where, nonetheless, the artist has found fame as a “directionalist.” Gladman writes as if in a post-apocalyptic world, like a Crusoe on a desert island that is actually populated, but with linguistic signs instead of people. Though one wishes at times for a more vividly descriptive language and perhaps more elaboration of the ideas, this is a rich and unusual collection, like an alien codex from a culture in one’s backyard.

Push the Mule

John Godfrey

The Figures, 2001

1-930589-06-9

In his first book of poetry since 1988's *Midnight on Your Left*, Godfrey – normally associated with a later incarnation of the New York School, though he might just as easily be linked to a sort of “post-punk” poetry scene – shows himself to be one of the most observant and imaginative urban poets today. These poems are all in prose, and while the pacing of the writing is not much different than one would read in fiction – this is not the Williams of *Kora in Hell* or Gertrude Stein, or the ecstatic fables and apostrophes of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* – the sentences combine to create swirls of meaning rather than stable narrative environments. “Accede in Kind” builds sentence by sentence into a troubled, at times darkly erotic portrait of a woman, known only as “she” throughout. The drama is in determining which participant – the perceived or the perceiver – should dominate the spotlight, such that the literary battle of formal perspective spills over into the content, which could very well be a battle among minor gods: “I have my hand over that part of her that readies for injury. It is stability that suffers solo. Should she die dreaming of a night passage the silky weathered sail will have her. She will be carried along on waves of heat from roots burning underground. She is not lacking in hatred; why, then, isn't she the one to decide the fate of creatures?” [17] Like in the Arcimboldo effect (named after the Italian painter, 1527-1593), in which the artist utilized different types of fruit to compose his portraits, this sort of accretion, at its best, is carefully tempered so as to trouble the relationship of poet to subject. Even at the end of this poem, when things seem to clear up a bit, the subject disappears into maze of unyielding grammatical hallways: “Ancient dry voices of men come at her and address her as “Mother.” She exhales as deeply as possible and hugs herself in order to get both the original and the duplicates of her body out the door to the flatlands, where everything she will need for proof is ready.” [18] Other poems engage more freely with paratactic sentence structures, à la the “new sentence,” or with classic surreal moments (“The whole hallway is ready to start rising, like an elevator under leaves,” [21]) or with Beat-inspired word twists that point, simultaneously, at beauty of the sublime sort and the grounded, earthy resplendence of trash: “Windshield spit allover by streetside trees breaks out the tunnel into a blinding halo Queens didn't earn. By seven-thirty morn, the LIE shines golden white while factories either side rend their fumes awry.” [43] A beautiful elegy for the poet Jim Brodey uses this talking-around-the-subject technique, along with Godfrey's strong penchant for mating opposing ideas by putting unexpected conclusions to his sentences, to marvelous effect: “He fancied meat of dragon swans, as if the gods were always on his lips. You know how wet they look from the foam and under ground soak. I will raise this pitcher to the skeleton man in case he needs to look up on the light through waters. A longing comes over me to tell the abodes of my heart the great nerve sharp has eloped from exile... Without question he was a being struggling in the net, drowning in a dry mouth, weakened by exile into blathering purity.” [40] Poems like “The Big Wingspread” take clear aim at political demagoguery, especially when it borders on the messianic. Other poems, like “Same Feet,” are reminiscent of Jim Carroll in their lighter touch, placing just the right of surreal weirdness over the interior fires that burn in love relationships: “Try no matter how many times, I still can't describe what I feel to see your hair catch fire. I am fond of your anger and proof of your pain.” [47] Like with many books of prose poetry, it's not easy to read *Push the Mule* all the way through – sometimes one wishes for more variety in the meters, more discreteness in the individual

poems, more torquing of the paragraph form, and maybe some wilder sense of humor to make it a bit less bleak – but the precision of these sentences, taken one by one, are often interesting enough and satisfy careful attention. Godfrey is never less than noble in the care he takes with his work.

Vocoder

Judith Goldman
Roof Books, 2001
0-937-804-89-4

“Philistine, florid, degenerate era, / there are no longer / any inner voices in us and / the family magazines have cut off their long tresses” [82] writes Goldman in “[untitled],” one of several humorous, deliriously word-drunk but nonetheless angry and focused apostrophes in her first volume of poems. Goldman is master of a lyrical collage aesthetic that takes on great sonic momentum as in poems like “rotten oasis” – a sort of twisted soliloquy right out of Gogol’s *Diary of a Madman*, but with lots of youthful pop and grrrl ardor – spill down the page in extended tours-de-force of accusation and cries of betrayal: “I guess someone is a king of France & apart / from whom nobody is a king of France. Same / rockstar, different poem. I like icons / & the toxic halos of figureheads, I like / to beat people up & rehash among the swan. / I was born in captivity, having / fucked the right people, thick / in the France of it.” [26] Demonstrating the true flare of a moral exhibitionist, her poems take “stands” while not letting the wheels stop spinning on some stable, prefab “punk” identity; every gesture of a Goldman poem, even when remaining within the range of the “lyric,” shakes, shimmies or leaps away from interpretive certainty. Like younger women poets such as Jennifer Moxley and Lisa Jarnot, Goldman often takes the tones and tropes of the patriarchal literary tradition and twists them into new shapes – a practice the Situationists (such as Guy Debord) called *detournement* – thus fracturing the certainties of the master discourses and slamming us out of our subservient pieties. But Goldman, much more prone to using language out of “theory” either linguistic or political, is distinctive in her ability to start a thread of meaning – absurd, denunciatory, lyrical or otherwise – and pack it with an abundance of torques and twists that skate just above rational discourse. While some of the conceptual pieces – such as “dicktee,” a list of words beginning with “un-” – don’t make for great reading and seem misfires attributable to an over-saturated intellect, they give a sort of ballast to the romantic idealism that seems to drive some of the other poems on, such as “entropy,” “the real devotion of events” or the poem of visible deletions called “procedures”: “read / me / the airsickness bag of events / called for by each situation, albeit / vulgar opinions vulgar opinions / / who serve in the service of / people of vulgar opinions, with / the U-turn of sarcasm / well-regulated / and untimely ripped / words that were used / at all costs, connotation devoured / / transvaluation” [29] For all the somewhat loaded language of Goldman’s first book, its pleasures – in the humor, the daring, the deft work with the line – are immediate on first reading, hence not only supporting but mainlining her overriding argument: that social emancipation is not just the right to survive under a capitalist, globalized hegemony but the freedom to live fully.

Gardener of Stars

Carla Harryman

Atelos

1-891190-10-5

“Today is somehow different from the other days I have tried to make contact with Gardener *as* my other life. I pick up my pen to join with her impulsiveness. Sometimes I have thoughts like Gardener would have had her freedom in a world without language. In a world of pure contact and wordlessly making everything up.” [tk] True to the genre-torquing spirit of the Atelos line, Harryman’s new book only appears to be a “novel” when approached from the angle of another genre – memoir, confession, philosophical tract, even prophecy. The “characters” of this work are not constants – sympathetic figures who lead one into the woods and back – but rise and disappear based on “pure contact,” the metaphorical embodiments of philosophical ideas, erotic impulses, moral dilemmas, or the pawns of invisible strategies enacted by some all-seeing, but not very holy, god. The sentences, often tightwire acts of tonal control, slip from the belle-lettristic idiom of an Arcadian narrator to the psychotic realms of the Son of Sam: “One day I sat her down to explain the word *oxymoron* and then to describe a magnificent and bucolic world of insults. Babs sat listlessly under the darkening skies as I repressed my desire to tie her to a tree, as my cousins had once done to me when my self-seriousness had bored them.” [84] This world – in which rape, birth, the first thoughts of a child and the dying thoughts of a post-nuclear race blithely coexist – is that of the “cyborg” in Donna Haraway’s sense, a land of creatures with no origins but self-mythologed births, no slavery to historical time (which “places living time in a tomb in which it can neither breathe nor suffocate” [132]), no limits to the extension of their bodies which extend into limitless circuits of “narcissism” – that is, a world of the “monstrous.” Irony has hypertrophied to the degree that even laughter is impossible, like screams drowned out at a crowded stadium; it is as if the naughty kids of John Ashbery’s *Girls on the Run* had grown as huge, fertile and pissed off as the creatures of the Godzilla movie series. The moral ambivalence of Lewis Carroll’s apotheosis of a pre-teen girl into the annals of literary history is the wavering, “virtual” foundation of Harryman’s metaphysical roller coaster ride, in which the taboo starts on the table, and emotions such as “love” are obscene: “The meaning of everything becomes sexual.” [87] The laws of physics have seceded along with the laws of narrative; Harryman variably over-extends or completely collapses any of the normative structures of fiction, as in this unceremonious dismissal of Carroll’s very nymphet: “Alice swung her mind to an upright and seated position. And as she railed against human stupidity, her body followed. A little girl threw a small stone at her, hitting her in the head. She was instantly dead.” [93] Harryman describes a world in which “our utopian plans” have been “gutted,” and the best not only lack conviction but are resplendent in the time beyond the paradigm shift that replaced our essentialist certainties about identity and being with dangerous digital wavering, coaxing us into mental adventures in a slipstream of avatars and misfit angels. What “happens” here may not be as important as the fact that it leaves no trace.

A Border Comedy

Lyn Hejinian

Granary Books, 2001

1-887123-37-7 \$

“I thought I could, as it were, follow a poem, that kept itself apart from me / And from itself / A short lyric of shifts / A page or two at most / A poem of metamorphoses, a writing in lost contexts / I would write a line or two / No more / And go away / And come back another day only to add something that would change everything” [63] This “lyric of shifts” is the fifteen-book sequence of Hejinian’s marvellous new poem, as close to a *ars poetica* as she has come, mixing daily reflection with modes of theory, drama, epic and fable. Hejinian has made a career of publishing virtuostic long poems, including the early *Writing is an Aid to Memory* (her most “language” school book), the acknowledged classic *My Life*, and *Oxata: A Short Russian Novel*. *A Border Comedy* is the most fluid and natural of the series, as it adopts many of the themes that she develops in her essays (recently collected in *Language of Inquiry*), one of which is the pushing of the conscious mind to the borders of experience, and yet the poem allows itself to wend at apparent whim along the byways of a very interesting mind with no formatistic strictures – the new-sentence rigors of *My Life*, the Pushkin-inspired “sonnets” of *Oxata* – to trouble the connections. The capacious, yet self-reflexive setting allows the disconnections to have their meanings too; while this poem has some of the wave-like activity of an Ashbery poem (such as *Flow Chart*, to which it can be compared), it doesn’t rest anywhere for long, sometimes flying off on a tangent spurred by a single word. “We do not want all loss of boundary / At boundary is a body of experience / It affirms our solitude but it negates it too / It makes conjunction, has beauty and clue / It makes of the body an erotic talisman / Then the woman sewed it into a silk pouch and tied the talisman to her thigh / And there it was sidetracked / Slapped / Producing a great sensation” [59] *A Border Comedy* asks that you learn the special meanings of several of its recurring terms – pleasure, boundary, barbarian, comedy, etc. – and though the poem often digresses into mini-essays describing the poet’s sense of each, the meanings are always fluid, words appearing in new contexts that torque the old: “A comedian is a foreigner at border / Or comedienne – antinomian / Performing the comedy known as barbarism / This / An encounter / (Encounters, after all, are the essence of comedy) / With forge and link / Which doppelgangers (perfect matchers) match” [78] Everything about this poem, including its variable lineation that is mile-high in song at one moment and is violently asymmetrical the next (a Jack Spicer-ish tactic), contributes to the impression of a mind treating the world as if it were a foreigner to it, and the poet’s own mind and body as if it were something of a cosmos itself. This is more than a speculative poem, in the manner of Wallace Stevens’ later writing, but one that seriously challenges philosophical rhetoric and modes of poetic discourse while it rides along its capacity for creating playful mental architectures, a truly redescriptive, pragmatist exercise.

Happily

Lyn Hejinian

The Post-Apollo Press, 2000

0-942996-38-0

This small book by Hejinian presents a linked series of pleasures, pleasures that are not corrupted by over-arching theoretical significance imposing its will on the structure, though, indeed, a “theory” seems to be at its base. That is to say, there is an “ambient” quality to this work, an attempt to provide the “mental furniture” (in Satie’s phrase) to daily living and thinking which approaches as from a distance, but a distance that is neither exterior or interior, but is to be found in language. That it appear “far” is mostly a quality of the measured incompleteness of the phrasing, which can be contrasted to the overdetermined quality of the aphorism or rhymed couplet. The sentences have a self-containment – they can be read individually for their contents and aporias – but fall, when taken on a long-view, into a pragmatist’s discourse of viewing thought in its moment-by-moment self-creation: “*Now* is a blinding instant one single explosion but somehow some part of it gets accentuated / And each time the moment falls the emphasis of the moment falls into time differently / No sooner noticed no sooner now that falls from something / Now is a noted conjunction / The happiness of knowing it appears” [27] The reader is guided along by a rhythmic certainty that doesn’t fall into a regularity suggesting “pace” or a normative meter; likewise, “conclusions” appear – “Now is a noted conjunction” for example – which can spiral off into an entire philosophical thesis (suggesting closure) but which, in obedience to the method of the poem, leads only to the next moment and the promise – the best promise of poetry – of further discoveries, of “possible futures”. “Dailiness” seems to be some aspect of this, that one should not create thought or linguistic structures that could not, in fact, survive the contingencies of day, whether these be impositions on one’s reading time or the hierarchies created when values are too much analyzed, too much banished to the linearities of, say, academic discourse. “There is no ‘correct path’ / No sure indication / It is hazy even to itself” she writes, echoing, in a sense, Dante, but subverting in some ways the entire mythos of the “bildungsroman” and the promise of metaphysical certainty, in which humans are banished to the second-tier, “mundane” task of the approach to essence and the ideal. Some lines read like counter-arguments to the accusation of relativity; Hejinian opts for the approach that pragmatism relieves one not just of final vocabularies but also of any myth that contingent values fail in their relationship to the “eternal verities”: From the second moment of life, one can test experience, be eager to please, have the mouth of a scholar, hands never at rest, there is no such thing as objectivity but that doesn’t mean everything is unclear and one doesn’t fail to choose the next moment for a long time [30] The poem ends beautifully, and it sounds like a beginning, subsuming within itself both Bergsonian notions of time as a tactile, immeasurable quantity but whose recognition is revelatory, and the Marcusean argument that uncontaminated “pleasure” is a quality worth fighting for in the economic/political nexus, though difficult to deduce freed of the needs of capital: “No, happily I’m feeling the wind in its own right rather than as of particular pertinence to *us* as a windy moment / I hear its lines leaving in a rumor the silence of which is to catch on quickly to arrange things in preparation for what will come next / That may be the thing and logically we go then it departs” [39]

Living Is What I Wanted: Last Poems

David Ignatow

Boa Editions

1-880-238-78-0

Ignatow, who died in 1997 at the age of 83, led a distinguished if uncontroversial career as a man of letters, having been poet-in-residence at the University of Kentucky and Vassar, a professor at Columbia University and poetry editor for *The Nation*, not to mention having won several awards including the Bollingen and two Guggenheims, fine work for a man who started in his father's bookbinding business in depression-era Brooklyn. As the title to this posthumous volume suggests, Ignatow was engaged in a philosophical search in his last years for the meaning of "living" in a time when death was immanent, and the reader discovers some curious answers in these often understated, at times sparsely elegant, but always accessible poems. The tone is almost from beyond the grave itself, as the surety of death – these are no vague paranoias, presentiments, or vain strivings for immortality – give voice to the poems with a startling confidence: "Patient we wait / so that / once dead / we'll know perhaps just who we were, / with others thinking back on us." [12] The first poem, "Along with our illusion," states the theme even more bluntly: "The irony is that without death / there could be no life." [10] Sometimes the poems risk indulgence, as if the poet – perhaps with an ear to the simplicity of William Carlos Williams, whose tone he occasionally adopts, or Robert Creeley, whom he suggests with his Elizabethan echoings – didn't have the time to give the poems the craft one would think they deserved, and as a result, reading the poems straight through creates a fair monotony of tone and a dissatisfaction with their individual forms. As he didn't make this selection himself – written in 1996, the year before his death, the poems were edited by Virginia Terris, Jeanette Hopkins and his daughter, poet Yaedi Ignatow – and as he was no doubt depressed more than elated by his rendezvous with history, this is not surprising. The thought of death seems to have subtracted from him any sense that life itself was what defined one, as if life and death traded places and it was the distinctive moment of death, which was raging with substance, that contained elements of the "positive" – the bright side of the yin and yang, not the dark. As he asks himself: "Was I born and raised / without a life of my own?" [44] and, later, more violently: "Ways to die: by slashing your throat, cutting your wrists / hanging the body by the neck, stabbing, shooting, choking, car / crashing, drowning yourself. There are many more, but don't bother, being busy otherwise. / / One more is to be a poet." [70] It seemed the bookends of birth and death were subsuming the book, and yet the poet is still capable of praise, and finds pleasure in knowing more about his place in the universe, as the short but fine "Make of me its purpose," with its internal rhymes providing a baroque lilt, states: "Let the sun be the creative one / and make of me its purpose / of which I know nothing / except its aging me / as if I knew that being creative / is its aim, that is, / if the sun knows, if at all." [48] Ignatow finds the "creative" lacking in both death and life, but gives it some exercise in what was, for him in the closing poem "Circling the silence", the paradox of poetry: I write to awaken silence, to acknowledge I have nothing to say, and it is satisfying as if having written the poem. [76]

Poasis: Selected Poems, 1986-1999

Pierre Joris

Wesleyan University Press, 2001

0-8195-6435-4

For decades, Joris has been an important translator of important avant-garde authors such as Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès, and Maurice Blanchot, and editor (with Jerome Rothenberg) of such important volumes as the *pppppp: The Selected Writings of Kurt Schwitters* and the massive two volume anthology of international avant-garde poetry, *Poems for the Millennium*, from the University of California Press. Joris's first volume of selected poems, *Brescia*, appeared in 1987, and was jointly published in Luxembourg and by Station Hill Press (Barrytown, NY); *Poasis* is, outside of several chapbooks and magazine appearances, Joris's first major publication of his own writing in the United States. He has lived for several years in Great Britain, France, North Africa, and now the United States, and this "nomadic" existence – he has written a manifesto for a "nomadic community," part of which is included here – strongly informs the stylistics and content of his writing: "He decried the 'citoyen du / mond' as some Socratic / blunder – but it is not so, / Charley, the particular is / everywhere, is the cosmo- / politan exactly, the particular is / everywhere, the smallest / unit, the particle is / everything – & it moves, / it crosses bound- / aries, it moves / wherever [...]" [164] "Charley" in this quote is Charles Olson, one of the writers who casts a deep shadow over this work. Another is Ezra Pound, and the sense of Europe's failing in the twentieth century, of the martyrdom and all-around shamanistic function of the artist as vortex of meaning, the globalizing breadth that takes in all facts of history (personal and social) and contemporinity in one rhetorical swoop not to mention the condemnation of modern times – Pound's tone and method in the *Pisan Cantos* – runs through *Poesis*: "von Hollands Grachten bis tief ins Russische / Reich a Ganovenweise sung in Luxembourg anno domini 3 / post world war 2 all the way to Ancel in the Bukowina / & we still go at it turba scriptorum tralala trying / to wring something from this long night" [84] There is something antiquated about the method and subject matter, especially after the postmodernism made historical master narratives, not to mention the canon, leaky vessels that one would not want to board without a life raft of irony. Joris attends to a singular sense of the "pure line" that one gets in poets like Robert Kelly and, earlier, Robert Duncan (Joris writes: "O that I had Duncan's eyes to see & hold both this America that Europe planisphere of my sense fine mercator mesh grid of this my prison earth"). For all of these poets, the coherence of a strong European tradition was of ethical concern, and a loose, speech-based epic lyrical style, with all its potential for bluster, was the best "American" way to confront it. Many of the Joris' poems struggle with the issue of how to have an ethical engagement with history without quite being "historical" – that is, without being an actor – and so he often sounds like he is addressing an empty courtyard from a fragile pedestal; outside of a general teleological rush and longings for the visionary capacity, there isn't much touchdown, either into perfectly satisfying poetic form or a detailed, unique personal vision. The better parts of this book are when Joris is just writing in normal prose (or prose-ish poems), discussing why Americans can be so dogmatic in their religions, or in the selections from "h.j.r." describing his search for the "Nomad Hotel" somewhere in, one presumes, Africa: "Realizing that we were children of no Sheikh, wanderers from another direction that had no direction, they led us outside the city's perimeter to where the Japanese buses were waiting, drowning in dust and sun. A low building without a well offered itself to us. I overheard talk bout emigrate / immigrate, the different sides of the same coin. Koiné. Porous borders." [191] Here, one

senses the complexities of being an interstitial writer, of existing somewhere on the edge of mediated, globalized culture, away from theories of being and economics, though all the pulp and paradoxes of these issues are delivered in the details. The super-national adventure of Joris' nomadic existence – through the walls of Europe and Africa and through the wilds of all of Modernism, which he knows better than anyone – might have been better displayed had he sacrificed his commitment to the tone of Olson and Pound, and written more freely of the contradictions of his *particular*, therefore meaningful, life.

Dura

Myung Mi Kim
Sun & Moon, 1998
1-557132-92-5

Kim's third collection – *Under Flag* (1992) and *The Bounty* (1996) are her previous two – continues her passionate, formally investigative cataloguing of the pervasive effects of colonialism, war, and rampant capital in the domestic and public spheres. While foregoing the genres of fiction and journalism to record this morally arid landscape, she engages the reader in the act of re-witnessing these chains of insights that render one without a narrative of rebellion, but which create a forum in which meaning, being reformed by the reader him- or herself, empowers and doesn't – like television or the newspaper with its stylized narratives – distract. The long middle section, "Thirty and Five Books," composed of short paragraphs of no longer than a few sentences each, is the most forceful in this engagement: gleanings of horror ("And the unremarkable become the stuff of dust."), of theorized imaginings of the interconnectivity of politics and economy ("Deployments to the assigned parallel. Sheer volume of river traffic. Ascension, declination and distance of the measured body"), of subverted pastoral lyricism ("When we stayed together working the fields and went home at dusk and ate together. Mangy birds sing ornate songs"), even extending its reach to a brief liturgy based on a death in the Los Angeles riots of 1993: "Percussive / In the *LA Times* the picture was in color / Body moving in circle be fire / What looked like black in the Korean newspaper was my son's blood / Body moving in circle be fire" [tk] Each sentence resonates with a story: "Unrecognized she went about the city", a complete paragraph, suggests the alienation themes of early modernism, but it is revised for postcolonial content in the later "_____ arrived in America. Bare to trouble and foresworn. Aliens aboard three ships off the coast. _____ and _____ clash. Police move in." Though her work seems utterly devoid of anything that could be called "humor," Kim has a panoptic generosity, so that she finds a way to extend her very personal relationship to issues of immigration and cultural severing to include and address all who have correlative experiences. As she writes in a later section of the book, inspecting the canvas on which she works: "Call ancestry lost / Collapse and valence / Brevity and gesture / House with rooms cut of various sizes / An America as big it is" [tk]

poetics@

Edited by Joel Kusai

Roof, 1999

0-93780-479-7

While it is probably true that internet listservs as vehicles for the dissemination of critical thinking is still going through its “experimental” stage, with contributors still unsure of the ontological status of their words, this edition of cullings from the early years of the “poetics list,” run out of State University of New York at Buffalo, should prove at least one thing: that literary criticism among the “experimental” community has advanced past the stage of statements of “poetics” and moved into something more engaged, passionate, “real time,” and direct. As the Kusai notes in his introduction: “It was all here: the quick dismissals and the brilliant precis, the idle chat and the meticulous scholarship, the silly and the self-important, the smug arrogance and startling generosity, the noise and music.” [5] *Poetics@*, with all its punchiness and bravado, can be seen as the successor, and direct contrast, to the anthology *A Poetics of Criticism*, edited by Juliana Spahr, Mark Wallace, Kristin Prevellet and Pam Rehm out of Buffalo in 1994, a volume characterized by frequent swerves away from direct discussion of poems and poetry and hence the possibility of passionate disagreement, and by its occasionally overly-clever genre-busting tactics in the name of “poetics” that, for the lay reader, could seem terribly diffuse or simply hermetic. As a quasi-academic volume that positioned itself *against* the academy – that is, in response to the “frame lock” of much academic poetic discourse – *A Poetics of Criticism* bore little relation to the poetics statements by New American poets collected by Donald Allen in the *Poetics of the New American Poetry*. Few of the writers really said why they wrote, what it is that they do when writing or what their social contexts were, but rather suggested their range of interests, and outside of a few – Lew Daly, for example – most writers didn’t offer many upsetting, candid, charismatic, downright narrow-minded or convincingly visionary views of how poetry is or should be written today. This isn’t to say that *Poetics* was a bad volume – it is a great record of its time, and several essays by writers such as Lisa Robertson and Tan Lin could be referenced as key texts in these writers’ personal canons – but it lacked the “whole field has been lifted” excitement that, for example, William Carlos Williams saw in “Projective Verse.” Its unclear how the group of writers it represented interacted with each other, and one wonders if its community snapshot may have exposed more fissures than commonalities. One can speculate that a result of these strategies – not just in *Poetics* but elsewhere – was a decreased sense of what could be called “feedback” for works of poetry, as if poems were no longer to be understood as discrete statements executed into a living, palpable world that could be upset or enamoured by them, but were, rather, mere turns in some myriad proliferating strands of discourse concerning the “avant-garde,” a text stream unresponsive to the poem’s status as “outside.” A pious attitude toward avant-garde writing and its traditions had settled in, and the naturally impious attitudes of the artist looking for singularity against the gray scales of the given could find no place in it. The writing in *poetics@*, in contrast, is practically an explosion of the issues, anxieties, enthusiasms, intellectual rivalries, contentions and cross-cultural camaraderie – all the barroom talk that can be, if taken seriously, the living critical culture of poetry – that were rendered silent by an anxiety to perform in the field of “poetics.” While it is a mere chip off the iceberg of what had been written during that time (the first two years, from 93-94, running at 10,000 printed pages) and though it still leans toward the writing strategies of academics, *poetics@* is nearly complete as an image of the nexus of issues that – in our “globalized” and technologically connected world, in which the Cold

War has been replaced by corporate monoculture – have grown to characterize writing about poetry since, inside and outside the “experimental” communities. “I think you boys must be getting a little saddle weary from all that wobbling,” opens an email by Jennifer Moxley, already clearing the air of the technical stylistics of writing that is self-consciously non-academic, and she continues: “Those who muse around in definitions of community without self-referentiality obviously can ‘step away’ long enough to question: are we in one? do we want one? etc... Most people on earth are born into your vagary.” [tk] The urge toward description and definition, systematically deflected *Poetics*, is in *poetics@* encouraged by the very possibility of “feedback” (often with large blocks of quoted text) from an individual that does not “share your language”; a clashing of subcultures, rather than a pointing to a unified group of “poetic dissidents,” is the natural characteristics of these exchanges. The range of subjects run over in this volume is amazing, and little of it has appeared in any of the more standard academic texts, such as *The Marginalization of Poetry* or the books of Marjorie Perloff, concerning writing of the past twenty years: New Zealand poetry (N.Z. poets like Alan Loney and Wystan Curnow were active early participants), Diane Ward’s book *Imaginary Movie* (and an ensuing debate on the relevance of the “pleasure of the text” in reading it), the meaning of “experiment” in “experimental” poetry, a debate over the journal *Apex of the M* which had appeared at the time (possibly the most controversial first issue of a journal to appear in the 80s and 90s), why “few women post” (i.e. write criticism from a sort of activist perspective despite the activist motivations of much feminist writing) and why the “boys” are always engaged in verbal sparring, what sort of role the academy plays in the continuation or nurturing of avant-garde activity and whether it can any longer be called “avant-garde” – just a random selection of the topics crossed, which flow into each other with fluidity rather than being separated by chapter headings and lead sentences. Poets from the “mainstream” mingle with “Melbournian Doctoral Students,” African American poets with English cyberpoets, young upstarts with established Language poets, with both ease and masterfully expressionistic unease. The “image” of this book, what it presents metonymically as a substitute for the whole, is that of a dialogic complexity in which the basic contract is to let the text of the “other” sound itself out prior to any knee-jerk engagement with the author or ideas. In real life, of course, the Poetics list was, and continues to be, something quite different from this happy utopia of fleshy vectors engaged in an experiment of radical democracy. Because of the ontologic crisis about the place of these texts in the universe of time and space, writers on the list often engage in ad hominem attacks on individuals, usually with a brand of rhetorical strategies that want to be intellectual pyrotechnics, or seem born of a falsely self-convinced strategy of neo-romantic improvisational brilliance, but are unfortunately something like mental self-preening in front of the computer screen, a private, perhaps therapeutic activity gone public. Whether this book, which finally places a lot of the digitized writing “in print” and on the poetry consumer market, could make an effect on this confusion (the list has not been nearly as central to people’s concerns since then) remains to be seen, but as a break in the continuum of anthologies of poetry (in which the editor, with the exception of Ian Sinclair, seem timid in writing anything that suggests critical perspective) or about poetry by poets, *poetics@* seems the place to go to get a quick bird’s eye view of what poets were talking about in the nineties, in a language that is imperfect in such a way that is revealing rather than demeaning.

The Evening Sun

David Lehman

Scribner's, 2002

0-7432-2552-X

“[L]et’s face it / your idea of the artist is / a jazz musician or abstract / painter forty years ago I / admit it I love black-and-white / photos of colorful painters, / Guston, Rothko, de Kooning [...] / and the word “faith” pronounced / in a Dutch accent ‘fate.’” [62] writes Lehman in one of his self-reflective, less ironic moments midway through this poem-a-day “journal,” a sequel to 2000’s *The Daily Mirror*. This serial method allows Lehman to try on several suits in the course of a hundred-fifty pages – on April 22nd, he is a nihilistic sharpshooter as he mock denies the events of the Holocaust in a sort of list-curse – “nor were the windows of synagogues and Jewish shopkeepers / smashed in November 1938” – while two days later he is ruminating, like a Dada Seinfeld, on the fact that many people mean “fuck you” when they say “thank you,” but never “thank you” when they say “fuck you” – “All roads lead to the Rome of ‘fuck you’ / get it?” [58] Lehman’s poems, while they can be formally quite refined, often come off as skilled but unambitious pastiches of the styles of the New York School poets he adores – Asbbery, Koch, O’Hara, Schuyler (each occupying a chapter of his prose study, *The Last Avant-Garde*). The irony, however, is that Lehman’s rapid-fire “Meditations in an Emergency” style is nearly devoid of the sensual joys, cinematic snapshots, precious facts and love of friends that characterize even the most spurious of his heroes’ writings. The ingredients are often there – Nicole Kidman and Ben Affleck, autumn leaves and French rap music, as well as several unnamed lovers – but toward any detail pointing to contemporary experience he affects a courtly, sometimes brash humor that is really a disguise for a clinical indifference, as in this failed attempt at Herrick-like eros: “They now call / downtown New York [...] / the ‘canyon of heroes’ / a great phrase / that I shall use / for the canal zone between / your lovely lithe legs.” [26] Lehman is at his best when his joke-machine is on and he’s got a few hard facts to throw around – “George Steinbrenner / is as frightened of the Mets / as Nixon was of the brothers Kennedy” he writes in one poem, and from earlier in the book: “Sam Giancana, the mob boss who would have / ordered a hit on Sinatra except he wanted / to hear him sing ‘Chicago’ one more time.” [16] He is also quite effective when he’s put the down the bon vivant party suit and given us a glimpse of his darker side, putting a little dash of maudit into his flaneur: “I woke up alone, with cuts on my neck / and scratches on my forehead / who knows what battles I fought / in my sleep and did I win well I survived.” [111] This book is certainly enjoyable, almost too readable and full of eye-wink insights, but someone looking for the meaning of springtime in Manhattan or the double dreams of desire and domus might have to go elsewhere.

Paper Head Last Lyrics

Andy Levy

Roof Books, 2000

0-937804-83-5

Levy sets out upon his poetic project with an ethics of observation and agitation, setting out with no definable goals but with a quasi-Buddhist, quasi-materialist calling to be in the world, moment-by-moment, recording its contradictions and, when there is beauty, its necessity and how it is learned: “A surfer in methodological self-consciousness // forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting // to wipe clear this screen with // some cloth of disparity // What we will try to become, that labor // curious about each // Not curious about God, or sexual mores” [69] The idiom in the long title poem which takes up most of this book is somewhere between Williams’ “Asphodel” and the fluid, polyglot and cross-spliced rhetorical strategies of Barrett Watten’s *Progress* or Lyn Hejinian’s *The Cell* (echoes of Oppen also abound). Levy never sounds entirely like he’s “speaking” to one singular figure, like a Flossie, but this poem-including-history seems poignant in a way that suggests the Modernist, never entirely submitting itself to the rigors of method or foregrounded structure. Indeed, Levy is willfully “transcendental,” not minding to point the eye up toward an ideal or universal Other, even if it is one he doesn’t choose to name: “Did you write the great line to take everyone / to another earth,” [69] he writes, and later, as if turning directly on his Language poet heritage: “A philosophy of pissing off the other side // abandoning the secular car // making and unmaking time.” [74] Later, however, he takes shots at what might be called the subtone of transcendental philosophy in mainstream, class-defined American culture: “A memory of light / The turd of transcendence establishes a hillside estate: / Transcendence Hill Club // Croquet is the game of choice for its ladies / All the members are ladies at / Transcendence Hill” [51-52] The tone is primarily meditative, but occasionally the “news” breaks in (not to mention the occasional Andrews-esque obscenity-as-direct-address) to trouble the isolation of this mind. The worst one can say about the poem is that its politics, when they take center-stage, seem undeveloped; one section riffs on potential lines of a Nixon biography and smacks a bit of preaching-to-the-converted, while some other targets for a sort of name-calling include the GOP and the Democratic National Convention (“Troglodytes and Neanderthals”), the NRA, and the military, while passing up the contradiction inherent in some of the Protestant “good-works” philosophy of the poem – the Poundian “make it new” – and their linkages to the basic power structures of these institutions. But as a whole, *Paper Head Last Lyrics* along with the beautiful essay “An Indispensible Coefficient of Esthetic Order” – with their guerilla attacks on the problematic rise of “virtual realities,” and hence virtual moralities, in a de-spiritualized America – presents the image of a complex, invested mind at play among words, and with a poetic ability that is rare.

Works & Days

Bill Luoma

Hard Press Editions, 1998

1-88909-728-4

Luoma's *Works & Days* is a quiet, almost mercurial, masterpiece about the living of a life with "lazy philosophy" in world that is as static and eternal as a circuit-board, a world populated by countless baseball players dead and alive, countless bridges and street names, maps that work but can't be followed, priorities never realized in several states and small towns, and a circle of friends that never arrives and yet never leaves, as if even their most ephemeral, ridiculous conversations had the same weighty status as the immortal bon-mots of Samuel Johnson. As a successor to the tradition of the Beat style road-novel, one notices immediately the lack of any mystical attitude taken toward travel, nor any sense of differing properties between what was once the frontier West and the industrial, civilized East – Hawaii, where "every pretty language on Earth is spoken," may be the closest one gets to Rimbaud's Africa, the feminine void of Western civilization. One might almost believe that Luoma and his altering band of misfits never actually go anywhere; at the same time, their place in America is clearly that of the "edge," but of a particularly "Gen-X" and none-too-dangerous variety – it is simply where one must retreat to maintain any sort of live contact with the "other," one's friends and lovers. Characters named simply Douglass, Brian, Marlene, Steve, Jennifer, "an ump named Norm" (one is never too sure, in fact, who is traveling, who is being visited, though certainly several of the characters take turns driving the car) and probably a hundred others are both distinctive yet seem also exchangeable; they are all part of the dominating episteme that is Luoma's world, and on reading it one senses that nothing really makes sense to Luoma unless it has been rerouted through the perceptions of one of his friends, or through the critical mass of a self-replicating "in joke." There is a subtle wisdom to Luoma's formulations, and minor changes in standard word-choices – something he could have picked up from a poet like Coolidge for whom word replacement is the essence of alternative perception – give the writing a beautiful, mildly subversive texture: "Ceres always has a boyfriend with long hair when Brian calls her or she's watching the olympics. Her boyfriend is usually in Japan. I never know why people in love spend so much time apart when they could be dead in two years. I called her serious a couple of times, but that wasn't very funny. Her real name is barbara." [21] On the other hand, Luoma has clear ties to the "precisionist" art of Marianne Moore, Williams, and the painter Charles Scheeler, which relies on a distanced, objective approach to describing visual and social phenomenon, as if what was happening "outside" one's perceiving head were the work of several well-oiled machines. Hanging over most of the work, and certainly the central sequence "My Trip to New York," is the presence of Luoma's late wife, the poet Helena Bennett – Helena's death figures in several ways, as a destabilization of the general community and its warm system of relations, but also, since the coldness has set in, as the source of his own textual breakdown: "the narrator has trouble with spelling and capitalization since his wife died." One can almost read "My Trip to New York" as a testament to arrested development, a refusal to go on but "I will go on" in the Beckettian absurdist sense, but of the slacker-existential variety that one associates with late New York School writing. *Works & Days* operates, then, as an outward spreading text that hopes to maintain engagement with as many people and memories as possible, and though it is centrifugal it has a focused sense of urgency. It also becomes an anthropological text, a study of the culture of a particular group of people which may not, in fact, be too spectacular, but who, because of the singularities of time and place,

are due eternal contemplation. What Luoma, who works as a computer programmer, runs up against is the breakdown or inherent comedies of system – in both the “world” and the “textual” sense – a breakdown most pronounced in his scattered affections for baseball players of both minor and major league variety: “Sometimes it’s hard to balance your love of a team with your devotion to individual players. I don’t know how to feel when one of my hitters plays one of my pitchers.” [56] The breakdown in textual system is most humorously displayed in the “annotations” he wrote for the French translators of “My Trip to New York,” for whom he explains such things as: “naughty: sexually innovative,” “Being tall: she is very tall,” and: “little nipper: the name of the dog in the RCA logo, and electronics company. nipper is a cute little doggie. RCA used to have its headquarters in Albany, NY with a big statue of nipper on the top of the building. Nipper is still there. RCA is not.” [tk] Sportscenter, a weekly program that gives you all the stats and trade information on your favorite team, operates as a sort of alternate religion, as when he writes of “relating to Sportscenter and tracking your rotisserie team,” or when he writes (pushing the structural subtext of all their travels): “We drove down I-70 getting low on gas and it was late. We figured we could hold out until I-70 made a T into I-15. We made it to the T but there was no gas. The next town was beaver and it was 20 miles away. There were hills to go over and coast down the other side. We made it to beaver with 0.2 gallons of gas in the tank. Cedar City was our goal, but pulling in late meant no sportscenter. In the morning we wrote postcards, picked up some film and headed for Las Vegas.” [tk] Such writing alludes to the precision that the NASA scientists used to get Apollo 13 around the moon (the presence of panoptic satellites, though rarely named, runs throughout this text), but it is juttred up against the comical misadventurousness of the Keystone Cops, not to mention the inherently unguided, impractical nature of New Sentence writing. Luoma’s tone – he uses it through most of the pieces in *Works & Days*, such as the “Ear Inn Reading Reports” (“Drew Gardner began to read. Once he said devil. Another time the mind of god.”), comes from that eternally-reflected-upon space in which the body and its central emanation, speech, dies in the form the of text – where the grapheme, as a mark on the page, confesses to the truth that all that you are reading is merely the trace of some bodily experienced spectacle, and that the body and the text are incompatible. Hence Luoma’s call for more naked bodies at one point in the text, and the poignant elegy he writes for his wife which appears in the annotations, some of which reads: “When I am feeling depressed and anxious sullen / all you have to do is take your clothes off / and all is wiped away revealing life’s tenderness [...] / sick logic and feeble reasoning are cured / by the perfect symmetry of your arms and legs [...]” [tk] *Works & Days* is like a map for a possible evisceration, via constant exchange of “spectacular things” among loved friends, of the alienation that capitalist culture and the need for individuation inflicts on our warm imperfect selves. Its logic, and its most developed paragraphs, leads up to one answer, humor, but that’s because the break in the chain of economic and technological causality is the human itself, which can’t help but be funny because it is often unexpected and rather out of place.

Atet A.D.

Nathaniel Mackey

City Lights, 2001

0-87286-382-4

This third volume of the sequence *From A Broken Bottle Traces Of Perfume Still Emanate* (*Bedouin Hornbook* and *Djbot Baghostus's Run* are the first two) returns to the story of the Mystic Horn Society, that band that, like Scooby Doo and his cohorts, seem to court supernatural disaster with every turn. Like its predecessors, *Atet A.D.* is composed mostly of letters by composer/musician "N." addressed to a mysterious correspondent Angel of Dust in which N. recounts these odd events and the often odder interpretive spin he puts on them. The central turn in this volume occurs at a performance in Seattle, in which one of the horn players, Penguin, suddenly acquires for an evening the ability to project cartoon-like thought balloons, text and all, out of his oboe. As with all of Mackey's fiction, N's hermeneutic speculations are motivated as much by the power of puns as by syllogistic reasoning: "The balloon not only swelled like a pregnant belly but, thanks to the mixed-metaphorical ground onto which we'd moved, it appeared to be a sobriety-test balloon as well. Penguin blew into it intent on proving himself sober even as he extolled the intoxicant virtues of Djeannine's audiotactile perfume. Whiff of What Was notwithstanding, the vacant balloon seemed intended to acquit him of drunken charges, the admission of words' inadequacy a sobering descent from the auto-inscriptive high to which the earlier balloons had lent themselves." [57] For all the wordplay, Mackey manages to cover a lot of ground in this novel which is not so much about "characters" as ideas and themes such as gender equality, the survival of African customs and spiritual values in America, the legacy (positive and negative) of slave culture, and the plays of ghost/dream world on our waking realities. Most idiosyncratically, Mackey, with his incredibly detailed knowledge of jazz recordings and their subtle interrelations, convinces the reader that music operates like a language, with all the power to convey the subtleties of a specific feminist critique of male-centered jazz culture or acquire levels of symbolism that would make Dante wonder if he shouldn't have taken up sax. *From a Broken Bottle* is proving to be a major, and highly entertaining, sequence of fictional works that straddle what were once considered a huge divide between logos-bashing postmodernism and the historical redressings of postcolonialism.

Seven Pages Missing, Volume One: Selected Texts 1969-1999

Steve McCaffery

Coach House Books, 2001

1-55245-049-X

Long associated with the Language poets but often not given his due as a major figure, most likely because of his Canadian citizenship (born in England, he moved to Toronto 1968), McCaffery has carved out an impressive, distinctive oeuvre of visual, conceptual, lyrical and novelistic poetry for over three decades. As opposed to his American peers, who were interested in a politically charged, experimental version of “realism,” whether it be through the parataxis of the “new sentence” (Ron Silliman), offbeat stand-up theory (Charles Bernstein), mind-crunching collage techniques (Bruce Andrews) or diaristic experiments in self-knowledge (Lyn Hejinian), McCaffery has focused on an aesthetics based on theories of deconstruction and the Deleuzian rhizome, reducing the scale of his word-play not just to the level of the meme – the smallest unit of meaning that language can possess – but also to the level of mark of the very ink on the page. *Seven Pages Missing* contains several of his poems in a “post-semiotic” style, which are in the “concrete” tradition but which are really purely visual images that force the viewer into a reading-like state, like deciphering the hieroglyphs of some lost civilization. Also included are sections from his experimental novel *Panopticon*, which operates equally like a movie and a theoretical text, the mystery being to find the body in writing, which is figured as the excess of bodily economy: “WHEREVER A BOOK CLOSES A WRITING BEGINS. A BODY DIES AND GETS BURIED IN THE SPECIFIC HISTORY OF SOLUTIONS INSCRIBED WITHIN THE KNOWN GEOMETRY OF QUESTIONS. LET US NAME THIS CORPSE CALLIGRAPHY. LET US ENCODE IT AS A SPECIES. AFTER ALL IT’S ONLY IN A FILM. ABOUT A BOOK. SITTING DOWN. TURNING PAGES.” [256] *Evoba: The Investigations Meditations* is like a companion to Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Meditations*. The poem takes the reader through every flaming hoop of meaning as evinced in language, from the cartoon thought bubble, several varieties of projective and language-centered verse, the indifferent doodle to the lyrical rumination: “In a dim lit room / you merely see the writing / a sign / a parrot sings / / a sentence that enters / see the colour you say / turn your head in a peculiar direction / it is the eye that places you / before you point out faces” [169] The section from *The Black Debt* is probably the most accessible – puns, social detail, word games and philosophical fragments abound, conjoined only by the comma, his effort to avoid the closure of the sentence – but several sections from the prose *Theory of Sediment*, a group of poems based on Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, dada poems like the “Poem for Arthur Cravan,” as well as an appendix of “documents” – the poet’s own writing on his individual works as they appeared in interviews, book jacket copy and introductions – provide access to the novice reader into the works of this important Canadian poet. This huge, gorgeously designed book – too small to be a “collected” but large for a “selected” – is the first volume of a two book series; the second, due next year, will contain works that have not previously appeared in book form.

Letter to an Imaginary Friend

Thomas McGrath

Sheep Meadow Press, 1997

1-55659-078-4

Thomas McGrath was a 36-year old Rhodes Scholar, World War II veteran, accomplished poet, and teacher at Los Angeles State College when he was blacklisted in 1953 for refusing to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. During the next several years, McGrath worked at menial jobs while writing the first part of *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, an epic-scale autobiographical poem that would take 30 years to complete. While *Letter* could be considered Proustian in its heroic effort to recover, through long, self-perpetuating sentences, a past from the distance of middle age, McGrath's hard-earned political insights provide the work with a wrought philosophical frame. This separates it from the belle-lettrism that has marred many American middle-century long poems with their facile displays of learning, banal narcissism and trivial details culled from daily life. McGrath wasn't unaware of his distance from mainstream literary culture: "Outlaws / system beaters / we held to the hard road / (While Establishment Poets, like bats, in caves with color T.V. / Slept upside down in clusters: a ripe-fruited scrambling of assholes). / But it's a hard system to beat: working under the hat / On the half-pay offered to outlaws by the fellow-travelers of money: / / And time runs fast on a poor man's watch." [154] Written several years before the publication of Ginsberg's Beat milestone *Howl*, *Letter* already recorded, with prophetic tones but through un-Puritanical eyes: "The junky medics, night walking, their ears full of barbs / And the loony preachers, their ears ringing with gunshots / From the suicide farms, laying the Word out cold / In a thousand-mile thick of fog." [113] The poem is imbued, however, with an ethical earnestness – not to mention a pure love of family, wives, and friends – that has been long absent from the postmodern equation, providing the missing link between the right-wing dogma and politics of a poem like Pound's *Cantos* and the aforementioned, decidedly leftist (and certainly anarchic) *Howl*. McGrath's capacity for evoking images, whether describing vegetables or labor strikes, is often amazing, compacting the wealth of an entire poem in a few lines. He describes, sadistically but lovingly, the appearance of a young girl: "There was Peets with his gin, his nine-foot wife, and his son / Who was big enough to be twins – and stupid enough for a dozen, / And the daughter, big as all three, with a backside for a face, / With a mouth of guttapercha, with a cast, with a fine / High shining lunacy crossing her horsy eyes – "Fuck or fight!" I can hear her yelling it now [...]" [81] An atheist since thirteen, he hyperbolically confesses to the Christian flavor of his ethics in Book III, writing: "Yes, I do know sin, / For haven't I felt the whole universe recoil at my touch?" [325], echoing at the same time the metaphysics of Eliot's diffident alter-ego J. Alfred Prufrock. But then McGrath proceeds to parody the entire confessional act with a litany of sins fueled as much by Joycean wordplay as by a sincere belief that he (or someone else) has cheated his fellow man: A silence from beyond the border where the Latin begins: And then: "You left out something." / "What's that, Father?" / "Anfractuosity." / "What's / That, Father?" / "Three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys!" / Hell hath no fury like a sinner scorned. / I try again: / "Zoomorphism." / He's cautious. "Yes?" / "Father, have I failed / My grandfather's Animal Catechism, each inch and fur of the way!" / "And have ye now, my little parolee and logoklept?" / "Yea; though daily I do my self-quiz in my grandfather's terms and tones [...]" [81] *Letter* is one of the most readable long poems in the Pound tradition of personal epics (including *The Dream Songs* and *Maximus*), and yet is complex enough to promise disclosure of many secrets upon rereading. This edition is a literary

event that will help secure McGrath a place in the twentieth-century canon though perhaps, like Melville's long poem *Clarel*, it will be relatively uncelebrated.

Sleeping With The Dictionary

Harryette Mullen

University of California Press, 2002

0-520-23143-0

It's been over six years since Mullen published her last book, *Muse & Drudge*, one of the best books of poetry of 1995. A series of terse, wacky quatrains borrowed liberally from Clarence Major's *From Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African American Slang*, *Muse* barnstormed through a plethora of recognizable, though singularly torqued, styles, from the plangent blues to "rhyme rich" rap, from Language minimalism to "the doubles" of playground dissing fame. *Sleeping With The Dictionary* is no less unconventional, and more diverse – prose poems, exhaustive alphabetical language-salads like "Jinglejangle" ("Mingus Among Us mishmash Missy-Pissy mock croc Mod Squad mojo moldy oldie"), Bretonian odes to her erotic other, Oulipian word-replacement poems, short stories that recall the quasi-fantastic realism of John Yau, and strange rewrites of classics, such as this riff on Shakespeare's famous sonnet: "My honeybunch's peeper's are nothing like neon. Today's special at Red Lobster is redder than her kisser. If Liquid Paper is white, her racks are institutional beige. If her mop were Slinkys, dishwater Slinkys would grow on her noggin." [20] "She Swam On from Sea to Shine," which seems to be autobiographical though is equally motivated by alliteration and puns, recalls Joyce in the retreat into nonsense language to create a perverse mirror of the harsh rotteness of childhood religious indoctrination: "They taught girls to knit. They taught her to hit the piano. They taught all the girls to say hell merry fuller grays, Dolores wit chew, blast duh art dower mung wimmen, blast dis fruit uh duh loom, cheez whiz." [63] Some poems, like "Present Tense" and "We Are Not Responsible," hone political realities through obscure writing restraints that lift her parataxis beyond the obviousness of much "new sentence" writing and into histrionic absurdity: "Now that the history of civilization has been encrypted on a grain of rice, it's taken the starch out of the stuffed shorts. Now as the Voice of America crackles and fades, the market reports that today the Euro hit a new low." [57] Other poems expose, in a mischievous way not incommensurate with the adolescent vibe running throughout, the basic foibles of human sexual relations: "Entwined in a passionate embrace / with his beloved wife / the holy one exclaimed, / "I have reached Enlightenment!" / / His devoted partner responded, / "I'm truly happy for you, my love, / and if you can give me another minute, / I believe I'll get there too." [45] At times the poems – like the title poem, which relates how the dictionary is a "versatile partner, conversant and well-versed in the verbal art" – recalls the strict parallelisms of Christian Bök's recent *Eunoia*, but Mullen opens her book up to social realities, or perhaps the particular "cyborgian" reality of being a minority writer in a time after the debates about the essentialism of race have faded, and language has stepped in to tell us all that there's something artificial, alien, hybrid, and susceptible to the spirit of algorithmic manhandling – not to mention wild humor – in everything we say and do.

Criteria

Sianne Ngai
O Books, 1998
1-882022-33-5

“An epigram delays / its form of destination” writes Ngai in “chrono / paradise,” and the poems of *Criteria*, most of which are linked sequences of elliptical, highly alluring philosophical junkets, maintain an aura of millennial catastrophe amidst the suspended silence of unnegotiated guilt. Through such fractured glances at both the totality of a world view and the totality of the sentence, Ngai creates something of a survival guide in the twentieth century’s panoptic technological gaze, and doesn’t fail to amuse with her dry-witted narrativizations of our need to be fragments amidst the observation: “Safety in Numbers / / blue cars are parked here / optimism still abounds / / in chunks / / / of the globe [the first / year in a year / of testing / / whiff then / waft / / your mother’s maiden / name is the code” [42] Her plays on the commonplaces of literary discourse are emboldened by a sharp sense of enjambment: “Meaning collapses on the other side of the all / terrain vehicle...,” she writes, veering from the preciousness that such a linguistically investigative poetics can lead to. Sometimes Ngai seems to turn the lens back on her role as poet attempting to subvert meanings while in the role of determining them, implicating the writer, and any being in possession of creative will, as the tyro of dreams: “lazy large world-compeller / whose prosperity was likely to develop a red crease / in imitation of the superseded / telling children of the dangers of being trapped in anything that closes” [56] If Ngai sees politics and society as largely a fractured spectacle of clanking existential comedies, the final prose section “My Novel,” with its looping recurring images from Wilkie Collins, turns the quasi-epigrammatic nature of the first parts into an interior experience, demonstrating by contrast the very meanings that are contained in the prose form even when the sentences are torqued beyond easy assimilation. Liberated discursivity gives her an almost Stevensian feel when describing the nuances of experience, though countered by a cerebral edginess: “A flow can be the object of one or several axioms. To prove a poem: a trajectory of the bird’s flight through the yellow forest. Crumbs marking the coordinates at which the name would descend from under a wing.” Distance is a set of differences, therefore only pain can travel over the face without features. Similarly, only vibration can travel over the strings of a piano played by a young lady in a drawing room. If femininity is the principle of uncertainty, one cannot expect sounds – only the blur of the thick lines moving as the name tracks itself through the yellow of a divided highway. Thinking of the bird – an alienated moralist – and itself as the absence of the weight the former once carried. [64] *Criteria* contains all the excitement of a first utopian reading of theory and philosophy while maintaining a level of fun that gives it a youthful, almost pop edge despite the weight of its references and occasionally showy vocabulary, and is exceptional in its restraint, its subtle tonal shifts and its devotion to a fairly extreme mode of poetry.

Disobedience

Alice Notley

Penguin Books, 2001

0-14-100229-8

Notley has had a stellar publishing history with Penguin books so far; after the 1996 long-poem *Descent of Alette* (which she first published in 1992 in a collaborative volume, *The Scarlet Cabinet*, with her late husband, the English poet Douglas Oliver), and 1998's *Mysteries of Small Houses* – which garnered praise from all quarters and was a Pulitzer runner-up – she returns with a new volume that outshines its predecessors. *Disobedience*, while diaristic (it is an epic-scale version of Ted Berrigan's "short bursts" method in poems such as "Bean Spasms"), carries over many of the themes of *Alette*: the subterranean journey, the search for spiritual life in a corporatized society, the anger at the hegemony of male dominance – thereby crossing the worlds of the living and the dead, the real and imaginary, the particular and the symbolic, in a back-and-forth motion that vacates the events of everyday life of its assigned non-meanings and grants them wild personal resonances: "I don't want to create meaning; / I want to kill it... / You made meaning; I'm / trying to make life stand still, / long enough so I can exist. / I, truly, am speaking" [49] Many fictional elements occur, such as a character who is variably named Hardwood, Hardware, Hardon or Mitch-ham (after the actor Robert Mitchum), but the ontological persistence of these figures is always wavering, moving in and out of focus as the stream of thought wills. Hardwood, who at times appears to be a stand-in for Oliver, seems at others to be an interior persona, the "hard," even male, aspect of her own psyche that she uses to power her defenses against the world: "Let's go back into caves / and talk to my willpower Hardwood / he's laughing at a snakejoke / "when is a snake naked / when it's a nake with no S / snake with no hiss..." / / Would I want to be a nake, Hardwood? / does Alice Notley want to be a nake" [84] The cave itself – in which she encounters a symbolic letter "E," linked to Dante, a tourguide she rejects – along with a series of dreams, bombings by Islamic terrorists in Paris, her anger at a certain "sect" of American poets, the rise of Le Pen through French politics, concerns about myth in contemporary society, and the fact that this poem itself is beginning to consume her – these themes and more recur in fugal fashion, a technique that Pound promised would be an element of the *Cantos* and mostly failed to deliver but which Notley uses to marvelous effect here. The most thrilling aspect of this book – outside of its way of pulling perfect lines of poetry out of thin air – is Notley's determination to rebel, to void herself completely of the slavery of society, and the incredible wit and beauty that she brings to the project: "No, I'm enjoying making mean remarks about everyone, / because I am the Soul, misunderstood / I'm pure, wise, and bitchy: that's not / contradictory. I intend to be grouchy throughout my eternity." [97] and later on this page, regarding the literary "Greats": "Fuck 'em – / they aren't "great" on the newly discovered / planet beneath Orion; and deep deep inside me, in the caverns / I haven't heard of them. I've only heard of the unnamed there" [97] This rebellion's greatest manifestation may be in the form of time itself, which, in Notley's poem, is distended, overlaps, carries experiences across it which the newspapers would have us reject, and is otherwise uncompartmentalized, as if Jung met William James in the pages of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and decided "God" was in everyone. One senses that Notley, who was turning fifty when writing this book, is enjoying the fruits of a lifelong dedication to poetry, one that was enacted in the underground cultures of New York and Paris and in fierce opposition to the mainstream ("The shirts in power, poetry power / still want a decorous poetry." [111]), hence the irony of her situation now as a lauded, and far from decorous, "Penguin Poet."

The naturalness of her idiom, the distinctive and uncompromising perspective of her thought, the almost Rimbaudian zeal to break free of convention, coupled with the sense that she is, after all, very vulnerable in her struggle (hence the courage of her exposure), make *Disobedience* something of a comet's path of spiritual discontent, though never in a way that lessens her art.

Dead Men's Praise

Jacqueline Osherow

Grove Press, 1998

0-802136-54-0

Osherow is not afraid to show off her easy mastery of the terza rima – Dante’s line of choice in the *Divine Comedy* – nor her significant abilities in other forms such as the sonnet and villanelle, in this, her fourth collection. But while the ur-”new Formalist” poet, Anthony Hecht, would include self-consciously mundane “20th century” materials in his poems, he rarely sacrificed a aristocratic pace to accommodate the present day’s taste for kitch, democratic accessibility, or the dropped domestic fourth-wall. Osherow, however, with a fine ear attuned to the best qualities of Jewish humor – the mating of metaphysical concerns with those of daily living, the ability to spin off on seemingly endless tangents, the playful direct addresses to a mensch-like God – utilizes the meter brilliantly, at times suggesting Auden’s mastery of Byron’s *Don Juan* stanza in his own “Letter to Lord Byron”: “Besides, I’m not sure God much cares for piety; / my guess is – since David was his favorite – / That He’s partial to passion, sponteneity, / / And likes a little genuine regret. / True, David lost his ill-begotten child – / But what did the pious ever get?” [11] The central themes of the book may, at first glance, not seem unusual: poems about looking at Renaissance art and desiring an equal verbal language, poems asking how God could have let the Holocaust happen and speculating on whether faith survived in the camps, etc. However, the combination of working in these meters – she calls terza rima her “camouflage” in the last line of the book – while, at the same time, including such vignettes as her chancing upon the site of the oldest synagogue in Europe (recently been discovered near Rome), or considering the Yiddish language and the invisibility of Jewish poet Benjamin Peret in the footnotes of a diary of Anna Ahkmatova – make this a drama of the negotiation of cultures on a grand scale. None of the poems in this highly formal book are mere exercises, nor is the content ever forced; each addresses, or gets around to addressing (after making sure you’re listening), issues that are close to Osherow, and tied into her faith, such as the funny “Science Psalm” (one of her sequence of rewrites of the Psalms): “[...] And I like picturing myself among the ancients, / This English of mine a language safely dead, / And schoolchildren uncertain whether Xerxes, El Cid, / Or Jimmy Carter fought the Trojan Wars, / Giggling, no doubt, at the ridiculous lengths of time / It took our crude machines to get to Saturn... / Relativity, if not utterly forsaken / Evolved into a simple grade-school theorem.” [85] It’s hard to get over the feeling, when reading Osherow, that perhaps these meters are better suited to a more earnest tone, and that her ruminations, which are often brilliant, could be edged into more innovative philosophical realms if she sacrificed her need to be speech-like, chatty. The one sonnet and some of the “psalms” lack the verbosity of her funnier material don’t impress enough formally, the seem unaccomplished as if from a book by a less-facile, less-interesting thinker. These are her more purely devotional pieces, and are necessary anchors to the spiel, but nonetheless seem to require a different set of tools. Nonetheless, Osherow is an attractive presence on the literary scene, and it would be hard to criticize such a good natured, dedicated and talented poet.

The Character

Jena Osman
Beacon Press, 1999
0-8070-6847-0

“What I thought was a sudden chip in / the metal was actually a drop of / water one foot in front of the / metal, my eye joining the two in a / simple surgery” [50] Winner of the 1998 Barnard New Women Poets Prize, Osman presents a complete portrait of the interests of postmodern aesthetic theory, ranging from the rarified take on Brecht’s alienation effect that keeps its metaphysics while discarding its directness, to such techniques as the “page-as-score,” the legibility of non-linguistic signs, the use of disjunctive footnotes (some of which are footnotes to footnotes), collage texts (and its natural biproduct, surrealism), the epistemology of vision and the cancelling plays of multiple identities. As Hejinian writes in her introduction, this is all combined in the term of the “character,” which at times can mean the elements of the alphabet, the “moral fiber” of an individual, the unique figure as found in novels and plays (“Performance requires the person who is the actor (i.e., already a character) to be in character, and this, in turn, cannot occur without performance” [xii]), and the mark of difference in identities: “she’s such a character.” At times the writing is compelling, creating a range of interests that circulate around specific themes, as in the long poem “Authorities (A Lecture)”, a rumination on power and evil which circles around the figure of Iago in Shakespeare’s *Othello* with a concurrent strand of discourse around experimental poetics, defending the cult of the aleatoric to the “nature of judgement itself” [64] being grounded in chance: “The presence of Iago questions the flawed system. He goes beyond the stance of necessary evil, a tool for ultimately attaining (through his discard) a cathartic utopian state for the spectator. He is, in fact, part of that ‘utopian’ state. He can never be totally purged; he is the scene which allows for Othello (and our understanding of Othello/ourselves) to exist at all. We are meant to empathize with (see ourselves as) Othello.” [65] The poem ends with a re-editing of transcripts from a session of the Supreme Court which reads like a conversation among the gods of a dangerously enfeebled Parnassus, as Sandra Day O’Conner asks: “Does a reasonable person know how to read?” The excerpt from “The Periodic Table as Assembled by Dr. Zhivago, Oculist,” a long, ‘pataphysical hypertext poem that, once on-line, would allow the user to create new compounds from the poems provided, rewrites the abbreviations of this table according to subjective or aleatoric laws, such that “hydrogen” becomes “harness,” and is listed under the “elements that contribute to sight” [27]. While in its static state on the page the poem is doesn’t add up to much more than often engaging juxtapositions of words – the poems broken into lines often lack any rhythmal drive, though one suspects that this aggregative method may have been her intention – a section from “Rayguns to Radium” explains how this scrambling of the foundational glyph of modern science expands to take on social mores: “Madame Curie discovered us in the pitchblende / and no subject since has so interested the mind / of the general public. Next in line was the discovery / of a radius of light, generic weaponry for all.” [28] Osman can sink into a mannered academic mode with already conventional attempts at density that only throw the reader off in her prose poems – certainly, much of the tone here has been adopted from readings in “theory” – but the poems thrive on the compelling promise of depth without ever surrendering their complete contents, which is, one supposes, what a “character” in its many manifestations invariably does.

Poems

J.H. Prynne

Dufour Editions, 1999

1-85224-492-5

The publication of *Poems*, Prynne's collected books from "Kitchen Poems" (1968) to "For the Monogram" (1997) is a literary event that will probably be unparalleled for some time. Prynne decided early on that his books – each of which would usually contain one twenty or so page sequence – would only be published in small editions, partly as a modest shunning of inordinate attention and partly to honor their quiet, hermetic quality and the care one must take to read them. His poems rarely, if ever, had distribution in the States, or even far outside of Cambridge, where he has been an influential presence for decades. Nonetheless, he has acquired a reputation, deservedly, as one of the major English poets of his time, a position drenched with ethical significance as he's never caved in to the calls of celebrity or other forms of "selling out" – his verse, if anything, has gotten less commodifiable, more dense and difficult, over the years. Prynne's early work departed mostly, so history says, from his reading of Olson and an interest in science, but have a heightened rhetoric that never strays into the indulgently eccentric manner of the American, and contain a political earnestness and subtle rationality (not to mention wit) that keeps them tethered to the matter at hand: "And don't let some / wise and quick-faced historical rat tell us about / the industrial north and its misery, since every / songbird since then (& with *no* honorable / exception for D.H. Lawrence) has carolled about / that beautiful black colour as if / this were the great rot in the heart." [15] The work in "Kitchen Poems" introduced what has since become a staple formal feature of Prynne's work (and of those he has influenced), which is the use of contrasting meters – often an iambic based line versus a two-beat, syncopated balladic line – within a single poem, the latter set off by indents and occurring in sets, giving the appearance of a cascading effect to the poem. But he also engages in a much freer line in other early work such as "Day Light Songs", a poem that is steeped in praise for life and nature not unlike another English poet which whom Prynne shares qualities and contradictions, Gerard Manley Hopkins: And so when it does / rain & will glide / down our necks like / glances into / the soul, drop / lets work their / way forward the sinus / is truly the scent / of the earth, upraised" [27] There is no way to reduce the over 400 pages of work presented here to simple phrases; the long view shows that the pattern of production seems to be from dense, large canvas exercises interspersed with lighter, lyrical sequences – overtly "political works" contrasted with spare "private" ones – but that says little. Many of the poems just strike one as major and demanding close, even scholarly, attention, such as "The Bee Target on his Shoulder" (1971), which moves through several registers in its 3-pages, a sort of Proustian ramble of recollection, but with mythological resonances, as if it were a paean to the lost anthropomorphism of the gods: "Be gentle with his streamy locks until he gets the wrapper off. / Strip pieces of flesh from the animals lying dead in the streets. / / Love him, in *le silence des nuits, l'horreur des cimetières*; / / otherwise the trendy book will slide / into the bath and linger there, / *avec le savon* / and the Rose of Texas, toasted marine-style." [152] Later sequences like "Not-You" (1993) seem to offer no basal metrical figure to use for guidance – the forms range from three-line stanzas to staggered, "fragmentary" lines that work like tone clusters whose aural figure isn't discernible until the sounding of the final lines: "Her pan click / elb / second fix / for them / pencil / breather park / over / talk at small to." [392] Another later sequence, "Her Wild Weasels Returning," (1994) is made of dense 24-line poems in which traces of a meditating persona are obliquely present, lingering

to maintain a supporting narrative structure. It is as metrically consistent as “Not-You” appears not to be: “Who with he’ll say climbing, to let blood slit imposed / at a turret elevation to buffer high return. I saw / her wings in speedy strip like a shadow in the sand / or in growth like natural reason, her heart so vast / as justly to make cause with the fiery fountain sealed / on track right across *terra nullius* overhead. I knew / that, she made me see the light level cracking along / her trebled skyline: I held my view.” [416] Prynne can seem to be one of the most “avant-garde” of later-century English poets – his word-play borders on the recursivity of Stein or the *over*-determinacy underlying the mosaic surfaces of *Finnegans Wake* – and he seems to have resolved certain problems involving lyrical subjectivity that were glossed over by the Language poets. However, he is also the most convincingly traditional, in that his formal grace, his skill with “numbers” – he is as metrically competent and deliberate as his Cambridge precursor, Thomas Gray – is closer to a stoic, classical sensibility for these democratic times than the sickly, and sometimes studied, ironies of those in the line of the “Movement” poets.

The End of the Alphabet

Claudia Rankine

Grove Press, 1998

0-8021-1634-5

While *Nothing in Nature is Private*, Rankine's first collection, deftly explored a community on the outside of "America" through formally conservative modes (which, nonetheless, recorded in politicized ways the distinct speech patterns of her native Jamaica), *The End of the Alphabet* contains twelve poem sequences that are more open in construct and narratively indeterminate, and yet which are, in their detailed mingling of tones and observations, no less precise in their effects and meanings. Like many women poets of her generation, such as Ann Lauterbach and Jorie Graham (though far less grandiose in tone), Rankine proceeds with the understanding that the most true form for a poetry of witness is one that questions the very genre of documentary, recognizing text as an untrustworthy window onto reality: "Door opening to green bowl of narcissus [...] / / she is dreaming the story of recurring commas, / the one that gossips of simple equations, complicated, / solution obstructed – / or hers is a wake claiming delay, piling blemish onto finery?" [67] But in this poem the private – "Though you thought you heard, so sure you heard / *sweetheart*" – takes on the tone of the public in its winding down to the issues of choice and agency, translating the feminist concerns of a poet like Adrienne Rich to the level of the micropolitical: "(suspecting only illusion (some vindictive act of mind / even before voice / depressed the edge of the bed, pulling shadow / from beneath memory spoke from its crushed / throat / / corrupting neutrality, until I knew, must know / what was coming, already here –" [69] A radical self-detachment combined with rich narrative skill gives parts of "Hunger to the Table" a unique philosophic cogency (reminiscent of the early poems of Creeley): "A turned ankle is its own consequence. She hops about, / then caught on the sofa waiting for the swelling to go down / is reminded we move among others to fall from ourselves, / wind-swept, having a liking for laughter but the / ridiculousness / of falling off one's own heels. What / was being viewed from up there?" [38] Yet even this poem ends on note of social urgency, though the play of words doesn't cease: "Don't ask to be told *x* to *y* in time or eternity. / Passage bleeds between the hammering / breath and flesh. Sweetness mumbled / is the voice nice. Just as the lips open open the eyes." [39] With a resonant ear and a light imagistic touch – "Faced with its staggering number of runny noses / the day begins..." – along with a rigorous concern for language's material betrayals – "I arrived unprepared for the lobed, dark- / grayed matter of 'wearisome' and cannot weep..." – *The End of the Alphabet* is sure to be as recognized as her first collection and to acquire this young poet a larger audience.

Plot

Claudia Rankine
Grove Press, 2000
0-802137-92-X

Plot is a book-length poem/fiction sequence concerned with the issues of meaning, writing and being, utilizing autobiography but also clearly bizarre naming-conventions (à la Zarathustra and De Chirico's *Hebdomeros*) to create an atmosphere of moderate crisis, philosophical overdetermination and, out of the stuff of domestic and personal drama, super-real dimensions. It immediately appears at the nexus of several different avant-garde projects, from the nouveau roman of Monique Wittig to the scholarly mind-blasts of Christine Brooke-Rose, from the deconstructed spaces of Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino right on to last year's *The Words* by Carla Harryman (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* also lurks in the background). *Plot*, which more or less spirals around the story of Liv and Erland and their future child Ersatz, is embedded in the sensations and anxieties of child-birth and -rearing: "Long after she grows tired in the night she hears only the child's cries. His cries, already recalling, and silence, / the dumbness she wedges herself into. Cowardly, and additionally compromised, she hears each cry, punctuating every space of exception, running through her, meaning to break, to interrupt each moment attempted. She hears and calls it silence." [20] The main issue seems to be whether this birth is wanted for an escape from self, and whether this second-self is indeed an "other"; Rankine writes: "Liv, answer me this: Is the female anatomically in need of a child as a life preserver, a hand, a hand up? And now, pap smeared, do you want harder the family you fear in fear of all those answers?" This question of self-othering, of viewing the child as "ersatz" meaning, is tied in with Rankine's sense of herself, and one of the more striking moments is when the three main figures conjoin to render this situation clear: "That same night Erland pressed his ear to Liv's belly. / What do you hear? Liv asked. / Not you, Erland answered. Not you." [78] Unfortunately, unlike Rankine's last book *The End of Alphabet* – which had very little "prose poetry" and rarely strayed from an imagistic core even in its more "indeterminate" passages – *Plot* is particularly prone to run-on, obfuscated formulations and indulgent – one presumes "experimental" and yet finally unnecessary – grammatical constructions: "the damaged image absorbed to appear, the exemplar seen and felt as one, having grown thick in the interior, opens on to surface and is the surface reflecting its source." [39] The Ashberian "taking out" – a mark, one supposes, of the "ellipticist" school of writing – and the "postmodern" urge for recursive syntax (which few have succeeded in making as fun and resonant as Stein), while occasionally quite beautiful and engaging, is often colorless and makes one self-conscious about wishing an end to all deconstructive tactics in poetry: "The interest is not with the dissolved, and yet dissolution surrounds, is a feeling in its duration. It observes its own density and is the constituted dissolved toward solidity. To this refuse, / casting its shadow from flesh to canvas, she says, no. But see, the debris is the self within the trace, then the tide is the general condition implicated. She is afraid of herself." [67] As opposed to the writing of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha in her *Dictee*, to which *Plot* seems somewhat indebted, these moments do not seem linked to any real intensity of vision, any thwarted desire to reveal, but come off as stylistic devices. *Plot* is interesting in that it contains moments of normative fiction (such as the "Interlude") and a series of odd graphically charted pages, an effort, perhaps, to provide occasional anchors to this often inchoate mass of issues and language, but even these moments are unexciting – the dialogue seems off-the-rack, and the graphics don't reflect a sincere interest in visual poetics. As her previous books show, Rankine has tremendous talent

as a poet, but one wonders if a better way of expressing the dilemmas of a fluid, ontologically flustered self would be a more concentrated, formally precise, poetry, one that presented the precious rocks that one grasps at for stability rather than simply the grasping.

Tottering State Selected Early Poems 1963-1983

Tom Raworth
O Books, 2000
1-882022-38-6

Hot on the heels of the American publication of fellow Englishman J.H. Prynne's *Poems* is the expanded edition of Raworth's underground classic selected early poems, originally published by The Figures in 1984. Ranging from the author's debut volume, *The Relation Ship*, to his major long poem "Writing" (not included in the original selection), *Tottering State* is a colorful, resonantly sunlit window on the work of a writer considered by many American poets (such as Robert Creeley) as the best living poet in England. Indeed, the American affinities – along with echoes of French poets like Pierre Reverdy – are most visible in his earlier work. At times he seems like a more cerebral, dark version of Ted Berrigan, or maybe a departure from Ashbery of *Some Trees* into more formally wilder territories, but this is never to the detriment of fun, a zen-like openness, and a English rapier's wit. His cerebral quality comes through in the precision in his choice of imagery, his modification of the moods of conversation, and the surrealist dive into absurdities arriving at just the right moment to both deepen his sentiment and render it more painterly: "now the pink stripes, the books, the clothes you wear / in the eaves of houses i ask whose land it is / / an orange the size of a melon rolling slowly across the field / where i sit at the centre in an upright coffin of five panes of glass / / there is no air the sun shines / and under me you've planted a quick growing cactus" [31] The philosophical underpinnings – always that of a layman, never venturing far into "theory" unless it's to present it as *possible* in normal conversation – bubble to the surface of the work when least expected, as in an anecdote about a child that has eaten green crayons (which remains, like a solipsism, the same green upon reaching the other end), to the quick-stab poem "University Days," which runs in its entirety: "[this poem has been removed for further study]". [76] Nowness, thisness, hereness, but also you-ness, I-ness and witness, are the axes around which such linked sequences as "The Conscience of a Conservative" revolve, with such choice moments of telescoped, daily life as the following: "o / hand / make a circle / / how / the wound / snaps shut" [103] In such poems, Raworth seems as full of child-like amazement and blissful, paratactic perceptions as another New York poet, Joseph Ceravalo, though he surehandedly connects it to a private/public sense of responsibility with soft-spoken but forceful opinion. In the later work collected in *Tottering State*, he seems to have entered adolescence, as the long, slender word streams in poems such as "That More Simple Natural Time Tone Distortion," push the once retreating poet into a more directly politicized, consequently more filmic than painterly, consideration of time. He almost illustrates Bergson's once-radical request that we not divide time into weeks and days, but a stream of contingent moments: "slow / low / thump / long flame / dry / flash bur / just / move / tree browns / to south / our horse / white / no trace / of action / in memory / and fear / but this / is / clear / this area / this never / ending / song / to last / gasp / cold colours / enough / flashes / to leach him / out" [134] If such extreme forms suggest a relationship to the Language poets, it is there, but that would be to miss the humanism in Raworth's work, the persona he has slyly created for himself of the benevolent, however mischeivous, tourguide to the here and now in its many ambivalent disguises. Only Raworth, too cynical to be Zen but too wise to be despairing, shows how interesting this this this can be.

Democracy Boulevard

Kit Robinson

Roof Books, 1998

0-93780-476-2

Synthesizing influences ranging from the Creeley-esque minimalist lyric (and minimalist art in general) to the experimental poetry of Robinson's main associates, the Language poets, and from the expansiveness of John Ashbery's skids through middle-class consciousness to the dance around the "void" of the French lyric, *Democracy Boulevard* moves through eight sections of poetical investigations of the paradoxes of a radically standard lifestyle observed from the heights of a postmodern sensibility informed by "High Technology" and "Media Studies", not to mention "The Messianic Trees." The opening prose poem "The Person" introduces the empty vessel of the narrative consciousness that is lurks behind the rest of the book: "The person is, as cliché-ridden isomorph, a creature of habit. One has certain convictions, obsessions, eccentricities, stylistic features, indications that set one apart. All this is begging the question, a delay tactic [...]" [12] This is followed by the meditative poems of "Sense Data", with such playful pieces as "Distribution", a fugal poem lassoed back to its title word once in each line creating a surfaces that critiques as it acquires the depth it is structured to elude. The final poem attains an impressive scale with its collage of humanist terminology with subversions of individual agency: "The alternating blind alleys of tooting your own horn / and lapsing into dark humors may be avoided by going / straight to the light available in escalating syntax / pronounceable only through sound, that agency whose office / serves up periodic reminders in the form of events, sun bearing weight on the leaves, breezes just barely touching [...]" [20] Robinson's skill lies, however, not in the Wagnerian sense overload so much in the water-clear resonance of words in sustained relationship to each other, a skill which comes to fore in the later, center-justified poems of the rest of the book. "Nothing gets lost / but stays with us like the fingerprint of a world view" he writes in "Win / Loss Report" and the extended clashing surface of "The Messianic Trees": "You have a flair for / crystal gazing / insufferable / three sheets to the wind / mid-Victorian taco junket / rank lyricism / weasel word at the ready [...]" [33] It is Robinson's ability to put these highly complex syntactical surfaces in contrast to the simplest phrases that distinguishes this book from the writing of his contemporaries, and by this technique he illustrates the shell of capital as it revolves around the suburban life. Though the book suffers from a dulling ticker-tape like rhythm at times, even this rhythm, in the defter moments, substantiates a stable field for *Democracy Boulevard's* troubled meanings. "Baked society / the interstitials / apprehension of the world / bound / in the loose confederation / sweating love beads / of the poem / / Separations / as if words named themselves / details pour out to sea" [101]

Mon Canard

Stephen Rodefer

Hard Press Books, 2000

1-930589-03-4

Author of books as diverse as a celebrated translation of Villon under the pseudonym of Jean Calais (1968) to the spellbinding *Four Lectures* (1982), recognized by many as a distinctive masterpiece of Language writing, Rodefer has never been one to fit easily into a method or recognized “voice” – indeed, into a stable reputation. His most typical form of writing, as exhibited in several small-press books, has been the quick, though elegant, improvisational poem – inspired by the examples of everyone from Olson to O’Hara, Baudelaire to Stein – which is why this new selection of long poems from the past seven years is especially welcome. In *Mon Canard*, Rodefer returns again to the large canvas of *Four Lectures*, each of the book’s six poems exploring a distinctive style: the short, linked prose poems of “Daydreams of Frascati”; the Williamsesque three-step in “Erasers,” and “Arabesque at Bar”; the projective, satiric apostrophe in “Answer to Dr. Agathon”; a high-flown language-salad pun-machine in “Mon Canard”; and – in a sort of wicked inversion, signifying his embattled relationship to Language poetry itself – the quasi-constructivist stanza suggestive of Barrett Watson’s *Progress* form in “Stewed and Fraught with Birds.” This isn’t to say that Rodefer is derivative; on the contrary, he needs these forms to reign in the various tones of address exhibits and which, one senses, society will never be entirely pleased with: “The ligaments / of your phraseology / will eventually get / put to some truth test or other / / and you’ll be lucky / if anyone reads / it with a big guffaw / or sneezes” [118-119] This poet, like the modernists he most admires, and as distinct from the determinations of postmodernist gesture, is railing for a concept of value when the old, stable ones have vanished; as a result, his use of reference resounds with the need to shore up history and knowledge against personal dissolution: “I am come to your cartop Ajax, waxing toward an invitation to an opening in some hedgerow. Our Leninist principles have toppled, to become fabulous and Sylvan once again. We are the last metaphysical activists in American nihilism. We demand a Pope from the Bronx.” [10] While some of the poems, like “Mon Canard” itself, can be faulted for a repetitiveness and a sameness of affect in the puns, the gesture of the effort can be appreciated for erecting particular reading challenges when least expected – i.e. in the course of libidinous play and rhetorical directness. In any case, the book offers depths to language and, most importantly, the range of human feeling – from the dark to the bright, the indulgent to the ascetic – that only a writer as dedicated to the poet’s “free radical” life as Rodefer can provide.

Poems from the Millennium, Vol. 2

Edited by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris

University of California Press, 2000

0-52020-864-1

Like its predecessor, “From Fin-de-Siecle to Negritude,” this volume presents a truly astonishing amount of poetry, freely crossing national and aesthetic boundaries to include work ranging from the Scottish concrete poet and garden designer Ian Hamilton Finlay to poems by the famed African novelist Chinua Achebe, and from William Burroughs to excerpts from *Dictee*, the only major writing project by the Korean American filmmaker Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. While the book appears, initially, to be a democratic celebration of the fecundity of avant-garde production of the last half of the century, its contents and structure, not to mention the introduction, betray other agendas. As the editors write, the period began in a “mid-century of molten cities and scorched earth,” and the brief biographies appended to each poet’s selection suggest that it is through poetry that 20th century humanity can achieve its liberation from global suffering. This suggests a shamanistic, or mythopoetic role for the writer – a carry-over from one strand of classic Modernism that many of the poets of the volume might shun – though it is a not suprising emphasis considering editor Rothenberg’s decades-long investment in “ethnopoetics” and Native American verse. The contents also heavily lean toward English language poets, and begins with a selection of mostly American Modernists – Williams, Stein, Pound, H.D. Zukofsky – who, along with Breton, Neruda and others, are offered as “continuities” with the present volume. No one could complain that the volume does not, in some way, cover the world: there are sections devoted to the “The Vienna Group” (Friederike Mayrocker, Ernst Jandl), the Arabic “Tammuzi Poets,” the Lettrist forerunners Cobra, the international Concrete Poetry movement (Finlay, Eugene Gomringer, Seiichi Nikuni), the American Beat and Language poets, and a number of other movements that either occurred within national boundaries (the Chinese “Misty Poets”) or are presently occurring internationally – “Toward a Cyberpoetics” reads the final subsection. No single poet is very well represented, for the volume is – as the editors admit – also an engagement with the fragment and the art of literary juxtaposition. This makes it unsatisfying at times since the unavoidable sameness of translatores, in which rich suggestive line-breaks often become cloudy leaps of faith, often produces a levelling effect on what should be the most radical, unusual and shocking poems of the entire century. Poems have a hard time taking center-stage in the midst of a busy thoroughfare of intellectual traffic, and difficult poets whose idioms take a while to appreciate – Paul Celan, for instance – do not always have the room to state their cases. Yet the value of *Poems from the Millenium: Volume II* as both an introduction to the many avant-gardes of the second half of the century, and as a revision of current thinking about canonization – the “what’s in” and “what’s out” of the mainstream anthologies – cannot be underestimated.

Busted

Nancy Shaw and Catriana Strang
Coach House Books, 2001
1-55245-0791-1

“What a messy, bloody, capricious business. Is lineage iced, or boarded, or unchecked?” Shaw and Strang ask – no, demand to know – in their book-length poem, a sort of cerebral evisceration of the givens of culture in the time after postmodernism’s hypnotizing simulacra, its seductive cult of schizophrenic, ever-generative presentness, seems to have fallen away: “But exactly when did the lucid rink around our discourse? And for which shift did all our plays lace up with capital? Ever more distant, ever more expansive. Was there ever a simple goal?” [46] Alumni of Canada’s determinably unofficial Kootenay School of Writing – a group that took a heavy lead from the Language poets but added an almost punkish edge – Shaw and Strang write from a point of strong conviction, from deep within that first moment in which one believes everything’s truly gone wrong. Nonetheless, a strong degree of ambivalence infiltrates their protest, and the ironies of this work, lofted like slags of kryptonite, have a certain pathos that is lacking in someone they are no doubt influenced by, Bruce Andrews. Some poems seem like outlines of new ways to curse, such as “Gripe: A Social Column for the Republic,” which contains phrases like “Come in and stuff my take-off,” “Coin a reasonable sequence of funking new conjunctions,” “Brown up your daily high-brow,” and “Swarm-scampy” [34]. But the final line of the poem, “This is a formal innovation,” takes some aim at the authors themselves, who – stripped of the “origin story” that is heritage of (male) Romanticism – revel in the monstrous, hybrid, even cyborgian identity they have created between themselves, and saunter gleefully outside the tradition, beyond innovation, beyond even authorship, though never letting you forget that their parallel universe, a utopia, is growing dangerously large. Like their Canadian peers, poets Lisa Robertson and Deanna Ferguson, Shaw and Strang seem to be interested in composing negative feminist anthems, poems with a tremendous amount of strident affect that – rather than outline materialism’s determining role in the world, like the Language poets – raze through a series of value categories, like “stoicism,” “nationalism” and the “lout boot or darling league of pro-moral verbal barge,” capturing perhaps some of the drama of public speaking from more revolutionary times. While some of the language seems a residue of some deep graduate level reading – “I crave triangulation, too” [67] and “A paradigm of intellectual command concurs in plunder” [81] seem humorous and eventful only to the most initiated – the words jump off the page in this book with little slackening of energy, and no straying from the target: getting past the alienation of individuation in an age when only global capitalism seems to have the sheen of inevitability and eternity, and hence the last word.

Protective Immediacy

Rod Smith

Roof Books, 2000

0-937804-78-9

Smith is part of an exciting DC-based community of poets who, for all their devotion to formal experimentation and a critical social vision, are generally very amusing, coupling a knack for stand-up “slacker” comedy with sheer lyric elegance. This new book is a honed display in five sections of all the virtues of Smith’s writing, including his complete mix-and-mastery of several strands of American poetics, ranging through Projective Verse, Berriganesque collage (more intellectual, but still with a Lower East Side “tune-in drop-out” dopiness), the clipped line of Williams, and the provocative opacities of the Language School. As the epitaph to the first section, “The Boy Poems,” states, “Humor is a process. Depression / a useful first step,” and this synthesis of comedy/melancholy is what distinguishes the often intellectual verse of Smith from the pack: “Speaker: Agon means / that ache you can / really see, right? / non-speaker: in some / x, the gross national / awkward. Oh hell, / Speaker: “Prove it” – / non-speaker: Special lights / I blow then sip, brains / dumped over pumps, etc /. Speaker: Diet *across* / that; then what?” [14] The page arrangement of “The Boy Poems” – each with titles like “Boris,” “Bert,” “The Buddha,” and “John Fitzgerald” – are like word-sculptures, somehow beautiful to see in their stasis on the page despite the heady, fluid meanings of the poems themselves. “Simon” theorizes this condition: “The implicit is / Arrival, approach / impasse – a hand issuing from a grasp - / These alternatives cannot be harmonized. / / But harmony sucks anyway.” [17] Human liberation is to be at stake in these poems written from the country’s capitol, as the fixity of corporate systems upon the mushy human emotions is part of the drama inherent in Smith’s colliding discourses: “This is the heart of all living / systems – The workshop mode flows formatively / across the morphogenetic light-born attractor / at the focal point of time and reemerges as / the Diet Coke stain on Bert’s disintegrating / mostly purple tie-dye.” [22] Because Smith is so comfortable living among grand thoughts – he has a natural “visionary” bent suggestive of mild-mannered Blake or a human-scale Pynchon – his idiom has a worldliness which belies a mistrust in naive acceptance of political dialectics or theoretical superstructures. But it is when these two elements meet – the mistrust anchoring the “vision” – that the humor of human bathos arises (he pokes fun at his theory-minded brethren, here, too): “A Nestea before the sex show / & a full length sofa bed / to teach the Cantos from – / this represents the temporal / hidden within the temporal. / The grapes though expensive / are “unimpaled.”” [36] Smith’s ear, while not infallible, is among the more varied, restless and daring among poets from the Language line – he can mix, in a single poem, verbatim quotes from Bob Dylan with polysyllabic science words, ballad-like strains, “plain speech” prose and weird word-lists, such as: “schiekase schmo / schmoose / schmooze / schmuck / Schnabel” [64] sheer nonsense which tells, in the meantime, the whole story of the New York painter’s fall from avant-garde grace. Through all these dada-esque hijinks, however, he always keeps the question of basic freedom versus the (failed) social contract in focus: “the sum tottle seems to ink us out / sheepish science dealing & important / – neither Spain nor Plain – / a health-related basic thing that people matter more than money.” [74] “What’s that little plan / you live in?” the poem “John Fitzgerald” asks, and Smith offers no answers, but no plans, either.

Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You

Juliana Spahr

Wesleyan University Press, 2001

0-8195-6525-3 \$

Spahr's follow-up to her 1995 National Book Series Award winning debut *Response* is an understated, careful examination of the individual in the troubled nexus of the law, community, culture and, centrally, language. The sequence "a younger man, an older man, and a woman" fixes the reader in the center of a minimal narrative that is both fascinating in a cinematic (even voyeuristic) way – the poem is a plain description of the movements of the three named in its title as they perform some gymnastic routine – and yet is also a playful schematic for an ethics of relationships among individuals: "In culture an older man and a younger man stand facing each other with their feet spread for balance. / They place their hands on each other's shoulders and together they flex their knees and keep their backs straight. / A woman steps onto their thighs, one foot on a younger man's thigh, one foot on an older man's thigh. / A younger man and an older man are support. A woman is a tower." [62] The poem is very effective by what it leaves out; the phrase "in culture" is, for most of it, contrasted with the emphatically pedestrian (though erotically suggestive) descriptions of constructions from human bodies, giving the reader a strong sense of the ethics of interaction, as if we were puppeteers navigating our dolls in and out of threatening or beneficial situations. Some of the punch of this poem is lost with the intrusion of a moral-of-the-story ending – that we all must "get along" if we are to build anything like a future – a letdown after the sophistication of the literary technique. But Spahr – who teaches literature at the University of Hawai'i, Manoa, and has recently published a study of social identity and literature called *Everybody's Autonomy* – may have the last word, as this seemingly simplified approach to over-complex politicized issues makes a disruptive, yet redescriptive, contribution that is (unlike "theory") hard to ignore. The sequence "gathering / palolo stream" concerns the conflict of native Hawai'ian property traditions and the imposition of rights to private property; at the center of the poem is the resonant void of a parking lot to which no road leads, and yet which stands in the way of a contested gathering place by a stream. This symbolic void, like the scream of the punk-rocker in another poem that is the title of the book, lends a strong air of nihilism to what is obviously Spahr's project of hope, and this tension between the black heart of anger and the faith in community makes this a distinct, ambitious, if not entirely fleshed out, book of poems.

Ma Langue est Poetique – Selected Work

Christophe Tarkos

Roof Books, 2001

0-937-804-88-6

Tarkos was born in Marseilles in 1964, and published his first book of poetry, *Morceaux Choisis*, in 1995; he has published over 25 books since then, all while maintaining a hectic touring schedule of performances all over Europe and remaining active as a publisher and collaborator with many French artists, writers, and composers. Judging by this slender selection from his work so far, there is no doubt Tarkos will begin to turn his sites to the States, as his poetry – unlike that of many French writers since the days of Tel Quel, with the exception of Olivier Cadiot – translates incredibly well into the American idiom. It is neither spare nor precious, but rather has an abundance and a sure-fire comedic bent, coupled with a hallucinatory sense of history and the myriad false plays of language, that place him somewhere in the line of Rimbaud, Beckett and Stein. In the collage of linked paragraphs, “Process” – which rambles from documentary history to visionary episodes at the drop of a colon – he even takes on some of the breadth of Pound, though with Bjorn Borg in place of Malatesta, and with a tendency to use Asian languages not to illustrate ideogrammic principles but to create babble lists such as the following: “He was called Ngo, they were called Ngo, Ngo Han and Hen, they were called Ngo Hao Hoa Hui Huy Hun Hou Hue Hyen Heu Huang Hang Heng Tan Tin Than Thin Thang...” [34] “Hurt: a libretto” is a little minimalist comedy in which a voice 2 tries to talk a voice 2 – which repeatedly expresses “ouch, I hurt” – into an out-of-body experience to divorce his/her self from the pain, a venture loaded with implications about truth and language that is clearly indebted to Wittgenstein, but with the metaphysical frenzy of the Brothers Quay. “Toto” is a run-on paragraph of 9 pages, and, at parts, is something like *Toy Story* for William Burroughs fans (Ashbery’s *Girls on the Run*, with its threatening cubist landscapes, also comes to mind), as many of the once-passive objects of the drug trade eventually become protagonists: “Toto’s back brews. Just seeing Toto is enough to see that he is a doser, watch him and you are better dosed, just by watching him. It’s contagious. He’s a beer drinker. Truck is, Pictured is, Tourniquet is, Robot is. Meanwhile everyone talks. In the meantime Toto doses. Toto lasts as long as his dosage lasts. Toto lasts indefinitely in the sky. The forces and the methods are the same. Tourniquet smiles, is smiling. He smiles for tray cupboard, to place opposite, cement, take a glass and a fork. Tourniquet smiles daily.” [67] Jonathan Skinner’s deft translation conveys the weird overlapping sense of time and space that is both full of hurried activity and yet, like a perpetual “meanwhile,” goes nowhere, as if each moment doesn’t seem to replace the last but just washes over it, never entirely erasing its trace. If there is an over-riding concern with Tarkos’ work – which can be both overtly political (the list of Vietnamese sounding names, for instance, suggests a relationship to Godard’s radio in *Weekend*) and very private – it is with the way language can be shaped and stretched, placed in all sorts of containers, duplicated, erased and made to reorient the mind. Tarkos calls this concept “worddoh,” as if language were as sweet and malleable as uncooked Betty Crocker’s. The book, edited by the American poets Stacy Doris and Chester Wiener, includes an introduction by Wiener, and counts among its translators Fiona Templeton, Norma Cole, the Montreal Anglophone poet Erin Mouré, and Geneva Chao, who translated the interview with Tarkos included as an appendix. *Ma Langue* signals the presence of an exciting and unpredictable new French voice in America.

The All-Union Day of the Shock Worker

Edwin Torres

Roof Books, 2002 1-931824-00-2

“AYYY: soy bilingual... pero BILINGUALISSIMO!... de nada!” screams the 18-point sans serif font of “A Nuyo-Futurist’s Manifestiny,” the Blast-like final section of this cartoon mushroom cloud of a book. A frenetic, but elegantly conceived, admixture of the most significant poetic and philosophical trends of the last decade – digital media and information arts, multiculturalism, performance and sound poetry, and the return to subjective lyricism after the waning of deconstruction – *Shock Worker* is one more unexpected twist in the career of Torres, a New York poet who was once associated with the performance poets of the Nuyorican café. Torres’ slam heritage comes through strongly in his jangly, El Lissitsky - inspired graphics as each of its pages – the delicately arrayed computer vomit of the series “I.E. Zagmm” in which bits of Spanish and English can be gleaned from its entropic sludge, or the Lettristic panels of “What What What Now,” some of which look more like exploded eye charts or astrological diagrams for deviant religions than poems – has an “in-your-face” quality that shouts over the crowd as much as seduces them with clever, unpretentious and agile displays of Quark acuity. This isn’t to say there aren’t quiet moments – the delicate lyric “Separatist Invasion” is a little mantra against the alienated sensibility: “There have been a thousand sightings / of people I used to know. / Separations of copies of / who it is they look like, backed up / by carbons of who they are... / The concert has happened / and all these people of me, / have still to go home.” [36] Indeed, it is these lyrical elements that shape the main thematic of this book, a sort of diary of a New York poet in the tradition of Whitman and O’Hara who seems to be in bodily contact with everything – people, things, noises, smells, and in this case letters – and responds to this field of experience like a prophet in agony over the sense of the infinite he finds in a single flower – but a whole lot funnier. One might expect a ton of agitprop politics with his self-conscious overloading of verbal and visual effects, but the politics are in the process – the poet moving forward in fleshly 3D, formatting his words graffiti-like on the page and asking in his inebriated digital creole: “Ever put the New in Yo?”

Partisans

Rodrigo Toscano

O Books, 1999

1-882022-37-8 \$

Toscano's *Partisans* injects a startling new breath of urgency in contemporary poetics, one that skates awfully close to such politically activated texts as Bruce Andrews' *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up* or Myung Mi Kim's *Dura*, but which doesn't lose its very specific questioning of political agency beneath its cross-cut surface. The twelve parts of this book-length work each consider a specific moment in thinking about progressive politics – “unveil[ing] the conjoined agency of human labor and grammatical component” in Barrett Watten's phrase from the book jacket – with such titles as “Present Perfect Progressive” and “Simple Past” identifying the perspective taken amidst the historical flux, pointing to concepts of closed historical determinacies and never ironic ideas of utopias to-be. Its short, tight lines, which move through several modes of rhetoric from the direct address, the declamatory, the lyric and the quasi-hermetic, never lose steam as Toscano plows through his manic considerations of aesthetics and society. The following is near-Poundian razzling of activist poetics, condemning as it is precise: “Flouting history, rambling spleen'd / <sign of Timidity> / / Fumbling segues, trancing sex'd / <a sign of Banality> / / Spouting ethics, shunning touch / <a sign of Celebrity> / / Sorting concepts, draping needs / <a sign of Obscurity>” [9] Toscano's “wordwork” – the poem is obsessed with the nature of poetry as “labor” in an poetic economy that is, even at its margins, compromised by the exigencies of the “market” – is always tempered by his quest for the “collective” revolutionary consciousness, such that even the short time it takes to bring the poem to the print drops it from its immediate social moment: “By the time this all gets sketched, typed / circulated, confiscated, allocated / celebrated, denigrated, reiterated / obfuscated, recuperated, activated / / it will have lost its gain / so to speak / will have had to begin / again / between” [12] he writes, staring into the space between the immediacy of his spoken address and the near-archival quality of the white page and the bookshelf. *Partisans* takes issue with “beauty” – it is as pared and honed as Brecht's later poetry – and certainly against the idea of a beautiful soul, but consequently avoids the pessimism and turn toward the ironic that much latter-day lyricism possesses in the face of disappointment with the revolutionary moment. “So back to irony-ville / petty bourgeois-ville / / round and round / / eclectic hectic and peptic” [20] His metaphysics of social “Agent(cy)” seems to center around the idea of a “social surplus” which can be engaged for social transformation for “Doing” – a surplus created in the margins of the bourgeois self and which, to this time, has been the static, inactive area from which most avant-garde American poetries have surfaced. “And why not / partisans / / So so democratic / postmodern muzzling / / Having been fitted / having been summoned by it / / In the present (but of the past) / the subject / / We 'ye, as a has been / or stand in – for / / Now? A muffled yet pressing now –” [41] he asks, bringing to light the necessity of a singular, staunch view amongst the calls for plurality and untranslatability that have become catchwords of late-progressive literary and political theory. However, even Toscano realizes that, in this case at least, his verbal assay may not be more than a tone mourning the loss of collective action and will in the later 20th century, an urge toward “the dazzling brightness / of realism,” the “tattered / fettered / committed.” Poetry may very well be the unsatisfactory vehicle, as he writes toward the end, imagining himself before a crowd: “So I'm facing faces / as I recite this / as I'm looked at / / quizzically?” [47] But this line is followed by “toward yourselves too”, throwing the ball back in the court where he has, fairly and unpre-

tentiously, returned it, into the minds and hearts of the readers who are being challenged by this extraordinary, difficult, but noble and ennobling text. “Readers / as agents” [49].

Verisimilitude

Hung Q. Tu

Atelos, 2000

1-89119-007-5

“Like omelets / nations fold” writes Tu at the opening of the series “Short Subject,” and in this spare and careful book not only nations but discourses of all sorts – the personal, the ideological, the lyrical, the global, the funny and the earnest – collapse into themselves revealing both their intercontextuality and competing degrees of relevance. The opening sequence, “It’s Just Your Basic CYA (The Streets of San Francisco)” demonstrates the virtues of Tu’s style, including his precise readings of public symbols enmeshed in human interactions which he exaggerates to indict the hidden, inevitable cycles of corruption: “Mutual Taunt Theater / a squad car rolls by / the masses: “You got any donuts” / the cops: “You got any crack”” [23] He has an assured sense of place in California contrasted with global corporatism (“over the table – mergers / across the mesa – maquilas” [25]), and has an always poignant, yet ironic, reading of history that one might associate with the poems of Brecht: “in 1855, Mt. Diablo served as the summit / from which northern California and Nevada / were surveyed by army engineers / 150 years later, pickets reinforce their imagination” [23] Each of the seven medium length sequences of this book display different facets of Tu’s project, such as in “Verisimilitude,” in which he matches the public spectacle of capital with the private, responsible, somewhat damaged perspective of a disaffected misfit: “with the installation of cameras / epistemology is really moot / the patron saint of / the illuminated porch / vintage Balzac of nineteen / ‘97 democratic straw men / cheerfully carded / to some end discards of town / in coda a flock / is nest-work of nesters / this push cart your kingdom / this counter your moat / the action-hero genre / and juice bar explosion / power is frost and tasty / no one forgot 19 whatever / but everyone tried” [41] “Uneven Development, Uneven Poetics (Simon & Simon)” takes the local, class based concerns of “It’s Just Your Basic” to an international scale, wrapping several complex strands of thought in democratic, haiku-like epiphanies: “China Embraces Liberalism! / consequences live in neighborhoods / but since this is literature / I’m interested in the term FOB” [50] “Dated” links several smaller fragments together into a stream of subversive aura (“There’s a little American / imperialist in every / Australian trying to / get out of its coral box” [67]), while “Short Subject” and the “Birth of Cool (Cash)” return to the fragment, and “Market Psychology” straddles both modes: “o the rally cap / Noah’s Ark school of diversity applied to Noah’s Bagel / two women a focal point over coffee and danish / her decision making process applied to tattoos / la différence – accountant’s raison d’être / world-view around the clock / the defense minister knighted for bravery in front of the podium” [105] Tu seems to have mastered the very short political poem, somewhat following in the line of writers like Bruce Andrews and Jeff Derksen who have made their poems lyrical channels of crushed and compressed social codes. But Tu, who is far less the firebrand than Andrews and less intellectual than Derksen, writes with a tone of disaffection and responsibility rather than assertive ideological manhandling, displaying an imagination that is thoroughly disgusted with it all but able, however bitterly, to be amused. At a time when many younger writers are retreating to a humble, apolitical bohemianism, Tu’s book – unpretentious yet uncompromising in its effort to force the hand of indifference – shows that you can have it both ways.

The Anchored Angel: Selected Writings by Jose Garcia Villa

Edited by Eileen Tabios; with a foreword by Jessica Hagedorn

Kaya Production, 1999

1-885030-28-2 \$

Kaya Production continues its innovative line of Asian American poetry with this selected edition of the writing of Filipino American Jose Garcia Villa. As the famous 1948 photograph from the Gotham Book Mart reception for Edith Sitwell suggests – in which he appeared with the likes of Elizabeth Bishop, Delmore Schwartz, Gore Vidal, W. H. Auden and others – Villa was something of an anomaly: a writer coming from a colonial property of the United States who created a poetics that was as unquestioning of the premises of high Modernism as he himself was unquestioning of his abilities and preternatural calling as a poet. The excellent essays appended to this collection by writers such as Nick Joaquin, E. San Juan, Jr., and Luis H. Francia, along with the introduction by Hagedorn, present the man in a variety of guises, from the imposing, learned, often didactic, never passive literary mentor that he was to several Filipino writers in New York, to the provocateur in the Philippines who never failed to cause a scandal with his tart tongue and demanding aesthetic tastes. (Villa was, nonetheless, put on the government’s payroll, and had a troubled but intimate relationship to the Marcos.) As if testament to his chosen tradition of late symbolist poetics, Villa – like Valéry, Rilke and Rimbaud – reached a point in his life when he felt that he had “said all he had to say” and let silence reign. In fact, he gave up writing poems after the early sixties, though he often spoke of an enormous work on aesthetics which he had been preparing. The poems that he did leave behind foreground a set of values that might strike one today as antique, and yet they are surprisingly fresh, and when focused, very powerful. The echoes one hears are from writers as diverse as Hopkins, Dickinson, Blake and Cummings, and his various innovations – such as his idea of “Reverse Consonance” – seem minor in retrospect compared to those of Williams or Pound, or even Ginsberg or Lowell, but attest to the care for the small event in poems that only surfaces upon a very close reading of the language. His later, more infamous idea of putting commas between every word – which he linked to “Seurat’s architectonic and measured pointillism” – has been dismissed for many years as a laughable eccentricity, but has resurfaced in practices by Language poets such as P. Inman. The heated purity of Villa’s approach leaves one nostalgic for a time before deconstruction and the politics of the referent had converted the aporias of language into the ironizing of essences and the critique of public values (which is to say, “before Auschwitz”): “Silence is Thought converging / Unprecipitate, like / Dancer on tight wire balancing, / Transitive, budlike, / / Till – her act finished – in / One lovely jump skips / She to the floor, bending / To make her bows, dips / / Herself in bright applause – / Then silence is / No more. Now it is the rose / Called Speech.” [15] The comma poems challenge the reader to break apart and reform meanings, as if to dissuade the imposition of final interpretation that eventually weigh on many poems: “As,much,as,I,perceive,the,Future, / Lo: the,Future,perceives,me: / A,Mutuality,of,Eyes. / / Untanglement,beyond,possibility – / Too,knit,too,knit,together,we! / None,can,effect,suture.” [45] His later syllabic approach to the stanza resembles, mostly, that of Marianne Moore’s, but unlike Moore, he attempted poems that were not merely assemblages of “found texts” but were based on a single sentence of a single text, hence testing the integrities of syntax (Bernstein would return to this idea in longer essay-poems like “The Artifice of Absorption”). One poem, based on two sentences from Andre Gide, permits him to escape the more fiery, messianic tones of his earlier poems and yet access the integrity of his personality which he cherished so much: “Night and sleep

alone / Permit metamorphoses. Without / Oblivion in the / Chrysalis the caterpillar /
Could not / / Become a butterfly: The / Hope of awaking someone else / Urges me to let /
The man I am to sink in- / to sleep.” [83] As some of the essays in the appendices argue,
Villa stands at the crossroads of many discourses, specifically those of postcolonialism and
the transition from modernism to a postmodernism informed by the West’s imposition of
values on non-Western peoples. However, it seems unlikely that Villa would have been com-
fortable in this position – he seems to ignore these issues all together, and would not do any-
thing to question his own fitness for the Western canon. But his ignorance of “issues”
might be what makes him so compelling and useful as a crux figure. In his unflinching devo-
tion to his notions of craft and calling, he becomes a diamond in the rough – the diamond
he hoped his syntax would find in language – and it is this diamond that serves, by its aspira-
tions to integrity and wholeness, to aggravate and permit growth to a number of unanchored
and partially-formed concepts that swirl around the political/aesthetic nexus, though remain-
ing untouched by any of them. *Anchored Angel*, excellently edited by Eileen Tabios (who also
edited the seminal *Black Lightning* published by the Asian American Writers Workshop), is a
study in how a relatively small contribution to two nations’ literatures could serve to trans-
form an entire discourse, once the discourse is forced open by the contradictions of poetry
and a poet’s life.

Spar

Karen Volkman

University of Iowa Press, 2002

0-87745-807-3

“This must be some specious season, quick and numbered, pulling the this-world to quivered, hectic ends. Sepals could count it. Pistils, pearly queens. Little godhead stamens, tense, erected. All this *intends*.” [37] writes Volkman with the mischievous authority of a sideshow barker standing before the curtains of reality and promising to reveal – to you, the reader, should you take the *chance* – the strangest wonders of natural world. The poems of *Spar* recall Rilke of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, not only in her depictions of the language of sense experience as a congeries of active agents – “What, I said, noise, I said, is you, are you, all?” [10], starts one poem, and “Berry, eye” ends another – but also in her use of first lines that simultaneously suggest both a conclusion and riddle – one poem starts “No noise subtracts it,” and another “A light says why” – thus tossing the reader *in media res* into a slipstream of cosmic, sensually redolent speculation, even if the subject remains aporic, an empty eye-of-the-storm. Another influence is Hopkins – alliteration and near-hypertrophied word-play abound, and one poem even declares “The day un-days” – and Volkman convincingly melds her engagement with the ludic quality of words and the marvelously chaotic commerce of the natural world, a distinctive confluence of forces that keeps her at a healthy distance from poets who might choose deconstructive tactics to the exclusion of the image, for example, or mundane confession over the charge of the liberated word. An element of this play is in the pairing of two nouns, verbs or adjectives that just don’t go with each other – “tremor and debit,” [46] “blur and spend” [49], or the “numb, recumbent dust” (44) – often combined with a conclusive, if inscrutable, declaration of *is*-ness, as when a poem ends “I am more than carbon or echo: I am fame,” and another (on the facing page): “If words are wire and can whip him, *this is* the scar.” [49] The pronounced artificiality of Volkman’s idiom thwarts any easy emotional relationship to the text, as the affect is often too highbrow, self-consciously heightened and alien, to be interpersonal – one poem begins, rather badly: “O coronet – your silver purpose stunts the weeds, the thrashy frays. I won’t stall the morning to please you...” [42] This literariness, which edges into irony, also thwarts the agonized, but celebratory, tone of a religious mystic in thrall with the clockwork orchestration of nature’s plurality, as one gets the sense that Volkman is improvising a metaphysics rather than animating one she has a calling to describe, and her images – the coronet, for example – seem pulled from books rather than from her environment. Despite these problems, Volkman’s poems are involved, elusive, and often startling performances of language, and with a more subtle use of poetic stagecraft they may be revelatory.

The Tapeworm Foundry: andor the dangerous prevalance of imagination

Darren Wershler-Henry

House of Anansi Press, 2001

0-88784-652-1

Taking up the call of a global poetics infused with the criss-crossing of information flow, a local poetics (centered around a Toronto as you've never known it) and a need to communicate beyond the surface intensity of radical form, Wershler-Henry muscles through a single-sentence poem of possibility whose only punctuation is the conjunction "andor." Any strand of this text – a DNA fiber for the new world chaos theory – propels the reader through a corridor exquisite options and micro-narratives, like a Borges short story compacted into the moment between breaths: "[...] andor realize your imac is just a big tamagotchi andor design a transformer to use up wasted ergs of energy from excessive pressure on electric buzzers andor quit making art in order to play chinese checkers andor tattooo your poems on the back of someone else but be sure to make no spelling mistakes anor prepare to correct them in a different colour of ink andor do it all for the nookie andor delete ambiguities and then convert to specificities [...]" [n/a] Billed as a "list of book proposals," *Tapeworm* is actually much more: a manifesto for significant and/or excessive action in a world increasingly circumscribed by middle-of-the-road politics, false notions of rationality and productivity, and the infinite hunger of a technologized economy for all the good bad (read: useless, fun, diabolic) ideas that the young, the disaffected and the inordinately talented can produce. *Tapeworm's* various attacks on institutions, the bourgeois, the mainstream and closed ways of thinking are not to be ignored; this is a book that revivifies the initial burst of excitement Dadaism and other modernist forms created, but unlike much "avant-garde" work today, it is not caught up in the self-satisfying, doxical terminology of the cultural institutions – schools, museums, even the cliques – but wants to reach out, to expand, to take no prisoners. If the work seems juvenile and "easy," that's because the author – who has conveniently escaped through the back door of exquisite process – has sacrificed the "difficulty" (often just confusion or a hapless shield against obviousness posing as hieratic) of much experimental poetry today. If there is an overriding metaphor to how this poem operates, it may be that of information itself; at times, even the simple paratactic structure (an advance over the disjunctivitis of much late "new sentence" work, including recent portions of *The Alphabet* itself) breaks down as a subset of phrases separated by "or" take over: "[...] andor find ninetynine different ways to retell the story of one man accusing another man of jostling him deliberately on a crowded bus at midday but aviod all anagrams or anti-phrases or alexandrines or back slang or blurbs or epentheses or gallicisms or haiku or hel-lenisms of litotes or logical analysis or negativities or permutatioun or proper names or prostheses or spoonerisms or syncopes or surprise andor [...]" [n/a] Like all great literary works, *Tapeworm* presents some fundamental problems, one of which is: what is the use of all this discipline – since this is, if anything, a disciplined work (as his tournequet approach to his Oulipian cousin suggests) – in world whose only avenues for progress – personal, social, and otherwise – seem to lead inexorably into melding into the corporate whole? This book raises suspicions about everything, not the least of which is where the "author" of such a work stands. Perhaps, like in the radical performative work of Beuys and Acconci, the author is the gesture itself.

Smokes

Susan Wheeler

Four Way Books, 1998

1-88480-019-X

Wheeler's second book signifies an important, if not entirely unanticipated, rapprochement of the indeterminate, militantly ironic stance of the postmodern with the comforting, bourgeois closures of the sentimental lyric. *Smokes* is infused not only with the play of signifiers – often a dance of malapropism, jarring surrealist and pop imagery, violent (and violating) pastiches and merciless non-sequiturs – but also with the play of sound, placing her somewhere between Ashbery/Bernstein axis of high schtick appropriation and the baroque strains of a 17th century English metaphysical. It opens with a cheeky homage to Robert Frost in the form of an overture to the reader, but as is the case with her poems, the invitation is to the text, not to the nurturing interiors of the poet: “The girls are drifting in their ponytails / and their pig iron boat. So much for Sunday. / The dodo birds are making a racket / to beat the band. You could have come too.” [3] Arbitrary word-replacement, often for the sake of clunky, but tempered, alliteration, often seems to be a tactic of hers, and at times it strikes with alarming *presence*, as when she writes in “Fractured Fairy Tale”: “Doze Doll Does Wiz Biz – a century that, her sleeping, / a stenotic century self-circling, noodling its tunes, drug / by the scuff of its kitchen to stand, squinting, at *thing* / coherent, drooping from clouds, bungeeing to boot.” [41] Wheeler's work often places somewhere within the realm of po-mo fiction, as in “The View from There” which seems to tell the story of an employee's desperate (gen-X Kafkaian) leap from vacuity at the office: “The old boss was surprised when you ran into her / on the street. Behind her eyelashes a model TV / hummed a sports coach and a car. The old boss / said, for instance, *Well I'm so glad things are going / well for you* with genuine surprise. She rubbed / at her eyelid and tried to revise her history of you, / invisibly.” [47] However, the poem, while remaining within the scale of reference (boss, car, work) soon appears more concerned with the “e” sound in the first verse – “lazy”, “invisibly”, “trees”, and “library” all make their appearance at metrically foregrounded moments – and the “o” sound in the second verse. The poem ends: “Herr Arbeit showed me the desk by / appliances: eleven more forms to blot with dry / snow, seven mock beavers to stuff. Then show. / My work cut out to a tee.” [47] Such obsessive repetitions suggest a subtext of hysteria, strangely linking the poem to Plath's “Daddy” with its pounding “oo”s (“Daddy, you bastard, I'm through”), but Wheeler, while not offering an humanist vision of a adjusted psyche, is far from the expressionist heroine of adolescent angst – her confessions are, if anything at all, halls of errors. While the poems of *Smokes* are occasionally marred by a sort of tunnel-vision – some of the poems seem based more on the academic argument for a “postmodern” poetry rather than the mundane, but felt, need for poetry, the play more a statement of intent rather than the attention to play – the book's desire to astound, contort, pervert and yet sing at all turns makes it a peculiar delight.

Source Codes

Susan Wheeler

Salt, 2001

1-876857-06-4

Wheeler skirts along the troubled borders where virtual reality and Robert Lowell's Maine lobster town vie for our central geographic tropes, and where the "self" is variably a node in a cluster of rhizomic meanings or enmeshed in an aging, none-too-pretty (but lyrical) body. Each of the new poems in this startling collection leaps head-first into dizzying, often very formal, always wackily alliterative, language: "We reassert / the selves but the Seagrams of the earth they / / sift us with silt no mind our gear in a wind that takes / *going off* to heart, or what heart a silt self has / / in the greater earth it constitutes." [1] As the fable of Benny, the beaver who only made a sound with his tail but did no work ("Benny slapped his tail to bang / A beat on hollow logs / Keen for external analogs / To the hums within his head."), Wheeler is obsessed (like Walter Benjamin, about whom this poem may be) with art in a time when the art object, in this case the poem, has lost its singularity and direct relationship to "work" and always echoes something else – a time when poems can literally be created by computers or be the product of text dumps from the web. Despite these high-tech concerns, which place her within the interests of Charles Bernstein in his "Nude Formalist" mode (the wrong word used just wrongly in a formal/lyric style, floating high above the essentialism of common lyric conceptions), the technology of the poems, or Wheeler's "tradition," seems equally inspired by the allusive, symbolist-tinged, grand style of the Bishop/Lowell/Berryman line, and her talent for crushing rhymes that expose total disaffection, while owing something to the Artaudian school of pain as pleasure, take overblown advantage of what the often pessimistic "Age of Anxiety" strains of these poets had to offer: "You've been pure trouble since I thought you up, / Acie, hairnet, glass eye, wormy dick / through stretch pants across a girth so thick / even your dog don't jump." [18] Wheeler's pantheon of effects takes in everything from jingles ("Double bubble toil and trouble / Double, double, double your fun"), very tight syllabic stanzas, the odd mix of stentorian modes with cartoon-like plasticity that is familiar to readers of middle-period Ashbery, pseudo-wisdom literature modes ("The death of peace is no literature / Leisure is death without letters. / Death is without the leisure of letters. / A letrist's death is without peace."), myths, fables, and Surrealist mantras, like this poem which, with a Swiftian turn right out of *Gulliver's Travels*, reverses the trajectory of: "lover admires his mistress, though she be very deformed of herself / a swollen juggler's platter face, or a thin / have clouds in her face, be crooked / mammis, her dugs like two double jugs / that other extreme, bloody-fallen fingers / she have filthy, long unpared nails / back, she stoops / very monster, an oaf imperfect / dowdy, a slut / obscene, base / he loves her once, he admires her for all this" [12] *Source Codes*, whose poems are only titled by numbers but have, on the contents page, what appear to be one-line citations for each one ("Text: Robert Burton, Anatomy of Melancholy," for example), is punctuated by a series of funny and interesting, if not as technically dazzling, collages that place figures in rooms and landscapes so that their Cartesian coordinates are possible, but socially quite out of place – a couple necking in a cathedral, for instance. At the end of the book appear three Appendices, each suggesting, in their own way, how the presence of the poem as a series of singular marks of ink on a page is undermined by its "source," hence banishing forever the image of Coleridge merely transcribing Kubla Khan from his repressed, universal memory: first, a series of scribbled-over drafts of the poems in the book; second, a splash of HTML that (as any programmer could see)

wouldn't work; and last, a series of what could be drafts for poems in a new book (in fact, they are drafts of poems from her first). This remarkably subversive book – in which Frost's "Provide, provide" becomes the great capitalist mantra "Produce, produce," and the warbling Nightingale "nests in its noose" – is at once an homage and an evisceration of what might call the main line of American poetry, not unlike Lowell's own haunted appraisal of his aristocratic lineage in his early poems – but without the pedigree. *Source Codes* synthesizes, even exhausts, the range of techniques that the 20th century provided for American lyric verse.

Borrowed Love Poems

John Yau

Penguin Books, 2001

0-14-200051-5 \$17

“Hans Violin enters the tunnel and emerges as Hank Harmonica, bit player and familiar television talk show guest. Meanwhile, after waking up in another section of the numbered quadrant, Gus “The Big” Viola discovers he has been reduced to a small-boned, foreign-born dry cleaner. Time briefly accelerates its production of images. Realizing that, while he will always remain foreign to those who seek the indelible signature of his services, he has unwittingly let himself succumb to a flurry of mispronunciations.” [44] Landing somewhere between the surreal-noir aesthetics of *Mulholland Drive*, a kinder, gentler version of J.K. Huysmann’s Paris decadence and the aggregated syllables of an Oulipian who courts masochistic restraint only to cry foul and take a nap, Yau’s new poems churn along with the bright inventiveness that have characterized his work since his first major collection, *Radiant Silhouette* (Black Sparrow, 1990). *Borrowed* continues several of the series and modes inaugurated in that volume – the “Genghis Chan: Private Eye” poems, the addresses and briefs to poets and painters – and fans will revel in the weird, ghostly wisdom of his lines, spoken as if by a twisted mister behind a 3-way mirror and punctuated by the poet’s trademark “le mot injuste” verbal choices (reminiscent of his friend Clark Coolidge) that reveal startling, if impossible, imagery: “But the sum / is not all / / The circles float / in their perfect mouths of ink / / Where else am I / to store them / / The windows have their own tasks / The sky brings its own table” [15] he writes in “Bowery Studio,” and later: “Why do we go on singing this song / when we know / / all its words are nails / all our tongues are pieces of wood / / meant to build a house / for liars” [21] The phrase “I am” or variations thereof appear more than any other in this book – “I am called Gobi Snow,” “I was not born in Dulwich or Brighton, but in Camberwell, south London,” “I wasn’t always a fevered lepidopterist” are some random examples. In fact, “I Was A Poet In The House of Frankenstein” is a 9-page litany of such statements, a form of self-portraiture that suggests the sport of trying to see your reflection in a melting box of crayons. This evisceration of the myth of self-revelation can get wearying once the trick is learned, and Yau’s musical sense is not as varied and sophisticated as would be needed to sustain long, aggregative poems like the “Vowel Sonatas,” where he seems outpaced by the speedy short-lines that seem, at least partly, inspired by Tom Raworth’s “Ace.” “yesterday’s fiery / fairy gargoyle / gyrating devilry / argyle ferry / skyward journey / windy electricity / robbery fly / style by / tyrannical tapestry / cloudy hallucinatory / laundry already / buttery yak [...]” [121] But Yau always manages to startle with a charming, provocative coinage just when the race appears lost, and there is a pathos to his distinctively dispassionate accounts as a “nude drummer boy, all pomade and fancy” of that moment when time “accelerated its production of images” through the chance meeting of unacquainted words that refuse – after a giddy, shotgun marriage in pharmacist’s puce cabana – to separate.