train love poem

(for John)

I mean it
when I smile at you
with you
and this very repetition
growing kisses
that out-star the planets
and out-gun the mountains
switching the scene on and off
with increasing rapidity
both dazzled by our own brilliance
casting off voles
that try - through desperation -
to cling to our robes
hammocks in a blaze of lights
swinging like mad pendulums
until the unbelievable
and unknown explosion
throws it all
everything - and this happened -
up into the air

-LEE HARWOOD
Three Poems: Guillaume Apollinaire (trans. Ron Padgett)

N. Nevada Di

Books” are a Diggs has noted her lanlay of the pramanged, rubber tires, wood, metal, plastic, nameless names, wood, metal, plastic, nameless names, wood, metal, plastic. The effect is symphoual interweaving of the lines, gray text, and black providex, and its translation feels almost plodding.

I Want to Reclaim Every Part of Living Including Illness and Death:

A Poem: Karen Lepri

"Endeavor and the world, / th...
In the land of Poetry Project, we start thinking about New Year’s Day in October. We barely notice the groups of people on haunted tours of the church grounds or the Day of the Dead celebration because we are fixated on how we can put together an Annual New Year’s Day Marathon Benefit Reading, for the 40th time, that has everything people love about it but is always infused with surprising new energy. The Marathon is like a Bernese Mountain Dog that jumps up and puts her paws on my shoulders. What a sweet beast.

It bodes well for poetry that it gets more and more challenging to narrow the performer list down to a number that works for our relatively modest 11-hour timeframe. Our Program Committee, formed last year to include more voices in the making of a dynamic and diverse event, started the process with a list of 300. When Anne Waldman founded this benefit event 40 years ago, there were, according to our database, 31 performers. I do love a list, so in honor of the big anniversary, I’d like to tell you who they were, with particular gratitude for those who are no longer with us: Helen Adam, David Amram, Regina Beck, Rebecca Brown, Michael Brownstein, Gregory Corso, Larry Fagin, Ralston Farina & Friends, Allen Ginsberg, Ted Greenwald, Byrd Hoffman, Philip Lopate, Jackson Mac Low, Jamie MacInnis, Berndette Mayer, Taylor Mead, Joel Oppenheimer, Peter Orlovsky, Maureen Owen, Nick Piombino, David Rosenberg, Bob Rosenthal, Ed Sanders, Patti Smith, Johnny Stanton & The Siamese Banana Gang, Tony Towle, Paul Violi, Anne Waldman, Lewis Warsh, Joe White & Rebecca Wright. Since I opened this can of worms, and record keeping being what it was then, I asked Ed Friedman if he remembered others – so we add John Cage, William Burroughs, Gerard Malanga, and probably others.

The funds that this community effort raises are important to the existence of The Poetry Project and get poured back into programming for the rest of the year. Thank you to everyone who supports this event by performing, paying the admission, volunteering, donating, listening to the very end.  

Stacy Szymaszek (Director)

Hello, dear reader of the Poetry Project Newsletter. Another Dia de Muertos has passed. Each year it’s celebrated in our churchyard cemetery with plenty of elaborate altars, sugar skulls, & marigolds. After pouring some Cazadores on the ground for Mictecacihuatl, Queen of the Underworld, we staff of the Poetry Project take to planning our New Year’s Day Marathon in earnest.

It’s our biggest fundraising event of the year and we need lots of help to make it happen. It takes about 80 volunteers working with the staff to create the full Marathon reality: more than 10 joyous hours of reading and performance, an amazing poetry bookstore, and a busy kitchen. If you would like to begin your new year playing a part in this collective effort, send Nicole Wallace an email and let her know. She can be reached at NW@poetryproject.org.

I hope to see you on New Year’s Day!

Arlo Quint (Managing Director)

...writing is as lonely
As a pile of shoes. Heaven is wingless and far away.
And there are no books that mention your name or mine.

- Frank Lima

Frank Lima and Lou Reed and Seamus Heaney.

October has passed and what is it now? November?

I think I may have broken a promise to myself along the way, but that’s neither here nor there.

What do I remember? “And they sit down in the shining room together.” “…and how terrific it is to be/ mislead inside a hallway...” (Thanks, Lisa.)

These, as prospects, don’t seem all that lonely. Though, I suppose maybe Frank means a different loneliness. The kind of lonely someone might feel at the bottom of a joyous heap of one’s own friends. A big dogpile of friends.

What would those friends be without the lonely candy core sunk into that tangle of bodies? Lonely is the magnet that draws the whole pile down and down and binds it sticky sweet in its syntax.

And it does and doesn’t belong to everyone, so surely writing isn’t the only thing that’s lonely. But what’s lonely is writing, and we can share that.

And how terrific it is to share that with you. And how terrific it is to miss that with you.

Ted Dodson (Newsletter Editor)
NEWS/ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Long time readers of this publication have probably realized that once you subscribe to the PPNL (or receive it by becoming a member), you will continue to receive it whether or not you keep up with your membership or subscription.

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Don’t be surprised if you find an appeal for a year-end contribution to The Poetry Project in your inbox or your mailbox. By being subscribers, readers, writers and attendees, you’ve made it clear to us that you value what we do. Keep the love coming by considering a fully tax-deductible year-end contribution in whatever amount is significant to you. Your gift will help the Project to sustain its legacy and build opportunities for the future. Given the possibility that you are too eager to wait for our appeal letter, you can make your contribution now by visiting poetryproject.org/get-involved/donate-now. Thank you!

THE NEW WEDNESDAY NIGHT COORDINATOR...

is Ariel Goldberg! Goldberg’s publications include Picture Cameras (NoNo Press, 2010), The Photographer without a Camera (Trafalger Press, 2011), and The Estrangement Principle. Selections of which appear in Aufgabe 11. Goldberg is the recipient of a Franklin Furnace Fund grant for The Photographer, a series of slide shows in 2013. Goldberg will be hosting the series starting in January, through the end of the season.

CONTEST! WIN! WIN! YAY

Traditionally, the last poem of The Poetry Project’s New Year’s Day Marathon Benefit Reading is read by our Director, Stacy Szymaszek. For the second year in a row, Stacy has decided to share her good fortune. We are excited to announce the Project’s “Win the Director’s Lucky Reading Spot Contest”!

The rules: Send us your poem. If we believe it is short enough to be read in two minutes, it will be entered into the contest. The winner will be selected based on any number of yet-to-be-determined factors, but most likely it will involve a lot of passion, partisanship and bickering. Don’t you want to be a part of that? Enter now!!

- Email submissions (only) to programcommittee@poetryproject.org by DECEMBER 9th.
- The winner will be announced on our blog and via our eblast before the event.
- Anyone may enter our contest, provided the winner be in New York City for New Year’s Day and can stay until it’s over.

CONTRIBUTORS

JIM BEHRLE lives in Jersey City, and The Comeback is due out from O’Clock Press.

AMARANTH BORSUK is the author of Hardiwork (Slope Editions, 2012), and, together with programmer Brad Bouse, of Between Page and Screen (Siglio Press, 2012), a book of augmented-reality poems. Her collaboration with Kate Durbin and Ian Hatcher, Abra, recently received an Expanded Artists’ Books grant from the Center for Book and Paper Arts in Chicago and will be issued as an artist’s book and iPAD app in 2014. A collaboration with Andy Fitch, As We Know, was recently selected by Julie Carr for the Subito Prize and will be published next year. Amaranth is an Assistant Professor in Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington, Bothell, where she also teaches in the MFA in Creative Writing and Poetics.

ANDREW DURBIN is the author of Mature Themes (Nightboat Books, 2015) and several chapbooks, including Believers (Poor Claudia, 2013), and pumpsugs in (Insert Blanc Press, 2014). With Ben Fama, he edits Wonder, an open-source publishing and events platform for innovative writing, performance, and new media art. He lives in New York.

LAURA HENRIKSEN’s work has appeared in Peaches and Bats, Lungfull!, and Big Bell. She lives in Brooklyn.

LYSTYRE JULIAN is making a documentary about Anne Waldman and the “Outrider” poetry lineage. She lives in close proximity to Waldman by coincidence and holds an M.F.A. Writing from Bard College.

KAREN LEPRI is the author of Incidents of Scattering (Noemi, 2013) and the chapbook Fig. I (Horse Less Press, 2012). Lepri received the 2012 Noemi Poetry Prize. Her poetry, prose, and translation have appeared in 1913, 6x6, Boston Review, Chicago Review, Conjunctions, Lana Turner, Mandorla, and elsewhere. She teaches writing at Queens College.

MATT LONGABUCCO curates the Friday Night Series at the Poetry Project.

BERNADETTE MAYER has been a key figure on the New York poetry scene for decades. She is the author of more than two dozen volumes of poetry. Recently published by New Directions is The Helens of Troy, NY. She lives in Upstate New York.

BEN MIROV is the author of Hider Roser (Octopus Books, 2012), and Ghost Machine (Caketrain, 2010) which was selected for publication by Michael Burkard, and chosen as one of the best books of poetry in 2010 for Believer Magazine’s Reader Survey. He is also the author of the chapbooks My Hologram Chamber is Surrounded by Miles of Snow (YE-SYES, 2011), Vortexes (SUPERMACHINE, 2011), I is to Vorticism (New Michigan Press, 2010), and Collected Ghost (H_NGM_N, 2010). He is a founding editor of PEN America’s Poetry Series, and an editor at large for LIT Magazine. He grew up in Northern California and lives in Oakland.

JEFF NAGY synonyms for parkway and luxury trunk — call at 1088 Carroll st. apt. 2 in Brooklyn, NY or by appointment.


LISA ROBERTSON lives with her dog in La Malgaiche, France, population 4. During her time in this place she has published Revolution, A Reader, an annotated anthology made in collaboration with Matthew Stadler, and Nilling, a collection of essays.

BIANCA STONE is a poet and visual artist. Her book of poetry “Someone Else’s Wedding Vows” is forthcoming from Tin House/Octopus Books.

CHRIS TYSCH is the author of several collections of poetry and drama. Her latest publications are Molloy: The Flip Side (BlazeVox, 2012) and Our Lady of the Flowers, Echoic (Les Figures, 2013). She is on the creative writing faculty at Wayne State University. Her play, Night Scales, A Fable for Klara K was produced at the Studio Theatre in Detroit under the direction of Aku Kadogo in 2010. She holds fellowships from The National Endowment for the Arts and the Kresge Foundation.

KEN L. WALKER is a copywriter paying off a large amount of debt while living in Brooklyn. His work has been published in Atlas Review, Bright Pink Mosquito, Seattle Review, Washington Square, Likewise Folio, The Bakery, Sink Review and the anthology Oil & Water, published by Typecast. Diz Press is releasing his chapbook Twenty Glasses of Water this month, and he continues to curate the conversation project, Cosmot.
In a few minutes, I’m meeting Jacques at the Café Parisien (on the lovely Place Rhin et Danube, near the Buttes Chaumont Gardens). No doubt, we’ll both cringe at the absurd tautology of the name, though neither of us could remotely claim to be a bona fide Parisian — what with his Sephardic beginnings in Algiers, what with my mother’s dark green passport haunted by double black lines spelling APATRIDE (stateless), an event that drags with it the blue archive, the one stored in the chest, both grave and everlasting ark. “Stay with me, Jahveh had said to Moses, send them to their tents” (Archive Fever 23).

As in any expulsion, exile, and incarceration, between Christmas and New Year, he remains suspended before the barred door. We are no longer at the Ruzyně prison. “The heart — have you found the heart?” (Glas 111)

Instead, we walk along the narrow streets of Prague’s ghetto, paved in the immemorial knowledge of the way. Le chemin du calvaire. No high heels here. That is to say a walk of walls, stones and fosses. This clacking on the ground, we understand as if in a dream, comes from afar. The memory of Jewish tombs piled high, one on top of the other, laid upright in this mad vertical rush hour, forever (en)graved in time, a stone, ineffaceable mark that never ceases to blacken.

It is 3:00 in the afternoon. Dr. Franz K. returns from his office by way of the Charles Bridge. Will there be enough daylight for him? “... like the clapper of a truth that rings awry [cloche]” (Glas 227).

Time is near. Will I know the password (wish I was still smoking), drawing the tongue exactly so as to mouth his initials in smoke rings, up in the air, toward a point where light goes, reshaping itself, letting go of the pattern, the trace, the inscription, the very writing which leaves a mark right here on the wooden bistro table. I’m definitely thinking of throwing the cl, the gr, the gl— those tormented garlands of his — under the bus. Feu la Cendre. Ashes, one more time, verify there was something in the passage. “Let that fall (ça tombe) in ruins” (Glas 201).

Never mind. He’s here now. The white shock of hair, the wide boulevard of a forehead, the smiling mouth. Irresistible, the very thing that distinguishes him from B, F, L, D, and G, the others I sleep with alternately, though truth be told, I haven’t gone near L nor F in ages. Does this change anything in the book of ghosts? Jacques empties his sugar stick. I try hard not to stare — step aside, miser, I admonish myself while simultaneously hoarding a clip in that rather inept documentary by one of his former students: Jacques in his kitchen eating aubergines. The intimacy of that scene tells me. Crushing sign, if one was still needed, of the hopeless philogroupie that I am.

Right off the bat, trail of shame, I confess that in Glas, I only read the Genet column. What is proper, clean in French, he says, or appears to be, must be depropriated itself. The question here is not to install an originary founding matrix, a proper mother, “the global mother” (Glas 168), he adds, but to recognize that in the event and practice of writing, there is always already — here’s the deconstructive tag that has become a second skin — a part, a morsel, bread and wine, of mother in father; of writing in speech; of fictions in truths. “The text is what makes a hole in the pocket, harpoons it beforehand, regards it; but also sees it escape the text” (Glas 170).

I show him my pink highlighted sentences on page 170. He backtracks the citation by heart in a voice both tender and tutorial:

Even if we could reconstitute, morsel by morsel, a proper name’s emblem or signature, that would only be to disengage, as from a tomb someone buried alive, just what neither Genet nor I would ever have succeeded in signing, in reattaching to the lines of a paraph, and what talks (because) of this. (Glas 170)
Having left the café, step by step we now mount the steep Rue Compan at the bottom of the 19ème. I'll spare you the insane chain of puns, semantic shifts and phonic backbends we indulge in this chance meeting that cries out to be seized by its impossibly rich letters, we grab like hair everywhere or fibers in a dress we stroke before pulling by the handful. “That street is lucky,” Jacques says. “It has the power economically to condense, while unwinding their web, the question of semantic difference and seminal drift” (“Avoir l’oreille de la philosophie” 309). That “panse” (as in fat gut) and “pense” (as in think) share a pair of wings has us in stitches. Glou glou… we laugh like madmen, think of one into the other” (“Avoir l’oreille de la philosophie”) 309. That street is lucky, it has the power economically to condense, while unwinding their web, the question of semantic difference and seminal drift” (“Avoir l’oreille de la philosophie” 309). That “panse” (as in fat gut) and “pense” (as in think) share a pair of wings has us in stitches. Glou glou… we laugh like madmen, thinking of yet another way of tearing poor Compan's hymen, folded, reversed and restitched every which way; it is now a glove turned inside out, more of a sieve really, a kind of basin or pot without borders.

“This game is dangerous. I’m sure we’ve left traces…” (Glas 56), Jacques says after a while, nearly inaudible under the general traffic where Rue Compan merges with the noisy Rue Mouzaïa. But we already knew that deconstruction, a supreme game of infinite regression, is best practiced in the crossing rather than at the arrival gate.

As we’re coming in view of Villa Paul Verlaine, my place, I tell him, with a sad smile that he is not alone, that the others will be joining us for dinner later on at Les Folies on Rue de Belleville. “Sometimes I wish,” he responds, “that all remain illegible to them — and to you too” (La Carte Postale 221; my transl.) Not to worry, I laugh to myself. Threading his arm through mine, he continues:

I am like the one who, coming back from a long trip, out of everything: the world, the end of the earth, men and their languages, triess, after the fact, to keep a journal, with the forgotten, fragmentary and rudimentary instruments of a language…

(Jacques Derrida 159; my transl.)

I squeeze his hand recomposing my attraction, in advance mourning our inevitable separation. Jacques cuts in: “tries, to explain it with pebbles, little pieces of wood, with gestures of a deaf-mute from before a Deaf Mute school, a blind groping from before Braille…” (Jacques Derrida 159; my transl.) It is precisely that spectral, otherworldly and blind groping from before Braille…” (Jacques Derrida 159; my transl.)

... the precise structure of thatretch that will have been “what leads me by the nose to write” (“Ja, ou le faux bond”), the precise structure of that embrace. 

Footnotes
1 Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari
2 The most normal step must hold in itself a disequilibrium in order to go forth, in order to be followed by another… But it must work poorly for it to work; if it needs to work, it needs to work poorly. It limps well, doesn’t it? (my transl.)

Works Cited


Author’s Note
An earlier draft appeared online in Spine Road 3.
Inscription for the Tomb of the Painter Henri Rousseau Customs Inspector

Dear Rousseau you hear us
Hello
From Delaunay his wife Mister Queval and me
Let our luggage go duty-free through heaven’s gate
We’ll bring you brushes colors and canvas
So your holy leisure in the real light
You can devote it to painting
The way you did my portrait
The face of the stars

Translator’s Note:
Henri Rousseau did two paintings of Apollinaire, one of which was The Muse Inspiring the Poet (1909), which shows him alongside the artist Marie Laurencin, who was Apollinaire’s lover at the time. Rousseau received the nickname “The Customs Inspector” from Alfred Jarry, but in fact was, until his retirement in 1885, a clerk in the Paris city bureaucracy responsible for setting and collecting taxes on certain goods that entered the city.

Michel Decaudin, in his note on this poem in the Pléiade edition of Apollinaire’s Oeuvres Poétiques (p. 1146), quotes from an article that Apollinaire published in Les Soirées de Paris in January of 1914: “In 1911, thanks to Robert Delaunay and to the Douanier’s landlord, we acquired a thirty-year concession and placed a tombstone with a medallion representing the departed, who lay not far from his friend Alfred Jarry. Finally in 1913 the sculptor Brancusi and the painter Ortiz de Zarate carved this epitaph on the tombstone, where I had written it in pencil.”

Delaunay his wife: The artists Robert (1885-1941) and Sonia (1885-1979) Delaunay.

Mr. Queval: Rousseau’s landlord.

Editor’s note:
Though this poem exists in an expanded version, first published posthumously in Poèmes à la marraine (Paris, 1948), the text above is a representation of the actual epitaph Brancusi enscribed into Rousseau’s grave marker.
The Traveler

to Fernand Fleuret

Open this door where I knock weeping

Life is as variable as Euripos

You were watching a cloud bank come down
With the orphan steamship toward future fevers
And all those regrets all that repenting
Do you remember

Bent fish waves supermarine flowers
One night it was the sea
And the rivers spread out into it

I remember it I still remember it

I stopped at a sad inn one night
Not far from Luxembourg
At the far end of the room a Christ was taking flight
Someone had a ferret
Another a hedgehog
There was a card game
And you you had forgotten me

Do you remember the long orphanage of train stations
We went through towns that kept turning all day
And at night vomited the sun of the days
O sailors O somber women and you my companions
Remember

Two sailors who had always been together
Two sailors who had never spoken to each other
One while dying fell on his side the younger

O you dear companions
Electric bells of the stations women singing as they harvest
A butcher's truck regiment of numberless streets
Cavalry of bridges nights livid with alcohol
The towns that I saw were living like madwomen

Do you remember the outskirts and the plaintive flock of countrysides
The cypresses projected their shadows in the moonlight
At summer’s end that night
A languishing and endlessly fussy bird
And the eternal sound of a wide and somber river are what I heard

But while all the glances made a motion
Of eyes that were dying and rolling toward the ocean
The banks were deserted grassy quiet
And across the river the mountain was shining bright

So with no sound no living thing in sight
Some lively shadows passed across the mountainside
In profile or suddenly turning their hazy faces
And holding in front the shadows of their lances

The shadows against the perpendicular wall
Grew large or sometimes suddenly small
And the bearded shadows were crying like humans
While sliding step by step along the bright mountain

So whom do you recognize in these old photos
Do you remember the day when a bee dropped into the fire
It was and you do remember at the end of summer

Two sailors who had never been apart
The older wore an iron chain around his neck
The younger one had a braid of golden hair

Open this door where I knock weeping

Life is as variable as Euripos

Translator’s note:
Fernand Fleuret (1884–1945): Poet, writer, and friend of Apollinaire. He, Apollinaire, and Louis Perceau secretly compiled and then published, in 1913, a 415-page annotated bibliography of all the “forbidden” books in the section of the French National Library known as “Hell.” The initial publication of “The Traveler” (September of 1912) bore no dedication.

Euripos: A strait between Boetia and Euboea where the water flows in one direction, then the opposite. Aristotle is said to have drowned there.

Supermarine: Apollinaire coined the word surmarine.
Before the Movies

And so tonight
We'll go out

Artists so who are they
Now they don’t study the Fine Arts
Now they don’t bother with Art
The art of poetry or even music
The Artists are actors and actresses

If we were Artists
We wouldn’t say movie
We’d say film

And if we were provincial old professors
We wouldn’t say movie or film
We’d say motion picture

Also hey you have to have taste

Translator’s Note:
The manuscript version of this poem was written on the back of a bulletin from Agence Radio and dated March 20, 1917, and published in Nord-Sud, issue number 2, dated April 15 of the same year. Nord-Sud was edited by the young poet Pierre Reverdy. Despite the light attitude in this poem, Apollinaire felt that the cinema would provide amazing opportunities for a new kind of art, that, for example, future epic poems would be created in the form of movies. He wrote that “the phonograph and the cinematograph have for me an unparalleled attraction. They satisfy all at once my love of science, my passion for letters, and my artistic taste,” an assertion borne out by his applauding like an enraptured child as he watched the films of the Fantômas series. He even wrote several film scenarios. Apollinaire’s colleagues Ricciotto Canudo and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti were major theoreticians of the future of cinema.
You make me feel so nineties
Lucy Ives
Review by Andrew Durbin

Nineties
Lucy Ives
Review by Andrew Durbin

You make me feel so nineties
Lucy Ives’ Nineties is spare, though its eponymous U.S. decade certainly wasn’t. Lucy, the poet, novelist, and editor of Triple Canopy, reduces the big world of Anita Hill, Columbine, the Concorde, Club Med, Nirvana, the Madonna of Sex, Nickelodeon, and the endless, slimed particulars that defined this American twilight to short, declarative sentences that scarcely reference the pop culture of the moment until finally, mid-novel, the world explodes into two and a half pages of its brand names: “… Boyz II Men, DKNY Intimates, Flea, Henley T, recumbent bikes, bitches, Biosphere 2, Bruce Weber, Absolute, David Caruso, Oklahoma City, Exit in Guyville.” It’s the credit-driven world between the end of the Cold War and the U.S.S. Cole, marked by the high-water events of the Republican Revolution and Monica Lewinski. This list comes as a release to the (elegant) monotone of Nineties, a novel in which time, branded into consciousness, “but there was much research going on in the 19th century, witness the comments of Edgar Allen Poe in marginalia, and of William James.

As with hallucinations, especially auditory ones, people don’t always want to say they have them for fear of being labeled a lunatic. I have a friend who saw bright red and blue dots when he was falling asleep and thought he was from outer space. The best way I’ve found to record hypnagogic visions is by tape recorder or via a scribe. Even this will take some getting used to. As with dreams though, nobody has to record this stuff unless you want to. You can just enjoy the show!

The predominant free human activities are, obviously, sex and the weather. Others are your personal history, variations in memory, dreams, library books, license plates, signs, plants, garbage on the road, the night sky, and celestial events. Also synesthesia and hypnopompic imagery.

Synesthesia is the mixing up of the senses that some people experience, like octagons coming out of your mouth when you speak. The most common form is perceiving letters of the alphabet as colors. Hypnopompic imagery is what you see between sleeping and waking up. It’s rarer and scarier than hypnagogic visions. It seems like the images won’t go away, that they are really there. I’ve had only two hypnopompic images: seeing myself at different ages and seeing the walls covered with letters and realizing I was inside Hannah Weiner’s head. I thought if I left the room and the letters didn’t go away, I was in trouble. They didn’t but then they did.

We thank Michael Ruby for venturing to explore this territory and enlarging the number of things we can write about. One of his best constraints is to refer to the visual field, eyes closed, as the world. Let’s go see what’s happening in that white, maroon, red, yellow, and green world, but be careful! The sun might be too bright to continue.

Next will be a book, I hope, about eyes closed in the sun vs. eyes closed in darkness.

Further reading:
The World of the Imagination, Eva Brann
The Day of St. Anthony’s Fire, John Fuller
Hypnagogia, Dr. Andreas Mavromatis
Hallucinations, Oliver Sacks

Close Your Eyes
Michael Ruby
Dusie, 2013
Review by Bernadette Mayer

Michael Ruby has done us a great service. He’s put into words some of his hypnagogic visions so we can see and read them. These are the images we see behind closed eyes while falling asleep — unexplainable dots and designs, movements, things that look like something, it’s entertainment. As writers, hypnopompic imagery is something from our experience to make use of. They’re sort of like hallucinations but much more ordinary and decorative, sort of like the brain “idling” as Oliver Sacks says in his book Hallucinations.

They’re surprisingly difficult to describe in words, and they seem to defy any connection with meaning, even more so than dreams. One’s tempted to say there’s no word for that. The last time hypnagogic imagery was explored may have been in the 1960s in relation to “altered states of consciousness,” but there was much more going on in the 19th century.
Advice From 1 Disciple of Marx to 1 Heidegger Fanatic  
Mario Santiago Papasquiaro  
Wave Books, 2013  
Review by Matt Longabucco

I haven’t been able to stop thinking about Mario Santiago since I got my copy of his long poem, Advice From 1 Disciple of Marx to 1 Heidegger Fanatic, in a just-published translation by Cole Heinowitz and Alexis Graman. Or, I thought about him all the time before, but now I have a picture of him on my computer desktop — badly pixelated because the file is so small — looking relatively young and clean-cut, even a bit stiff in his clean brown leather jacket and dapper shoulder bag. I can’t bring myself to expand the other one I always see on Google Images, where he’s older and practically foaming at the mouth in the midst of a reading or a rant (and then, in the book: “foam runs from the mouth of the 1 who speaks wonders”). Am I just succumbing to the mythology of the infrarealist’s later years, in which he wrote on in obscurity and rebellion, walking the streets of Mexico City in a visionary fever at the expense of body and, when a car struck him, of life? But for this group of poets the mythology is really about a political commitment inseparable from the work, which is why Santiago’s friend and champion Roberto Bolaño is able to convincingly collapse the brutality of exile and the heroism of the poet (by the same token, sometimes the poets in his novels are utterly venal, the evilest of the evil). The hallucinations that offer an alternative to our reality — a reality choked by power and misery — are risky to come by and not necessarily reserved for the upright.

The poem comprising the book is dedicated to Santiago’s “comrades” — Bolaño and Kyra Galván — but it’s also “FOR CLAUDIA KERIK & THE GOOD FORTUNE OF HAVING KNOWN HER.” If Santiago and Claudia lived anything like their portrayal in The Savage Detectives (in which Santiago features as visceralist Ulises Lima), that dedication is an act of renunciation that’s either steely or enlightened or both. If she made him suffer, and likely he her, he has found a formulation that somehow allows for that suffering even as it transforms it into “good fortune.” I mean, who forgives anyone? Is it wrong to focus on the wording of the dedication as evidence of perhaps arduous self-making — as an integral part of the poem? Not to my mind — this text is, after all, a self-proclaimed piece of “advice” to “Becoming from Economy,” to the philosophy of right dying from the philosophy of how it’ll all come out even in the end. What does Marx have to say to Heidegger? I’ll tell you in a second.

In the first lines, we catch the scent of High Modernism: “The world gives you itself in fragments/ in splinters.” But Santiago’s wasteland is immediate and anything but exhausted, though it’s often grim — his Mexico City is oppressed and broken. Still, he doesn’t long for synthesis; he refuses to traffic in that lie. Instead, the fragments come, holy and staggeringly numinous:

in 1 melancholy face you glimpse 1 brushstroke by Dürer  
in someone happy the grimace of 1 amateur clown  
in 1 tree: the trembling of birds  
sucking from its crook  
in 1 flaming summer you catch bits of the universe licking its face  
the moment 1 indescribable girl rips her Oaxacan blouse  
just at the crest of sweat from her armpits  
& beyond the rind is the pulp/ & like 1 strange gift of the eye the lash  
(continued on pg. 28)

Rouge  
Kimberly Lyons  
Instance Press, 2012  
Review by Laura Henriksen

People will tell you how important it is to be really present, to breathe really deeply of sensory stimuli, to look out your window and really see your view. And those people are right, but at least when I’ve been given that advice, there’s always something flat about it, as if a situation to be experienced is this static thing awaiting your attention.

Kim Lyons’s poems know better, that there is “between this afternoon and tonight, a pale blank book/ that washes out the word’s ink,” such that even when you’re in the middle of experiencing details of a setting or a feeling, everything, the words and the story, could change because you’re never really in a closed room.

It might snow when you least expect it as letters are crystallized formations long delayed and then you stand with your son at the window on Sunday and marvel at anything that flakes and green leaves are commingling that any letter gets through to anyone the mail being what it is.

(from “Froth”)

The ambiguity of any set of circumstances is not only part of the content that Kim deals with but also one of the devices she uses to create these poems. The way, in the above excerpt from “Froth,” initially the word letters calls to mind a pen on paper, a very fluid curative, the line in question becoming a conversation about the difficulty of conveying anything linguistically then the word reappears a few lines later, it has transformed into a letter in a mailbox, and you think that’s what she meant all along, but you aren’t really sure. It’s as open-ended as the scene it describes. These poems are personal and interior and contemplative, but not like a private driveway to one person’s impermeable mansion of experience. As any moment is open to sudden shifts and transformations, the personal moments that Kim describes — writing at a café, standing in the kitchen, thinking about weather — open up to the shift that is the reader’s entrance. She writes in “In February,” “I sit here kind of suspended/ as the morning pools out/ as though attention is an array/ of sticks and I’ve used every one up,” and in the specificity of that image of an early morning in the dead of winter, there is this feeling of almost overwhelming and diverse potential, so much so that the reader experiences not the same feeling of suspension as the speaker but an entirely unique and personal sensation of suspension.

Reading these poems is like coming to stand at a mirror and a painting at once. And as with any mirror, the poems receive you, and you find more there than you had expected or meant to bring, images you had forgotten from earlier that day or years before.

(continued on pg. 28)
Astroturf

Joe Luna

Hi Zero Publications (UK), 2013
Review by Jeff Nagy

Sometimes (“sometimes and always?”) writing is like beating a dead horse with a rubber hose until it confesses. Or until, more likely, the gentle reader’s sense of pity is sufficiently roused, and s/he slumps onto the poor defunct beast. Upon which the writer marvels at a supposed ability to relate to an audience, the trick of this coercive empathy being that the writer has — unobserved, if a little bit good, or lucky! — taken the place of the horse, prop ping the rubber hose upright in its bridle as if to strike again. A team of nano-elves in Paris Review/PGA co-branded sun visors immediately sets to work turning the now superfluous horse to glue for use in setting reader and author like two spooning waves in a perm. They save the hose: recycling is mandatory now in New York City.

Rubber hose poetics has a long and storied history, the affective infrastructure connecting otherwise distant aesthetic polarities: the sewer running the gamut from Conceptual to Quiet, from the most conservative to the most committed, where the raised flail so often triggers the wanted blank-eyed and prig-bored recorded message like dialing the answering machine of the superego. “Of course... Of course we must... We must be feminist in this way. Of course we must critique capital like that.” Dear reader, the poem has prepared for you a hangover spirit of flattened resentment turned inward, turned outward into a coercive bathos just as inverted as anything else that might look less à la mode. Personality kohl: cute — but it’s a little trashy and doesn’t wear.

This isn’t that. And as so much critical language was and is developed to explain how this is that, once it isn’t it becomes slippery to explain what this is and how it is so. But we’re not ones to shy away from wet work in the terrain vague between encampments.

The poems in Joe Luna’s Astroturf are more Protean than the faux-catholic engineered empathic rictus the collection’s title indicates. They are quick-turning and liquid, refusing a comfortable top-down coherence in favor of sequences of brilliant flashes, like the dolphin that darts throughout them and whose origami-constellation schematic graces the cover: fold your own rescue.

Like that, more variously flexible, bending the knees where they elsewhere jerk: “I come home from the protest,/ give myself a blowjob,” as it’s put in “Having Coke With You,” finding the commitment in narcissism and the narcissism in commitment and refusing both when that Venn diagram starts to blur to circle, when “the sky is a thousand anecdotes about me, no one knows what/ narcissism really is, stuck outside the embassy in flames.” The poem ends with its pronoun stuck inside-out an ambiguous aporia: “I can feel anything/ else apart from life now safe in the style of a person.” Is it “life now safe” one can feel anything but? or bare “life?” or “life now safe in the style of a person?” Are we naked or styled, feeling anything or totally anesthetic? How can we read or write or even simply feel elsewhere, in the open water with the keel nosing down on the old Adornian life-boat?

(continued on pg. 28)

TwERK

LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs

Belladonna, 2013
Review by Amaranth Borsuk

The notes to LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs’ TwERK are prefaced with a description of their medium, telling us what these poems are made from, if not language itself:

rhinestones, acrylic on panel, knives, mirror, packing tape, fur, found medical illustration paper on mylar, rubber tires, wood, metal, plastic, porcelain, paper, latex paint, Lonely Planet phrase books...

This list is no mere joke, no tongue-in-cheek Magritte reference to the traffic between language and image. Diggs’ words on the page sparkle with rhinestones, cut like knives, coat themselves in animal pelts and hold it together with paint and packing tape. By turns janky and jacked-up, kitted-out and kicked-back, these texts are the heat where rubber hits the road. Aggressively polyglot, poems like “daggering kanji” spit knives of “Hawaiian, Cherokee (Tsá’lāgi’), English, Tagalog, Quechua, Japanese, and Maori.” Diggs’ range of reference is vast, and one of TwERK’s great pleasures is the possibility it affords of bridging, say, Oulipo and Négritude. “daggering kanji” hurls its series of glottal-stopped “k” words in a way that sounds to the ear like beatboxing and looks to the eye like a series of waves:

k’k’kazoo                kk’kk’kulolo
k’k’kahuna                kk’k’kabob
k’k’ku’ulala            k’k’ku’ulala
k’k’ku’ulala            k’k’ku’ulala
k’k’kali                kk’k’kulisap
k’k’kabuki              kk’kk’kumala
k’k’ku’ulala            k’k’ku’ulala
k’k’ku’ulala            k’k’ku’ulala

The insistent refrain of the Hawaiian “ku’ulala” suggests the wildness and eroticism of this text that simultaneously swallows and spits as the glottal hits the back of the throat and the velar flicks off the soft palate. These lines defamiliarize kazoo and kobab, placing them alongside words for things both delectable and dangerous, from the Hawaiian dessert kulolo to the Tagalog insect kulisap. Systematically looking up the words in the poem provides a patchwork of references that circle food, religion, the body, and the spirit, but the poem resists this approach, aiming as it does at the reader’s sensory apparatus, we are to hear and feel these words daggering at us, to feel them in the mouth and gut. Like the lipogrammatic poems of Christian Bök, to whom it is dedicated, this is as much a display of linguistic virtuosity as a bearer of meaning, an assemblage of rare phonemes into a beautifully faceted surface that twinkles as it twerks.

While Diggs’ performances make poems like this one seem effortless and musical, each line shimmering with a hi-hat of syllabic cymbals, the poems of TwERK are, in fact, work for the reader’s eye and ear, for which much of this lexicon will be new and unexpected, not least because of how often Diggs switches from one language to another. Such work is both pleasurable and difficult, and that juncture makes the book worth returning to, each poem legible at multiple levels.

In a recent presentation at the &Now Festival of Innovative Writing in Boulder, Diggs described her investment in a polyglot poetics that gives voice to the range of languages that populate both her Harlem community and her own psyche. TwERK is clearly sensitive to poetry’s tendency to “other” foreign tongues, italicizing (and ostracizing) them on the page. Diggs resists this orientalizing impulse, taking an inverse tactic in many poems, like “symphony para ko’ko’i” ends with its pronoun stuck inside-out an outside the embassy in flames.” The poem...
Gossamurmur
Anne Waldman
Penguin Poets, 2013
Review by Alystyre Julian

Anne Waldman’s latest long poem, Gossamurmur, is an activist’s allegory, a clarion call to the transformative power of poetry and the necessity of its archiving. Its opening to “phenomena soft, sheer, and gauzy,” explores Waldman’s central metaphor of poetry as gossamer in all its iteration, and prefaces Waldman’s own crux, the shape-shifting of identity and power between “Original Anne” and the “new Anne” — the latter a ruse of “the Deciders,” usurpers of identity, poetry, and the “delicacy of life forms,” those with no regard for the preservation of poetry and imagination, no regard for the archival. Waldman, armed with her “stylus,” “interviently” fights for the sake of language — an endangered species among others — towards a radical “po-ethos,” her own identity at stake. In a tale both literal and symbolic, Gossamurmur takes on the gauze/gaze of this allegorical identity as Waldman chronicles the fleeting fragility of life on the tundra, the fragility of poetry and imagination even as recorded on tape and digitized, the fragility of art in our culture as mediated by celebrity and “mediacrats,” and the fragility of endangered species, all vulnerable to what she dubs as “New Weathers.” Poetry, as a “film of cobwebs floating in air,” is juxtaposed with the interstice of value and “metabolism”:

“What are we worth? I mused. What is our exchange value on this vast meddling market?”

In an analogy with a twist on Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, where those chained to the wall of the cave can only ascribe names to shadows, Waldman’s Tundra refugee serves to delimit the Deciders’ view by offering Original Anne a way to wilder inspirations. Waldman spins a web from the Tundra into the “multiverse” as far out as Jupiter’s gossamer rings. Urgent, witty, and wise, this is a work to ponder for the crafted way these meditations intertwine, for its galactic range of poetic device and delight in such phenomena as “gossamer-wing’d butterflies.” The poem is a hybrid of forms — lyric, epic, allegorical — and as in her lovís trilogy, works in the mode of documentary poetics. Waldman’s Archive is simultaneously “shelter” and “a consciousness” that “tells many stories,” containing such treasures as a small cassette from John Cage, “an inscripted postcard,” and “poetry you must never forget,” all perpetually at risk of being lost to fires, floods, and complacent ignorance. It’s out of this anxiety that Waldman offers archival alternatives in the Tundra as archive, the intangible oral archive, the Jemaa el-Fna medina, and a seed-veil sanctuary in Norway, approaches to her relentless query: What is the archive of the future? And thus, the imperative: “Spool the tape. Rewind. Digitize. Listen. Good a thousand years?”

Sourcing Derrida’s Archive Fever, Waldman takes on the role of “Archon” and reveals what is at stake in the “Heart of Archive”:

The Archive of the multiple voices was endangered, years in the making, to preserve breath and intellect, imagination’s other place, as psychic inscription and to let humans of the future know some of us were not just killing one another.

Waldman’s Archive is simultaneously “shelter” and “a consciousness” that “tells many stories,” containing such treasures as a small cassette from John Cage, “an inscripted postcard,” and “poetry you must never forget,” all perpetually at risk of being lost to fires, floods, and complacent ignorance. It’s out of this anxiety that Waldman offers archival alternatives in the Tundra as archive, the intangible oral archive, the Jemaa el-Fna medina, and a seed-veil sanctuary in Norway, approaches to her relentless query: What is the archive of the future? And thus, the imperative: “Spool the tape. Rewind. Digitize. Listen. Good a thousand years?”

Gossamurmur is a revelation of and a revolution against the threat of “cultural drought.” “Original Anne” weathers her turn as tundra refugee, guided by “systirly winds,” and emerges with the courage to drive “stakes through the hearts of Imposters.” Guardian Waldman “traverses the braided river” to deliver her talismanic transmission: “look to the little ones.”

With her resilient, cinematic, and expansive poem, Waldman takes us on a sustained adventure with the woven magic of “living threads.” Poetry is like gossamer: fragile, transient. And it murmurs its fleeting sound into the void.

the world is full of Deciders
I’ve always felt and say it such again

the world has to change for true identity
(love) to burn
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MON 2/12
OPEN READING
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WED 12/4
NATALIE DIAZ & DIANE WAKOSKI
Natalie Diaz grew up in the Fort Mojave Indian Village in Needles, California. She has been awarded the Bread Loaf 2012 Louis Untermeyer Scholarship in Poetry, the 2012 Native Arts and Cultures Foundation Literature Fellowship, a 2012 Lannan Residency and the 2012 Lannan Literary Fellowship. Her first book, When My Brother was an Aztec, was published by Copper Canyon Press.

Diane Wakoski, who was born in Southern California and educated at UC, Berkeley, made her home and began her poetry career in New York City from 1960-1973. The most recent of her more than 20 collections of poetry are The Diamond Dog (Anhinga Press, 2010) and a new collection, Bay of Angels, (Anhinga Press, 2013).

FRI 12/6 10PM
KATY BOHINC & CAMILO ROLDÁN
Katy Bohinc co-edits COYDUP, a poetry pamphlet dedicated to hand-to-hand distribution at and around Occupy events with Meg Ronan. Summer BF press will soon publish selections of Dear Alain, love letters of a poet to a philosopher, as read at the East Bay Poetry Summit.

Camilo Roldán co-curates the Triptych Reading Series, is editor-in-chief for DIEZ and is the author of a chapbook, Amilkar U., Nadaísta in Translation (These Signals Press, 2011). His writing has appeared in various journals, including SET, Sun’s Skeleton, PANK, and Mandorla.

MON 12/9
STEVEN ALVAREZ & GUILLERMO FILICE CASTRO
Steven Alvarez is an Assistant Professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies at the University of Kentucky. He is the author of The Pocho Codex (2011) and The Xicano Genome (2012), both published by Editorial Paroxismo.

Guillermo Filice Castro is the recipient of a 2013 Emerge-Surface-Be fellowship and the author of the chapbooks, Cry Me a Lorca (Seven Kitchen Press, 2010) and Toy Storm (Big Fat Press, 1997.) His poems appear in Assaracus, Barrow Street, The Brooklyn Rail, Court Green, The Beliveau Literary Review, Ducts.org, la fovea, Quarterly West, and many more.

WED 12/11
TROUBLING THE LINE: TRANS AND GENDERQUEER POETRY AND POETICS
Join us for an evening of poems and poetry by writers from Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics, edited by TC Tolbert and Tim Trace Peterson. Featuring: Samuel Ace, Ching-in Chen, CAConrad, Joy Ladin, Dawn Lundy Martin, Tim Trace Peterson, Jordan Rice, Trish Salah, TC Tolbert, Zoe Tuck, Emerson Whitney, and surprise guests. Published in Spring 2013 by Nightboat Books, Troubling the Line is the first-ever anthology of poetry by trans and genderqueer writers.

MON 12/16
POEMS ABOUT FUCKING, GUEST CURATED BY ROSS GAY
All sex poems, all night. Featuring Ross Gay, Erica Doyle, Jenny Zhang, Kendra Decolo, Patrick Rosal, Alex Dimitrov, and others...

WED 12/18
LAURIE DUGGAN & JENNIFER FIRESTONE
Laurie Duggan has published some twenty books of poems together with Ghost Nation, a work about imagined space. His most recent volumes include Allotments [1-29] (Fewer & Further, 2011), The Pursuit of Happiness (Shearsman, 2012), Leaving Here (Light-Trap Press, 2012), and The Collected Blue Hills (Puncher & Wattman, 2012).

Jennifer Firestone is the author of Flashes (Shearsman Books), Holiday (Shearsman Books), Waves (Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs), from Flashes and Snapshot (Sona Books), and Fanimaly (Dusie Kollektiv). She is the co-editor of Letters To Poets: Conversations about Poetics, Politics and Community (Saturnalia Books).

FRI 12/20 10PM
LUCY IVES & MASHA TUPITSYN
Lucy Ives is the author of two books of poetry, Orange Roses (Ahsahta, 2013) and Anamnesis (Slope, 2009), and a brief novel, Nineties (Tea Party Republicans, 2013). A deputy editor at Triple Canopy, she lives in New York.

Masha Tupitsyn is the author of Love Dog (Penny-Anse Editions, 2013), LA CONIA: 1,200 Tweets on Film (Zero Books, 2011), Beauty Talk & Monsters, a collection of film-based stories (Semiotext(e) Press, 2007), and co-editor of the anthology Life As We Show It: Writing on Film (City Lights, 2009).

WED 1/1
THE 40TH ANNUAL NEW YEAR’S DAY MARATHON BENEFIT READING
Christine Elmo, Christina Strong, Cecilia Corrigan, Carolee Schneemann, Carol Mirakove, Camille Rankine, CA Conrad, Brett Price, Brendan Lorber, Brenda Coutsas, Bob Rosenthal, Bob Holman, Bob Hershon, Bill Kushner, Betsy Fagin, Beth Gill, Ben Gocker, Becca Klaver, Basil King, Ariel Goldberg, Anne Waldman, Anne Tardos, Andrew Boston, Alex Dimitrov, and others TBA.

**MON 1/6**

JESS BARBAGALLO & MOYRA DAVEY

Jess Barbagallo is a playwright and actor, operating from a poetic position. Plays include: Grey-Eyed Dogs (Dixon Place), Jess and Joss Are Doing Well, I’ll Meet You in Tijuana (Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab), Saturn Nights (Incubator Arts Project), Men’s Creative Writing Group (Invisible Dog Playwriting Resident) and Great Romance (BAX Artist-At-Large).

Moyra Davey has produced three narrative videos: Les Goddesses, 2011 (61:00), My Necropolis, 2009 (32:17) and Fifty Minutes, 2006 (50:00). She is the author of Long Life Cool White (Harvard/Yale, 2008) and The Problem of Reading (Documents Books, 2003), and the editor of Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood (Seven Stories Press, 2001).

**MON 1/7**

JEFF T. JOHNSON & SHIV KOTECHA


Shiv Kotecha’s writing has been published by TROLL THREAD, Gauss-PDF, P-Queue, and PELT. He is a PhD candidate at NYU and a co-curator of the Segue Reading Series.

**WED 1/8**

JENNY BOULLY & C.S. GISCOMBE

Jenny Boulli is the author of five books, most recently of the mismatched tea cups, of the single-serving spoon: a book of failures (Coconut Books). Her other books include not merely because of the unknown that was stalking toward them (Tarpaulin Sky Press) and The Books of Beginnings and Endings (Sarabande Books).

C.S. Giscombe’s poetry books are Prairie Style, Gicombe Road, Here, etc.; his prose book is Into and Out of Dislocation. His recognitions include the 2010 Stephen Henderson Award, an American Book Award (for Prairie Style) and the Carl Sandburg Prize (for Gicombe Road). He teaches at the University of California, Berkeley.

**WED 1/9**

KHADIJAH QUEEN

Wayne Koestenbaum’s latest book of prose is My 1980s & Other Essays (FSG, 2013). Among his books of poetry are Blue Stranger with Mosaic Background and Best-Selling Jewish Porn Films, both published by Turtle Point Press.

Khadijah Queen is the author of two poetry collections: Conduit (Black Goat/Akashic 2008) and Black Peculiar, which won the 2010 Noemi Book Award for Poetry and was a finalist for the Switchback Books Gatewood Prize. The recipient of fellowships from Cave Canem, Squaw Valley Community of Writers, and the Norman Mailer Writers’ Colony, she is currently working on an illustrated mixed genre project.

**FRI 1/10 10PM**

JENA OSMAN & MAGED ZAHAR

Jena Osman’s books of poetry include Public Figures (Wesleyan University Press), The Network (Fence Books), An Essay in Asterisks (Roof Books), and The Character (Beacon Press). Her book Corporate Relations is forthcoming from Burning Deck Press.

Maged Zaher is the author of Thank You For The Window Office (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012), The Revolution Happened And You Didn’t Call Me (Tinfish Press, 2012), and Portrait Of The Poet As An Engineer (Pressed Wafer, 2009). His translations of contemporary Egyptian poetry have appeared in Jacket Magazine, Banipal, and Denver Quarterly.
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Sara Mumolo  Mortar
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“With wry feminist humor and not a little ambivalence, her poems document the psychic costs of an economy that conflates sex and capital, the female nude and the courtesan. ‘Rolling over onto backs, we’re conflict’s mascot,’ Mumolo bravely writes, ‘none of these anxieties are new.’ Dear wise and foolish virgins of late, late capitalism: this book is for you.”—Brian Teare

Paul Verlaine  Songs without Words
Translated by Donald Revell
French on Facing Pages  $17.95   96 pages   978-1-890650-87-2
This is the book in which, unabashedly, Paul Verlaine becomes himself and, in so doing, becomes the iconic poet of the French nineteenth century. A book of musical sequences, it seeks and finds exquisite purity of expression, best exemplified by “Il pleure dans mon coeur,” the most famous and most inimitable of all French lyric poems.

Martha Ronk  Transfer of Qualities
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Keith Waldrop  The Not Forever
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I WANT TO RECLAIM EVERY PART OF LIVING INCLUDING ILLNESS AND DEATH

an interview with Lisa Robertson

I had perhaps the first true reading experience in god-knows-how-long (if ever) when I read the opening essay to Lisa Robertson’s absolutely gorgeous book of essays — *Nilling* — on the overburdening, long 5-train from south Brooklyn to the mid-Bronx where I taught an adult education program that strongly regarded the importance of reading and transmogrifying personal ethics into social action. That trip lasted one hour and fifteen minutes every Saturday morning for an entire semester. So, what better thing to grapple with than the utter prosaic precision that Lisa Robertson consistently sharpens all while examining the erotics and liberation of the individual reading experience?

Via Gilles Deleuze (from *The Fold*), Robertson remarks that the act of reading (especially within what she terms “the codex”) is “folded time” and that she is submitting to ink. This act, she writes, crosses her “into a material reserve that permits a maximum of intuition, the ‘as if’ of a speculative thinking, which is outside of knowledge. Reading shows the wrongness of the habitual reification of ‘the social’ and ‘the personal’ in a binary system of values. It submits this binary to a ruinous foundering. And so, an erotics.” And, later, Robertson offers this: “I prefer to become foreign and unknowable to myself in accordance with reading’s audacity.”

Once that same semester, a picture of a friend and I surfaced on Twitter to which another friend commented rather wittingly (from Robertson’s great lyric book, *The Men*):

*Men, I’m sad I must die.*
*These are beautiful shores.*

There’s really no summing up a gloriously intimidating mind like Robertson’s. She’s a hip, strict writer and translator. She’s wonderfully fashionable and has constructed (from my outsider perspective) a purposefully driven, lovely life in the south of France by way of Canada. After a couple of phone calls, we wrote the following missives back and forth while she was traveling and I was teaching every day for CUNY and the aforementioned adult education program in the Bronx. I vigorously looked forward to her replies with incredible excitement and dynamism.

- Ken L. Walker, interviewer
Flourishing is more interesting and slightly unfamiliar (conceptually) to me. Although, I like that it’s positive psychology. But it also antithesizes despair, I believe. But, it is also wrapped up in well-being, and that concept is super scary to me in the sense that societal and cultural and familial pancake-machines want to flatten the seductive and almost primordial concepts of anger, sadness, melancholy — the darker emotions. We are left with happiness, health, etc. In the Benjamin sense, global production forces love depressive and languishing emotions (the anti-flourishing) because that overwhelming minority is worth billions. Thus, flourishing possesses a simultaneous simulacrum — capital-friendly, radically inclined.

LR: I don’t think that flourishing opposes melancholy, grief, rage, and so forth, which I agree are necessary affective states. If it has any opposite, it might be the flattening you refer to. Most people in the world now live in different versions of extreme restriction. An access to agency is what I’m talking about. Political agency, material agency, discursive agency. I don’t mean a fucked-up mirage of happiness as unlimited consumption. I mean the opportunity to experience living as having all dimensions. To feel the body as fully present, having a place within politics. To accept the body, its lumpy, needy, intense, aging, explosive, wayward, frictive alwaysness. Which can include illness also. I don’t want to confuse flourishing with consumption and profitability, which only really diminish corporality. Capital doesn’t want our bodies to flourish. It wants to define desire, circumscribe need, and oppress agency. It is capital that wants to anesthetize despair. To flourish would be to roar, to resist. I think that would be health — the most open recognition of the raw temporal contract. The occupy movement is doing that. The great resistance movements are doing that — feminist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist movements. I want to locate that resistance at the level of the cell. I think the immune system is the landscape, and, as such, a political economy. It’s that direct. I’m more and more into Ivan Illich. I want to reclaim every part of living including illness and death.

KW: Can we talk about the body’s “alwaysness”? Also, I read this piece by Illich called “Hospitality and Pain,” and it was amazing — that pain can be a melding of liberation and oppression, that hospitality can be radical, and not in a non-violent way. What intrigues you about Illich’s work?

LR: I don’t have a special purchase on the body’s alwaysness. But what I think about it is this: there’s no perception and no language that’s not specifically inflected by somebody’s corporality. It’s the only foundation anyone has. The body is history. Yet often we’re denying or idealizing or institutionalizing the body, erasing its specificity and perceived flaws. My own body has given me a lot of privilege in my life, as well as much ambivalence. It’s afforded me unquestioned ease in certain institutional settings, and it’s also endured violence... And I’ve made choices, sometimes inadvertently, that have placed me outside of most of the standard institutions, even now, deep in middle age. I’m a single freelancer, a renter, a rural dweller, and I have to travel to make a scanty living. Sometimes I feel enormous fear for the future. But I’m telling myself, this is luck, just to be choosing and continuing, sometimes failing. The intensity that I felt at 21 hasn’t changed. It’s still pouring into my desire to make forms with my mind and my language, which is the language of my family and my friendships as well as my wildest hopes. There has also been illness and loss. The body’s alwaysness feels scary. Life feels scary. But I’m going to cleave as close to it as my will permits.

I’m in East London now, in an academic visitor’s flat at Queen Mary University. I’m here to research for a month at the Warburg Institute. The first time I came to London, when I was about 23, it was to apply for my British citizenship and passport, since my father was born here. (My grandparents were Canadian, but my grandfather was involved in the radar industry during WWII.) I was staying, in the early 80s, in a basement room at a Polish war veterans’ hostel near Victoria station, because it was very cheap. Every day, as I waited for my papers to be processed, I went to the British Museum to write and to draw and to stay out of the rain. In the tea room I would often see an elderly man, skinny, humbly dressed, eating soup. He had on the side of his neck an enormous growth, which he had wrapped in a sort of large grubby cloth scarf. The growth was nearly as big as his head and it rose and fell with his breath. I couldn’t help but look at him, though I tried not to, out of embarrassed politeness. Many years later, I realized the man was Ivan Illich, who chose to live with a huge cancerous tumor rather than impairing his ability to continue to write and live in his own manner by undergoing the standard treatments. He was against hospitalization and the normalization of the body and its illnesses. Then I didn’t know anything about Illich or his work. I was in the British Museum tea room because I believed HD had sat there. I had found HD in the public library in Vancouver. I was getting my British citizenship so I could live in France. Back in the hostel, I had a manual typewriter that my mother had given me when I turned 21, and I was trying to learn how to write poems. I thought you had to go to Paris to do that, so that’s what I tried. Five years later, I had become a bookseller back in Vancouver, and I still hadn’t published any poems. I discovered Illich’s writing. Then I was reading his work on medieval textuality, and it became a model for me of a kind of scholarship that I’ll never achieve. Only recently have I begun to read his work on vernacular politics, vernacular resistance. Everything I know about him moves me deeply. The way he chose to live nomadically, in a loose community of scholars. His involvement with indigenous resistance movements in Mexico. His anarchic spirituality and his rejection of possessions and institutions. The way he embraced his own death.
Now that I’m back in London almost 30 years later with the gift of this reader’s card at the Warburg Institute and almost a month to work, I feel ecstatic. It worked! That time in 1984 I tried to get into the British Library with the vague notion that I would read mythology. I had paid for my plane ticket by working as a camp cook in remote tree planting camps. I had no degrees, no references. Of course I was turned down. I knew nothing about how anything worked. Instead I went to bookshops and sat in corners and read until closing. I had this crazy black coat from about 1949. It had really wide padded shoulders and flared out like a sort of surreal cassock when I walked. I thought it was sublime. It was just before AIDS. I had never met another writer. I was costumed for an imaginary drama. Now I have a different weird black coat, vintage Yamamoto that I’ve preserved for 15 years. My feet hurt when I walk. My hair’s gone grey. I’ve mostly managed to keep listening to my body, and that has carried me — numbers in time, real time of real productive movement (that a car actually moves at like three and a half miles an hour) helps my own scholarly work along and that makes me grateful. But, I am still slightly baffled by his notions of pain. He makes me feel well connected to a gigantic swath of human thought; but I guess for a while, he was forgotten because he was all-too-pessimistic. And I of course was turned down. I knew — what an unsatisfying phrase: “listening to one’s body.” It does and doesn’t say what I mean. I dislike the essentialist associations it could point towards. But the problems inherent to the idea stimulate me.

KW: I love Illich’s idea (practice) of multiple utilization of a tool. Like, how can I use a Phillips head screwdriver in new ways? Or, how can I get text into molecules and freeze them? Does graffiti still matter or should we embed words in the paint as opposed to making words with it? Illich’s sort of creative philosophical approaches — numbers in time, real time of real productive movement (that a car actually moves at like three and a half miles an hour) helps my own scholarly work along and that makes me grateful. But, I am still slightly baffled by his notions of pain. He makes me feel well connected to a gigantic swath of human thought; but I guess for a while, he was forgotten because he was all-too-pessimistic. And I often find cages or repressive capabilities within pessimistic feelings. Then again, hope can be oppressive, too.

That said, what makes following the body un-superstitiously (what some folks might basically term a kind of desirous life) so radical as opposed to an ascetic ignoring of unification? This could, hopefully, lead us into a conversation about fidelity.

LR: I know — what an unsatisfying

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is a spiritual anarchist! I just read the essay on hospitality you mentioned. Interesting, and complex! It seems to me to be a plea about the appropriation of the pain that is an inevitable bodily experience, as a punitive or coercive tool, by the church. He seems to suggest that embracing one’s own pain is a resistance strategy.

But I’m not sure what you mean by an ascetic ignoring of unification. Context?

KW: I agree that Illich is a “great defender,” but what I meant is that his readership — i.e., the asshole-critics — took him as pessimistic in an age when all that was beginning to take hold was capitalistically globalizing false hope. In one interview, Illich said, revolutionaries must do away with both pessimism and optimism. I like that. But, as well, one critic wrote of his work: “He likes to point out the harm rather than the good.” I mean, I totally disagree with that and love the guy. And fuck a critic who would write something like that. It isn’t constructive, and it closes down conversation.

What I mean by ascetic ignoring of unification, I mean, that when people cut things off in their body — radiation, strict discipline of diet, corrective lens surgery, et cetera — something less organic, let’s say, or when Illich decides to live with a cancerous growth, or like, when my uncle Ronnie decided to finally end his lung cancer chemotherapy because he said it felt like it was cutting all the life out of him...that kind of ignoring the body/mind’s unifying is interesting to me on so many levels yet it seems to only enhance and reflect notions of the singularity of beauty.

LR: OK. I see what you mean. I like this injunction to ignore both pessimism and optimism. But I haven’t read Illich’s critics. We’re on a similar track but using different terms. For me listening to the body would precisely mean ignoring unification. It’s an experience that aging or illness can lead to — the realization that the body is precisely not a unity. It’s more like a syntax than a form, an unwieldy, awkward, mobile syntax that refuses to become an image. We’re pressured by very powerful discourses to submit this syntax to a unification. Try turning down radiation therapy if you’ve been diagnosed with cancer, for example. You simply fall out of the medical institution, or you’re shoved out. But then you’re in a space where you can start to make different observations and decisions. This affects your entire way of thinking and being. In this liminal zone outside the discourses of unity, the body can start to say other things quietly. Maybe what it’s saying is find a hut, buy a juicer, study geometry.
Of course, the real criminals here are the parents for giving a teenager a credit card. But in truth, no crime has been committed. The theft and shopping spree are only the realizations of the card’s potential—what it’s essentially advertised for. A credit card in a gym locker in the first act must be used in the second. Gwen and the protagonist only followed the rules of the card to a T, spending what they didn’t have on what shouldn’t be theirs at the expense of someone else. But (spoiler alert), this is the nineties, and the consequences of this culture have yet to come to bear on a soon-to-be spendthrift 99%. Or, they have, but no one is thinking that way yet.

I should be clear: I couldn’t put this novel down. It has the subtle ability to reorient your own view of the present toward the past it reinvents, ’90, ’91, ’92, ’93, ’94, ’95, etc. In reading Nineties, everything suddenly seemed so Clinton-era fey, so MTV2. (I can’t thank Lucy Ives enough for bringing me “back,” though who really felt “there” to begin with?). I started reading the novel on a flight to Miami, a city Lucy transformed from the pristine deco blue of Ocean Drive to the formidable grave of Gianni Versace. Later, I wrote this review on a flight to Los Angeles, which suddenly seemed so Madonna of the Blonde Ambition Tour in its unsupplied sunlight. Almost anything could go into the Nineties list and seem “’90s”: American Airlines, HBO, Europe. The 1990s were grand, plastic, easygoing, simpler, despite the morallistic feistiness of the Republicans, the tragedies of Oklahoma City, Waco, Rwanda, Rodney King. The 90s were easy for (white, mainstream) Americans in the afterglow of the 80s, before the 2000s when the check finally bounced, so to speak. We’d yet to suffer through the totalizing super event September 11th, two intractable wars, Katrina, Congressional gridlock, the crisis management of perpetual credit meltdown, and two incompetent administrations. Emotions were like credit cards in a Filofax, usable even if nothing backed them up except the desire to express yourself.

And expression is at the center of Lucy’s novel. Writing — letters, notes, labels for organizing schoolwork—is key to its rapprochement between the impenetrable surface of things and the boundless depths of the subjects who float upon it. The only catch in Nineties is that expression repeatedly finds itself at odds with the reality it describes, and in this way Lucy’s characters’ writing within writing reflects the way reality TV would later construct its subject, purporting “access” to some secret, “truer-to-life” side of its subjects, only to find everything even more scripted in its endlessly interchangeable plots — housewives, survivors, housemates. No one was there to make friends. They were there to make alliances. That’s essentially true for the characters of Nineties, too, particularly the protagonist, who writes a letter at the end of the novel to explain to herself and her co-conspirator, Gwen, their culpability in the theft. The letter fails to persuade her. It seems to me that Gwen’s refusal to accept her own guilt spurs the narrator to assert hers, and as such, her...
declaration of wrongdoing becomes a declaration of the truth-value of writing: No, what I wrote down is right. We were wrong. The struggle to articulate oneself with authenticity becomes increasingly consequential — and political in the framework of the decade at hand: Wasn’t the entire Monica Lewinski event a matter of what was and wasn’t said rather than done?

For all her success establishing the atmosphere of an era embalmed in success, Ives’ Nineties tightly constructs this world as a morality play that ultimately says more about the 2000s than it does about its eponymous decade. The age of innocence — or, I suppose, more credibly, the naïve belief in the durability of plastic — meets the lasting effect of there being no such thing as innocence except as an idea we could advertise and sell back to ourselves in order to conceal the vacuum of aimless adulthood. The term precarious has yet to come into play to describe our employment, the flow of cash to those outside the gold-embassies of the 1%, but its savage arrival at the close of the American Century drives Nineties: As soon as one person breaks the rules of the fragile game of credit and payment, the whole thing grinds to a halt. And of course: Why shouldn’t it? To put it simply, the removal of the rules that had survived the Reagan-H.W.Bush-Clinton Administrations and had safeguarded, however mildly, individuals from predatory lending, bad loans, and, urgh, “financial instruments” like derivatives was the heart of the Bush Administration’s economic policy. In the 2000s, everyone was breaking the rules. And by the first heady days of the Great Recession in 2008, it became clear that those who would pay the most would be those who had the least say in Torture Town.

“You’re smiling,” the headmistress says in disciplining the protagonist after the Filofax incident, “Is there something funny?” The narrator doesn’t say, but I think there is — and I think Nineties thinks there’s something funny, too. When the victim’s dad doesn’t press charges, the headmistress says, “I don’t think you should take it” — her expulsion — “personally, in a certain way. You can go on! You are able to live on and make changes with your living.” The joke is, after all, on Madame Punisher: there will be no “changes” with “your living,” there will only be the acceptance of increased access to credit, probably through student loans accrued as an undergraduate, then in grad school, and finally through mortgages and car payments. Torture town: in the process of the event, the everywoman protagonist becomes cubed, given form — she learns the world’s lesson: somebody’s going to pay, and it won’t be the creditor. But you can go on, if only barely.

In Nineties, I think Gwen is right when she doesn’t feel remorse for stealing the Filofax because, fuck it, why shouldn’t someone steal a credit card and spend it? We’re supposed to spend and we’re supposed to spend a lot. It doesn’t matter where the money comes from, who pays it off (no one can or will), or what you’re going to spend it on. It just matters that it is spent. Maybe Gwen provides a model for revolutionary behavior: steal each other’s credit cards, outspend one another, never pay it back. Can you trace that sort of thing if everyone does it? I don’t know the rules, but who cares because the government and the banks don’t know the rules either. Nineties made me feel so ’90s, like I wanted to spend a lot of cash I didn’t have on a cruise to the Bahamas, like I wanted to spend the afternoon in Bergdorf Goodman, like I wanted to buy a car at a 0% APR for the first thirty-six months no matter what my credit report says! My credit report is actually OK. True story: I was expelled from middle school for being a lot like Gwen, for fucking around with other people’s stuff. The novel ends with one of the narrator’s many letters throughout the novel. She writes to Gwen, who has been sent away to the Virgin Islands: “I LOVE YOU SO MUCH AND I HOPE YOU’RE HAVING AN AMAZING TIME.” Dear Lucy, I did.
Slick Pack

a slick pack
tinking on possible patterns
the hostility of science
dee listening

the man in the story slowly
overspending body
face, bed, home, time, gone
disappeared, I say to people

the fell of dark in fact
ordinary nature
absorbing magical disorders
material of the infinite map

independent pictorial
what was before a delicate reminder
buckets of red poured
canvas now a tendency evacuated

witness the suddenness
here the herd surrounding
my craze myth perilous past

fresh coyote lines
catbird bush fight
how fragile the catastrophe
from walk to poetry

light's blank tinge
absolutely grief ragosa
lowest form of love
poems predicate leaving
predict adjective still
objective fill with water
fuel verves from the well

pastoral fed nothing
prescribed dune seclusion
early storm of metaphor
post-combat numerality

parable destroyed by binaries
limbs splintered in the wind
not wind of night storm or
both keys as in range and entry

fluorescent flags as crumbs
realizing the way climate changes
jot down the language of movement
disoriented cards settle into flock

interior and exterior skeleton
juice of crab’s diction problem
settling into unrecognizability
no longer a pattern of waves

the deeper fact than compensation
soul to wit warm-blooded
“urban refuse chic” as example for
Alcestis, Winter’s Tale required attention

you insist she insists as I said
clip procedure for growing
the rest schematic, vague, belief-based organs of differentiation

separated guts pull remark how
gross necessary this could be
symbolic the soft look falling
look the room rash of yellow

stranger takes your clothes
offers a jump presentation
national park versus solitary cup
dowser holder would feel my dream
The “I” in these lines recurs throughout the poem, often standing in for the indefinite article — this idiosyncratic gesture runs through Santiago’s work and heightens the argument for the particularity of what he witnesses. What he sees is partly erotic — as the lines above attest — and also comic, signaled in the poem by the appearance of Chaplin, Laurel & Hardy, and Harold Lloyd. It’s also dangerous, as when “Existence takes the form of I cop/who runs his state-of-the-art billy club down the length of your face.” Or there is to fear “that whole race of sanctimonious reactionaries/ who feel offended/ by the every day more frequent contact with the riff-raff.” Santiago’s response to is to see the unseen — both the people of the city, the “riff-raff,” “so many who have bathed 5/6 times in the black waters of failure,” and even more deeply the true character of the “apparently static and fleeting” that “turns out to be the 1 very important piece on the board:/ the spirit and valor that accompany you when you roam the endless avenues/ remembering the poems the skin of Sappho/ bathed in moonlight.” What can Marx tell Heidegger? Partly: “THERE IS NO AHISTORICAL ANGUISH/ TO LIVE HERE IS TO HOLD YOUR BREATH AND UNDRESS.” Santiago’s “valor” is thrillingly naked, utterly earned. Marx knows the revolution is coming and Heidegger reminds us it’s happening now, and we need to prepare ourselves to be the ones to whom it can occur. The poet Santiago awaited, demanded, and becomes in a poem like this one is the one whose “heart is 1 crowded neighborhood,” the one who having risked his own integrity can thereby contain us (this is Whitman’s project) as we try to move together into history and unto death.

I’m glad Santiago is here at last, ushered into the consciousness of most of us by Bolaño’s constant, tireless claim for his importance. After all, there was always that chance that the novelist’s support of his old friend would have turned out to have been just friendship, just nostalgia — that Santiago’s poetry itself, however passionate, might have proved slack or dour. But in fact his work is masterful, funny, and (with help from the excellent translation) utterly contemporary-seeming in its debt movement from high to low, formal to loose. Santiago’s claims for poetry are enormous, but essentially humble: “Poetry: we’re still alive” — I’m mesmerized by that colon that says this is poetry speaking and spoken to, assuring and assured that its ancient tradition is, in places, still nobly pursued by a solitary figure crossing an impossibly vast city on foot in the dead of the night.

As “Coke” turns to the following “Dolphin Blood,” “poetry for everyone is doomed/ as that,” when “there is blood in my tomato soup, the world/ that put it there is too.” Not only is the world’s stain there (here) — the world itself is too, inextricably, all of the billion relations that produced the soup, the blood, the mouth that eats it unwittingly until too late, the mouth that relates the unpleasant revelation. This is as neat a summary of the predicament as one could wish for, one immediately, again, refused: “I make a statement to the following effect and it comes/ out of my mouth all wrong, I’m sorry for your original trauma but you/ suck. You are not a dolphin.”

If you want poetry to soundtrack the revolution, shouldn’t it be as good as “Party in the USA?” This is. How can poems make transitional demands or even simply be them, bringing the House of Lords to the International, without the forced and deafening sociality of the club’s PA? “Miley Cyrus can’t actually utopia” (“Again Ode”) but she can be “the real drug that...
makes you happy, cruising for an off-ramp." The pathos manufactured by pop can’t actually utopé because it asks nothing of us, but only seems like it might for the same reason: the permanent revolution of the reel-to-reel that astroturfs the soul.

Plenty of poets are made paranoid or rapturous by pop’s dreamy pathos, a fantastic dream in bubblegum pink — Joe Luna is not one of them. He knows better, the high, the troubled sleep, and the hangover. Is it true that a nightmare hurts only the dreamer (if that, if her)? In the absence of bedfellows, one might think so. You made your bed; now lie. In the absence of bedfellows, even if the dream is shared and heartbreakingly beautiful, a “total life” as patina on the bronze corners of our tired eyes to be rubbed away at dawn, even if so it was all just a dream, and we all wake up OK but singularly — again: that is what pop means — we can’t afford to take our dreaming lying down any longer, even if the dream is common, which is certainly not to say: cheap. OK?

(Diggs/Borsuk cont. from pg. 15) The effect is “symphon[i]c,” both in the visual intertwining of the lines and in their echoing quality, gray text and black providing repetition and difference. The first line switches from Chamorro to English to Spanish, and its translation feels almost ploddingly verbatim, as though the fragmented juxtaposition of these words refused to be subsumed into a single phrase. Rather than disciplining the language into “correct” English, the poem “pull[s] out the constraints” of usage, letting us get “close” to the source by putting unaccustomed words in the reader’s throat. Not only does it refuse to tailor its words to the English ear, it also rejects an easy binary between “source” and “translation.” Often, when an English word appears in one of the left-hand lines, that word’s Quechua, Tagalog, Chamorro, or Spanish corollary appears at right within the italics so that both depend on one another for a full reading, as in these lines:

baba i kuatto-mu. ga’gá’ burst.
stand here. close. sumambulat open
your room animal.

pasto i firefly siha. put the
alapatdip to pasture.

In these lines, the Tagalog “sumambulat,” which can mean “to burst,” intercedes in the “translation,” extending the line’s meaning across the perceived gap. Which side is translating which? The traffic goes both ways. As Diggs’ notes indicate, “phrase books” are a major source of influence, and TuERK does not pretend to a mastery of each language it draws upon. As she has noted in interviews, her language play often arises from a fruitful misreading or misinterpretation, and the resulting poems are associative in a way that makes them cryptic at times with a dizzying density of allusion. One might get lost looking up each reference.

We don’t, however, need notes to help us decipher this text, which, like its own phrasebook, provides all the language we require. Her intertwining of text and translation places Diggs’ practice in a lineage with another multilingual poet, Ezra Pound, whose Cantos translate their translingual references line for line. It would be perverse to mention Pound here were it not for his presence in the Barbadian-inflected “damn right it’s betta than yours,” which opens the book’s third section, “Jones.” The poem’s rap cadence and bravado nod to the Kelis song that provides its title, but Diggs winks at Pound as well when she cocks a line in his direction: “erode di pentameter—blocka-blocka.” If “[to] break the pentameter, that was the first heave,” Diggs’ poem continues that heaving (or twerking) motion, wearing away at her forebears and riddling Pound with “blocka-blocka” bullet holes. The book’s final words, “all the rest is noise,” tie back to Canto 81’s resonant “What thou lovest well remains, / the rest is dross” by way of Alex Ross (author of The Rest Is Noise), whose own title draws on Hamlet’s last words: “the rest is silence.” The poem doesn’t end with silence but with live language bouncing. In TuERK, Diggs lives up to that canto’s chief wish. She has “gathered from the air a live tradition,” in sounds that surround us. After reading, go directly to YouTube and listen to her work that air.

(Downing/Mirov cont. from pg. 15) The second review I came across was more thorough than the first and slightly longer. It displayed a more impressive vocabulary and also seemed more concerned with commenting on the content of Brandon’s book. Also, the author of the review seemed to have a comprehensive knowledge of American Poetry and its history, which he used to make impressive statements about Brandon’s poems, such as,

(...) Downing presents as a key member of the poet-cum-literary artist-cum-multimedia artist set (or vice versa), and while Mellow Actions is not itself the multimedia presentation the author’s previous effort, Lake Antiquity, was, it nevertheless heralds several new trends in contemporary poetry that tilt the scales of the long-standing page-stage rivalry even further in favor of live performance.

Although this review was definitely of a higher quality than the first, I ended up paying more attention to the persona of its author than its subject, consequently began to feel horrible, and stopped reading it.

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After reading two poetry book reviews, I felt depressed and decided to stop and look for something to say about Brandon’s work, elsewhere. I remembered that Brandon had once told me that one of his biggest influences was Bern Porter, so I located some Porter’s “Founds,” from his 2010 MOMA exhibition on Ubu Web. The first link I clicked on lead me to an image, which encapsulated many things I wanted to articulate about Brandon’s new book and his work in general.

The image has three primary components: a cut-out of some purple text that reads “begin as a few drops of water on rock and become;” a large, back-lit rock formation with a dimly glittering face that is partially obscured by the text; and a gray, void-like section shaped like an “L” which takes up the left and bottom sections of the page and is also slightly obscured by the text in the lower left portion of the page. The text’s placement in front of the glittering rock and the void is casual and unassuming, but it also simultaneously creates a field of meaning between the other two components by bridging the boundary between the two images. The result is a visual mechanism that suggests and array of meaning and possibility through its application of text and image.
Porter and Brandon’s work share a number of ostensible similarities. They both use a collage technique to recombine chunks of preexisting information into singular compositions of radical coherency. For example, this section from Brandon’s poem, “America,”

Your propulsion cannot escape my planet’s depravity.
My planet is a fiery chugger planet,

“Will I get paid for what I’m doing on it today?”
The sabroso world goes sub-rosa

“Yep, I detect you’re on.”
“Uh-huh.”

Ok, sounds sweet, I’ll see you back after you add me.
“I already added you though.”

“Cool!”
Sent from my Car System

It seems possible that lines such as “My planet is a fiery chugger planet,” and, “Cool!” might be characterized as “adolescent,” just as the text from the Porter image might be characterized as the lighthearted, pithy advice of a grandmother. However, the discreet pieces of language that make up “America” have a more nuanced effect, placed in juxtaposition with each other, as they are.

The above section of Brandon’s poem can be separated into four distinct parts: the initial couplet and third line, which seem to refer to the same object, the “planet”; the transitional fourth line that moves the poem from the “sabrosa world” to the “sub-rosa”; the Gchat-like conversation represented by the following two couplets and the poem’s penultimate line; and the poem’s final contextualizing line. Not only do these four components comprise an impressive panoply of language that seems simultaneously ultra-contemporary, quotidian, and exotically nuanced (wtf is a “chugger?”), but they also comprise a system of meaning much like Porter’s “found” collage.

In the first three lines, one gets the sense that they are being presented a sort of conversation between two cosmic beings. However, the quotation marks around the third line seem to contradict the idea that these lines come from a single interchange (why denote the third line as a piece of found text, spoken by someone, while leaving the initial couplet without quotation marks?). Despite suggesting that both chunks of language seem to refer to the same object, the “planet,” the presence of the quotation marks create a moment of discreet parataxis that calls into question the perceived coherency of the three line component. One is forced to ask if the three lines were appropriated from a dialog overhead at a Sbarro in a suburban mall food-court or if they were constructed from several different sources. This ambiguity created by Brandon’s collage technique is important to understanding the overall effect of “America,” as it creates a metaphysical shimmer that is sustained throughout the poem, one that can also be found throughout the entirety of Mellow Actions.

The remainder of the poem continues to produce a similar aura as the initial three-line component. The poems fourth line bridges the gap between the initial three lines and the remainder of the poem. Much like the cut-out, “begin as a few drops of water on rock and become,” the fourth line acts as a bridge between the initial three lines of the section and the rest of the poem by providing a structural transition. The fourth line also enacts this transition in a literal manner. The planet referred to in the initial three lines becomes the “sabrosa world” that then “goes sub-rosa,” so our expectations shift to a realm that is literally and figuratively, beneath the one represented by the excerpted section’s initial three lines. This transitional line represents another similarity with the Porter piece in the manner in which it creates a field of action between the cosmic conversation of the initial three lines and the quotidian tone of the Gchat-like conversation that follows. It also seems worth mentioning that the line’s content and tone might be understood as “adolescent,” or taken to be a “performance,” but these evaluations would seem ignore the underlying seriousness and weight given to the function of the line within the structural context of the poem.

The third component, represented by the following five lines, sounds as though it has been taken from a single Gchat conversation. The lines are punctuated with quotation marks, again suggesting that they have been taken out of context, and collaged into Brandon’s poem. However, the line, “Ok, sounds sweet, I’ll see you back after you add me,” lacks quotation marks, creating another subtle moment of parataxis, which might lead one to ask if these chunks of language have come from a similar source or if their coherency has been generated by the deliberate juxtaposition within the context of Brandon’s “America.”

The poem’s final line has a similar cohering effect in the way it suggests an overarching context for the poem’s seemingly disparate components. It provides “America” with a summative mechanism, closing out the poem, while leaving the reader with a much more interesting question: What exactly was “Sent from my Car System?”

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A critical emphasis on the “intentionally adolescent approach” and the performance-like aspects of the poems in Mellow Actions can only be characterized as superficial. While these aspects of Brandon’s work are integral to the depth and intricacy of his poetics, they should not be characterized as ends unto themselves. As in Porter’s collage, each component of “America” is connected in such a way that the poem generates a spectrum of possibility, rather than a fixed meaning. Both Porter and Brandon treat art as a waypoint for the continuous, ongoing flow of meaning, rather than as a repository for Romantitcized feeling. Brandon’s poems may contain “adolescent” and performative aspects, but ephemeral examinations of these nuances ignore their underlying miraculousness, beauty, and gravitas. Just as the three primary components in Bern’s piece culminate to produce meaning via their arrangement, so too do Brandon’s lines interact to create systems of meaning that seem inexhaustible in terms of the possibilities their radical coherency suggests.
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