Toad’s Museum of Freaks and Wonders

Fiction by Goldie Goldbloom

New Issues, February 2010

ISBN-10: 1930974884

Hardcover: 321pp; $26.00

Review by Alex Myers

An albino woman, a dwarf named Toad, and two Italian prisoners of war on a rabbit-ridden farm in the nether reaches of Australia: what could be a better premise for a novel? Setting such a bizarre and unique concept at the center of a piece of fiction is a bold strategy, but Goldie Goldbloom’s debut novel, Toad’s Museum of Freaks and Wonders, never falls short of the mark. The winner of the 2008 AWP Award for the novel, it is apparent from the first few pages that you are in the hands of a master; Goldbloom writes with clarity and complexity, balancing abstract questions of identity, love, and value with a tensely developed plot and rich characters.

Set in Wyalkatchem, Australia in 1944, the novel is narrated by Gin Toad, an albino concert pianist who hails from an upper-class family in Perth. She is fallen from this lofty position owing to an evil stepfather and has been married off to the dwarfish farmer, Agrippas Toad. Between them, they have a dusty farm, two living children – Mudsey and Alf – and one dead albino daughter, Joan. Into this scene arrive two Italian prisoners of war, John and Antonio, who are given to the Toads as farm laborers. Soon, however, the line between prisoners and captors is blurred and the novel examines what it means to be a mother, wife, citizen – what it means to belong and to be loved.

Delightful strangeness abounds in this novel, whether it is Mr. Toad’s collection of Victorian corsetry, the foul-mouthed cockatoo that lives on the veranda, or the bright magenta uniforms the Italian POWs are supposed to wear. The characters, too, are not just strange on the surface, but are richly odd, profoundly other. Even the most normal of them, the prisoner Antonio, tells the story of his most formative childhood memory, how as a young boy he was taken by his father from bed one night and brought to a forest where a
man with the axe used it to cleave a chestnut sapling, to split it almost the entire way to its roots, and then the man shoved in a branch to hold the halves apart and laid aside the axe…the men gathered around (Antonio) and carried him to the sapling and now he saw that someone had nailed a picture of the Madonna to the heartwood, as well as a coin showing a man’s organs…they put ash on his head and passed him through the split tree, like thread through the eye of a needle, three times.

This story of what turns out to be a fertility ritual becomes the heart of Antonio’s identity, his promise, his duality, his mystery. Each character tells his or her own story, and each one opens up an entirely new world, bizarre but believable.

Beyond the strangeness, *Toad’s Museum of Freaks and Wonders* is simply a well-told story with wonderful prose. Place plays a prominent role, and Goldbloom manages to make the distant and foreign Australian Outback understandable, with lyrical description:

> the roads themselves have local names, friendlier than the ones given them by government workers….There’s the Pig Slurry Stretch and Metholated Mavis’s Gully and Kickastickalang. Every farm has its kerosene tin wedged between two stumps, or its Coolgardie safe on top of a Model T, and the people here say swing left at the kero tin or turn in at the motor and everyone knows what they mean. Antonio has hung a green milking stool from a stringy-bark at our turn-off. Toad’s stool. Toadstool.

The weather, the animals, the isolation, all feed in to the creation of place not just as setting but almost as a character of its own in this novel. Each entity struggles with the question of belonging, the idea of escaping, and the growing realization that imprisonment can be more than just physical. The at turns desolate, at turns fertile landscape of Australia beautifully mirrors the despair and passion of the principal players.

I would not say that *Toad’s Museum of Freaks and Wonders* is unlike any other novel I have read – for at its heart, it is a love story and a novel that for all its strangeness follows pretty much standard conventions of structure and chronology. However, there is something otherworldly in this book, an otherworldliness that made me look again at this world, which is as rich and promising a gift as a novel can give.

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**Bobcat Country**

Poetry by Brandi Homan

*Shearsman Books*, January 2010

ISBN-10: 1848610858
Paperback: 74pp; $15.00

Review by Kristin Abraham

The poems in *Bobcat Country* sling readers into a humorous yet serious exposition of American culture that mocks relationships between American capitalism and pop culture, the American family, and the “business” of contemporary poetry.

The book’s opening poem “What It Means to Be an American” sets the stage: “It’s a picnic. Buckets of beer, a bluegrass band, a shotgun / wedding.” Such precise, familiar details are characteristic of the style of this book. The details spark throughout; we see “the Tupperware deviled egg carrier”; “Max Headroom”; “moon boots”; “Coed Naked t-shirts”; and “an old Easter basket full of headbands and drying nail polish,” and we hear Skid Row and The Hold Steady on the radio. They are all nearly tangible and absolutely captivating.

This precision makes it nearly impossible not to identify on some level with the speakers in these poems; their voices exhibit the twenty-first-century family milieu anywhere in the world. The families presented are also players in Homan’s portrayal of an America we all can recognize, at times with admiration, at other times with aversion:

> A Simpson sister tries to sing. Half of us are pregnant.  
> The other half are sterile. This is not a dystopia, so obviously dystopic – our knives keep getting bigger.  
> None of us can stop eating.

Admittedly, part of the reason I am enamored with this book is that it confers significant attention to Midwestern life in the 1980s, which is when and where I was raised. Of course it’s not necessary to have grown up in the Midwest in the 80s in order to appreciate these poems. The poems are much deeper, much more representative of interpersonal relationships, the items we own, and how those items
Bobcat Country relates to its readers because we each have some kind of relationship with America, because we each have once been a teenager, and because we each are lovers (many of us writers) of poetry. But, don’t forget, as Homan’s poem “For Poets (& Others)” tells us, if you are a poet “do not admit to being a poet unless asked directly. It’s like saying your grandmother died. Maybe you weren’t close with your grandmother? People don’t know what to do.”

Mattaponi Queen: Stories
Fiction by Belle Boggs

Graywolf Press, June 2010
ISBN-10: 1555975585
Paperback: 240pp; $15.00

Review by Keith Meatto

In one of the many aching, tender scenes in Mattaponi Queen, a woman goes to Wal-Mart with her husband, who is dressed in drag. He’s about to have a sex change operation and the public shopping expedition is her way to support and process his decision. Later, she wonders: “How old do you have to be to understand how love works?”

The question haunts all the characters in Mattaponi Queen, a debut collection of short stories that won the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference Bakeless Prize. Set near and on the Mattaponi Indian Reservation in Virginia, the twelve tales mull the many manifestations of loneliness and the ache for companionship.

Nearly every story in Mattaponi Queen explores the effects of estrangement. Husbands and wives, parents and children stumble through their daily routines, haunted by people separated from them by distance, divorce, or death. Many characters have jobs – such as nurse, teacher and coach – that require them to care for others. Meanwhile, they undermine their own chances at happiness, whether it’s through drugs and alcohol or self-imposed seclusion.

The book begins slowly, with stories that are nearly vignettes. Gradually, a narrative accrues as Boggs sketches her native state from multiple points of view: male and female, young and old, black, white, and Indian. The tension comes to a head with “Homecoming,” about a boy who moves from Brooklyn to Virginia and his transformation from football star to drug dealer. At 40 pages, it’s the longest piece in the collection and, plot-wise, the most traditional. Regardless, the story hammers home the themes of the collection: the clashes between dreams and reality and the fault-lines of race and class in America. Above all, the story addresses the notion of what it means to belong to a community and call a place home. Mattaponi Queen is filled with homecomings and the celebrations are always bittersweet.

While characters recur in some stories, the unifying thread is the setting, a slice of semi-rural Virginia that speaks to a dying way of life. Minor characters may escape – to Hollywood or the swanky suburbs – but the protagonists have either chosen to stay or are forced by circumstance to come home. In “Good News for a Hard Time,” Ronnie, a half-Indian college dropout, returns after a long absence:

The airs she put on at school. You would have thought she lived in a teepee village, but really the reservation was just like anywhere else, trailers and double-wides and clapboard ranchers set on weedy lawns far off the black asphalt road. Pickup trucks with expired license plates. Girls who wore tight jeans and hairspray. It wasn’t exotic or special, just a big bunch of acres on the river. But the river was beautiful, even a mere silvery glimpse of it here and there through the thick growth of trees.

A similar air of ambivalence about home recurs throughout the collection. In “Imperial Chrysanthemum,” an elderly nurse muses:

It used to depress me to think about being born so close by – the idea, I guess, was that I hadn’t gotten anywhere – but now I don’t mind as much. I’m able to see what has changed and what has been the same, even if those are not all good things. Somehow it’s a satisfying feeling, like staying to the end of a party to make sure you don’t miss anything.

Elsewhere, the nurse aspires to be as “neutral and regal” as a boxwood tree, a phrase that captures the tone of Mattaponi Queen. The
prose reflects the characters’ muted stoicism, a stance that masks their suffering. Dramatic action rarely occurs in the present; instead, the characters obsess about pain from the past and dream about lives they could have led. Instead of dramatic climaxes and tidy epiphanies, most of the stories hinge on awkward anticlimaxes and end with uncertain resolutions.

Domestic fiction often focuses on heartbreaks and disappointment within families and *Mattaponi Queen* is no exception. What sets the book apart is the sense of history that bubbles beneath the surface. Four hundred years ago Powhatan – chief of the Mattaponi and the father of Pocahontas – ruled the region where these stories take place. Then John Smith married his daughter and English colonists kicked off an era of violence that ultimately led to the genocide of Native Americans and the founding of the United States. As these stories attest, we are still feeling the repercussions.

Further Adventures in the Restless Universe

Stories by Dawn Raffel

*Dzanc Books*, March 2010

ISBN-10: 0976717794


Paperback: 104pp; $14.95

Review by Sara C. Rauch

Dawn Raffel’s newest collection of short stories, *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe*, is an intriguing look at relationships. The spare, unfussy prose explores familial boundaries, the complicated connections between mothers and their children, sisters, aunts and great aunts, husbands and wives. The mundane matters of every day existence – taking a child to a museum or carving a pumpkin, a phone call to catch up, a day spent at the beach, learning to drive – fill up Raffel’s prose; each story occupies only a few pages (in some cases only one), but each moment captured by her prose completely fills up the whole space.

Raffel’s prose borders on poetry, but in the end, it doesn’t tip into prose poetry. It also seems incorrect to call it “flash fiction.” Lacking a better term, short story has to suffice. Her sparse, direct word choices sift away all the extraneous matter. This is not to say that her prose is direct and honest only. At times she is given to flights of fancy, as in “All Along the Silk Road,” where she uses her narrator’s neuroses to propel the reader into a world of shifting reality: “She was frightened of wind.” And later: “She went walking alone along the lake, in the elements, wakeful, in the night, in rain. Night after night: a sweater, a jacket, forever a hood (unruly hair), against better judgment.”

Raffel’s is an aesthetic that takes some getting used to; and once you immerse yourself, the well-crafted art of her writing never feels natural. Instead, like watching *The Jetsons* or some other fantastical program, you find it easier and easier to not question whatever oddities arise like in “The Alternate Palace”: “I sat on the river, on the ferry one day, and watched the city burn. I was leaving, of course.”

What is most interesting about the stories in *Further Adventures in the Restless Universe* is what is not said. For example, the beginning of “North of the Middle”:

> They are both of them, mother and daughter, inflamed by something miniscule, sneezing in tissues, covert sleeves, a hand. The mother says, “Bless.”
> The daughter says, “God.”
> The mother says, “Look.” She says, “Look at yourself.”
> The daughter is young. She is darling to look at, the mother says. “If only,” the mother says.
> “Stop it,” the daughter says, the timbre dropped, as if some sort of gauntlet. “Mother,” she says.
> “All I am saying,” the mother says.

As a reader, this kind of writing makes me feel like an explorer in an unknown place, often struggling for a spot that feels comfortable and creating one in my head if I can’t find it – unsure of myself, on guard. It is an interesting and beguiling approach to prose.
Much of the writing here is dialogue, and Raffel has a keen ear for what is important in conversation and what passes by unheard. She obviously pays great attention to how we humans speak to one another, and she is adept at placing each word and sentence just so—effectively creating characters’ worldly lives in an otherworldly way.

This graceful, slim volume is full of hard choices and privileged yet unfulfilled lives. Reality may be an adventure in Raffel’s cleverly and artistically crafted new collection, and as she writes it, is always an adventure worth taking.

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The White Visitation

Poetry by David Brennan

BlazeVOX [books], February 2010

ISBN-10: 1935402757
Paperback: 87pp; $16.00

Review by Jeremy Benson

I was reading The White Visitation in the Detroit International Airport, waiting for my flight to Charleston, when the Iraqi gentleman on my left nudged my arm. “Is that the bible?” he asked.

I closed the book, and the two of us pondered its cover art: “a 1949 painting of Christ, cloaked arm outstretched…Into Christ’s open hand has been pasted, yes, one hot-pink iPod nano…by bright red bubble caption Christ proselytizes, ‘Try it!’”

A moment prior, he and I had been discussing why his cell phone – we had the same model – wouldn’t take pictures, and the weather in Idaho compared to Michigan and the Middle East. The sudden cultural implications of his question threw me off balance. Awestruck, I fumbled for an appropriate answer. “No,” I began.

I too had judged its cover, coming to very nearly the opposite conclusion. The reason I had chosen to read The White Visitation in the first place was simply because of its patently sacrilegious cover; I was fully anticipating (welcoming, desiring) a satire of the Christian subculture, and expecting a possible poetic re-hashing of “What White People Like.”

Neither hypothesis was quite correct, though David Brennan toys with both. He quotes Transformers II and alludes to Arrested Development. One poem consists of cringe-worthy Caucasian gerunds in the club: “humping in the club, mad texting in the club, self-loving in the club, get your sad self to the club…gin and juicing in the club.”

On the religious front, T.W.V. says he only wants to “be spacious, to settle, to resolve God.” He attempts to do so in “General Rule 7.3,” and text from the optional passages of Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead:

- BIBLE – ANTIQUITIES
- BIBLE – ANTHOLOGY
- Bible. N.T. Polish. 1953
- Bible. N.T. Vietnamese. 1967
- BIBLE. N.T. – BIOGRAPHY
- BIBLE. N.T. ACTS—COMMENTARIES
- ROS. It’s all questions.
- GUIL. Do you think it matters?]

(Later, a continuation of “7.3” collects translations of the Divine Comedy, followed by what the book’s Notes call a “faux gaffaw. A façade of a cachinnation” – “Ha. Ha ha ha. Heh-heh.” and on and on.)

As much as I wanted stinging religious parody, about half way through I was tempted to call The White Visitation a prayer book: “It is language that fails emotion; witness the promiscuousness of tongues. A work about a title.” However, a prayer book that is too aware of itself, like all immortals attempting to reach God at his/her home office, or white people in the age of the internet, or a young man smacking into language barriers with a man from Twin Falls by way of Baghdad.

That being said, The White Visitation appears to be borne completely of self-awareness. It’s the story of two presences: The White Visitation (T.W.V., “the real or pseudonymous name I go by,” says the speaker), and the mysterious poet Ned Ravinband and his
“hyphenated incoherent” poem, “Night, Sleep, Death, & the Stars.” T.W.V. attempts to reconcile the existence of Ravinband through a series of General Rules, Special Rules, Exceptions, and the Seven Assumptions. But the logic is post-Einstein, and the rules T.W.V. establishes curve like time and space. Therefore, a dash becomes a space, “what is white is horse,” and the lines between T.W.V. and Ned Ravinband are blurred. In one poem, T.W.V. admits “when two or more authors are identical, makes no effort to arrange them within their group.” In another, The White Visitation is “a dream of myself I had.” These, and other hints (including the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern dialogue, Michael Martone’s blurb on the back cover, and the overt anagram), are keys to the identity crisis.

So it’s like the bible, in that the Good Book contains the phrase, “now we see as in a mirror.” And it’s like Sartre, who was an existential atheist, in that we see ourselves in the Other.

There’s more to it, of course. There always is, no matter how many Special Rules and Assumptions are applied. Simply: David Brennan, like the patients of the mental hospital that shares his title and “corporate body,” is a wild talent, a clairvoyant, and a mad magician.

“It looks like a bible to me,” he said.

I shrugged, flipping through the pages. “It’s just some poetry.”

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Quotidiana

Essays by Patrick Madden

University of Nebraska Press, March 2010

ISBN-10: 0803222960
Hardcover: 204pp; $23.95

Review by Jennifer Sinor

The gift that Patrick Madden gives us in Quotidiana is the gift great essayists have given us for centuries and that is the elegance of a mind at work. The essays Madden offers in this new collection are essays in the most traditional, classical sense. They do not traffic in the far-fetched or the bizarre, competing with reality television to hold our attention with a cacophony of sound, nor do they rely on the story to bear the weight of their subject, rather they investigate the way ordinary experience confounds and delights us, once we stop and pay attention.

Early on in the collection, Madden considers the essay itself, a subject that interests him throughout the book. Madden sees the possibilities for essays everywhere, either in the moment unfolding before him or in the centuries of history that have preceded him. Essayists, he writes, “are keen observers of the overlooked, the ignored, the seemingly unimportant. They can make the mundane resplendent.” And Madden takes for his material everything from the number of apples in his local grocery store to the grandmothers of the disappeared who gather at the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires to mathematical theorems rendered on the page as art. He does not braid these strands together; rather he replicates the connections his mind creates and leads the reader from garlic to Rush to the limits of the universe, seamlessly. His mind engages us immediately, his humor, his erudition, and as a reader we are more than willing to follow the twists and turns to arrive in a place we could not have gotten to on our own, while simultaneously feeling the journey was both intimate and familiar.

His final essay, entitled “Finity,” provides a stellar example of what Madden calls “the commonplace essay.” Like their cousins, commonplace books, a commonplace essay “will gather memories and research [. . .], attach ideas and stories to build upward, toward meaning.” A commonplace essay foregrounds the collaborative act of writing, the fact that writers have been influenced by those who came before and such influence should be celebrated. In “Finity,” we meet Montaigne, Archimedes, Madden’s high school physics teacher, Abraham, comedian Stephen Wright, Brigham Young, and molecular theorist Avagadro, to name just a few of those who have informed Madden’s thinking on the subject of finitude. And Madden moves us from grapes to the Bible to molecular science in the space of twenty pages, pressing these observations into conversation with one another, all the time building “upward, toward meaning.”

The possibilities of connection, he tells us, are infinite, while the things in this world to connect are limited. There will be new essays to write as long as there are people to write them. And because he connects these seemingly disparate ideas through the unique filter of his mind, his life experience, we arrive at a place we could have reached no other way. Not with an answer, but with understanding. You will never hold another bag of grapes in your hand, there in the grocery store, breathing Caesar’s last breath, without naming your place in relation to things and valuing that connection.
Madden’s *Quotidiana* is fresh and invigorating. The essay has strayed so far from its roots that we often forget its energy comes from a vigorous mind engaged in the pursuit of a subject, with the goal not of finding an answer but of increasing our understanding. Madden’s collection does just this, looping in and around itself, pulling evidence from literature, history, science, religion, and lived experience. Because he delights in “the infinite suggestiveness of common things,” so do we. And the reward is a rich and powerful reading experience that returns us, after ranging far and wide, to ourselves.

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**Bharat jiva**

Poetry by kari edwards


ISBN-10: 0981931006


Paperback: 116pp; $15.00

Review by Catherine Daly

kari edwards’s last book, *Bharat jiva*, was published posthumously. The book represents a leap in style, control and application of language, and scope of address and content over his earlier works, *disobedience*, *iduna*, and *a day in the life of p*. For example, whereas *obedience* continually lists and refines those lists, working from inclusion and exhaustion, *Bharat jiva* has a huge scope, a generous posing of questions against lists.

kari’s note on the title tells us *Bharat* is an Asian republic and the second most populous country. *Bhārata* is both the Sanskrit name for the Republic of India (etymologically, something to be maintained, as a fire is maintained) and a reference to Agni as the “fire bearer.” The gloss kari provided for *jiva* is “living spirit”; the jiva is the “alive” portion of a being, that which transmigrates. While edwards spent time dwelling in India, this book is not about the indestructible life force of a country. *Bharat jiva* is a book of poems in which edwards carries the torch, keeps the home fires burning, and transmigrates.

The book is divided into “preface,” “process,” and “aftermath” (rather than *afterword*) sections. “preface” is a poetic column of definitions and a call to a certain type of making, which now recalls to us kari’s death from heart failure:

> it is time to detonate the heart, it’s time to call for a sudden and delicious fractal indifference to the written line. no more fail safe dams protecting the audience from exploding . . .

The body of the text is in the section called “process” but this body is broken into pieces separated by blank pages. Within each section, pieces are differentiated by different lineation or justification. While edwards uses the fractal as an image of jaggedness, not chaos or microcosm/macrocosm, earlier works are distinguished by a tension between line break and omitted punctuation, and here the majority of the pieces are displayed as even justified columns, and the central unit is the phrase. The column-and-justification formatting emphasizes the prosaic nature of the poetry: a jagged right margin would emphasize lines and end words and a smaller margin would read more prosaically. Few pieces run more than one page.

When not operating lyrically, the pieces consist of sentence fragments and noun strings piled toward a sentence of meaning, and then spinning away from that meaning: at once like a paragraph in a theme, where each paragraph has a main idea, and also like a style of meditation in which one watches the body’s jumble of perceptions and memories take place. These sentences are generally in the language of meditation: “the eternal and immutable moving onward and upwards,” “do I choose not to chose and choose,” “I am alive in the indescribable, uneditable, ceaseless.”

As “process” continues, the sentences increasingly arrive at the paradoxes of self and existence in Hinduism and Buddhism. Often the first clause acts as a jumping off place, introduction, or title: “trinity has been illuminated” continues, “now, forever, and beyond that which can never be described”; “if beyond the self is the self, is the self beyond… caring” continues, “appearing for the first time beyond anything and fully present in a dying mumbling prayer.”

Many poets who come to poetry from music, including Clark Coolidge, Sheila Murphy, and Peter Ganick, share an interest in using syntax to create sonic effects and less determinate meaning. edwards uses visual effects and grammar to establish not necessarily multiple readings, not fuzzy readings, but indeterminate readings. One poem, according to edwards in *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, which first published it, is about Gwen Araujo who was murdered about eight years ago. It begins “can I do this spiritual drag,” which
recalls to me Eliot’s quotation of the Shakespearean Rag in “The Waste Land.” The song contains the line, “that classical drag.” Edwards continues his poem, equivocally, “collective agony wishful thinking.” How are we to read “collective agony wishful thinking”? Are these two equated, as in “collective agony [is] wishful thinking” even though everything within commas in this long sentence is equated with the phrase “spiritual drag” so that the questions begin:

[can I do]
this spiritual drag
collective agony wishful thinking
fearful peek-a-boo actuality

“remembering distortion, forgetting drudgery necessary to consume anything cement sorrow” where “remembering… forgetting” “cement(s) sorrow, [which is] surrounded by transfer credit surcharge immortal siege ideology”? The question ends with a string of phrases modifying “spiritual drag”:

submissive to appliance bodyisms . . . derivative of skin, bone, eyes and the rest opposite aggressive remoteness . . .

Edwards’ word piles and words repurposed to serve as different parts of speech are a linguistic sign, in the body of the text, for a gender between, interdeterminate, but also performed.

“aftermath” is centered on the page, double spaced, and lineated, and ends in a very American-seeming “translation” of the ideas “all is samsara” or “all is maya”: “where nothing is true and all is false.” But even this is a message coming from houses which are bodies, words which are pure lies. And so, reading the book straight through, whether or not one struggles with strict sense or enjoys the effect of images piled and twisted, one has the sense that Kari Edwards has left the house, finally, after having watched and witnessed with exquisite care.

Poetry by Amit Majmudar
TriQuarterly Books, October 2009
ISBN-10: 0810126265
Paperback: 75pp; $14.95
Review by Roy Wang

Scientific metaphors are invisible pitfalls for most poets, mainly because the average writer is unable to grasp how wildly ridiculous his or her musings and conjectures are. Reciprocally, poetry put forth by physicists, if sincere, can leave one rather cold. Fortunately, Amit Majmudar easily sidesteps both problems in this wonderful collection by having both a real scientific background and genuine empathy, creating a coherent work with sustained intellectual and emotional focus.

This book has all the ambition appropriate for a serious writer yet early in his career: breadth of scope and technique; restraint with a healthy dose of the obscene (“The serpent / dove in her through the nest-hole anus / until the scorpion-stinger coccyx / slurped in too”); and a strong connection to the poetic past. And for the most part, he succeeds on all counts.

A few lines that exhibit how Majmudar fires on all cylinders comes from his poem, “Answers for the whirlwind,” a breathless, sharp response from Job. Consider how he moves from precise, modern phrasing such as:

They dream of the freedom to flow once again
The speed and freedom that you took from them
And throw their flanks at the Tropic of Cancer
Like an electric fence and stagger backward
to the bold incantations of: “tell me has / Desire ever stripped the stringy husk / Off of your mind and shown you still unripe” or the simple truth of: “Speak if you have something more than wisdom / Speak if you have sympathy.”

The book is divided into five sections more or less focused on religion, art, war, love, and death. Since Majmudar is a doctor, it is not surprising to see many reflections on death, and especially on those who made the ultimate sacrifice. However, these are the weakest parts, too caught up in verbose descriptions and grasping at depth. Not that these are weak poems – they just pale in comparison to the probing, original mind that muses and draws connections between everything from antimatter to Golgotha.

However, to quote one great section from the last poem in the book, “The Miscarriage,” that conjures up Eliot's Quartets (again not surprising given Majmudar's dispositions):

Forgive me if I had no words that night
But I was wondering in the still
Begetting silence whether to console you
If I consoled you it would make the loss
Your loss and so we laid beside ourselves
A while . . .

To touch again on the firm grasp of science, here is a bit from “Static Electricity” showing scientific humor at its best:

Either she is electrically fenced off
at some subatomic level, and this is nature telling me
KEEP OUT, or else the electrons could be flowing
out of me into her, in which case her body bodes well
as a conduit for release . . .

“Subtle Anatomy” is the best poem in this collection – first published in Journal of Medical Humanities – you just never know where things will turn up. Romantic, visionary, grand in a reasonable tone, all in one page. It speaks of the fall from heaven and the angelic and devilish vestiges left in our bodies:

He straightened her, the breath in a balloon,
into this human posture of rebellion,
this upright and bipedal challenge.
Settled, the serpent sent nerves everywhere,
claiming each inch of her with senses.
Not with an apple but an apple’s taste
the serpent ruined her . . .

The nods to formal poetry, such as the handful of ghazals, are worthy attempts, carrying much of the mystical weight of the devotional genre. However, they sound like translations, which is either playful genius, or betraying a lapse of musicality in the short poem. The sonnets are also spotty, although there is a fun rhythm in “A Pedestrian,” shifting from a halting walk in the octave to an all-out dash in the turn.

All in all, θ, θ showcases a brilliant mind wise enough to not be content with only intellectual musings, but that tries to get to the heart of feeling, that can contemplate the mystery floating just behind any object or concept. Amit Majmudar’s poetry indeed does an enviable thing: it motivates us to examine how he is doing it better, and what he can bring not only to our lives, but to our own writing.

Lost Alphabet

Poetry by Lisa Olstein

Copper Canyon Press, June 2009

ISBN-10: 1556593015
Paperback: 91pp; $15.00

Review by Christine Kanownik
Lisa Olstein's *Lost Alphabet* is a serious meditation. All 90 pages of poetry have the same short paragraph form with a bracketed title that informs and sometimes subverts the poems. The setting seems post-apocalyptic in a quiet sort of way. There are no Mad Max renegades, but there is an unnamed narrator who moves to the edge of some pre-industrial village of horse traders where people dance to music made with a “dull spoon on the side of a pig.” The narrator is obsessed with the study of moths. The goal of this study is at first unclear, but as the narrator focuses more on the project, more questions arise.

There is a dogged persistence of both the narrator and of Olstein to achieve the inscrutable. These poems are confused and lyrical entries in a mad person's notebook. They describe dreams, people and events, but almost nothing about the person writing them, which is revealing in itself. There are moments when our scientist realizes the futility of the project or almost succumbs to a crippling and mysterious pain. People and events color this book of poems, but the joy and beauty are in the writing. When the project reaches a sort of success, the narrator and the reader “marvel at the immensity of their landscape.”

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**Sing, Mongrel**

Poetry by Claire Hero

*Noemi Press*, May 2009

ISBN-10: 1934819085


Paperback: 82pp; $15.00

Review by Kate Angus

Sing, Mongrel, Claire Hero’s first full-length collection, proposes a central conceit where the born and the made merge to make a disturbing and lovely hybrid music.

The book is divided into four sections: the untitled first; “Come, Salvage,” a longer work; a series of shorter poems called “The Animal Experiments”; and “Post-Domestic,” another collection of shorter poems. Although each section functions powerfully on its own, as the book progresses it gathers an accumulated weight as certain fundamental preoccupations are articulated: the body as it is made (both through nature and through machinery) and the voice that pain and desire gives it.

Hero lays out this dynamic in the opening poem, “In Which She Is Because of a Horse,” and grounds it firmly in gender. The poem begins “Out of the stall, a foaling, what seems a beginning. A stirring / in her womb that is an engine,” raises the question “The bag between her legs: plastic or membrane?” and builds to a crescendo where the “she” has desires that let “fall many foals.”

The book takes us both to interior space – “the small globe of the skull” where “it snows & snows / & cries” (“The Animal Experiments”) – as well as the larger world where “I am in the stitching room and I am in the stable. / At some point, I may need to make a choice” (“A Landskip”).

In the liminal moment before choice is made, Hero asks us, “Why look for an ending?” Instead of an answer, she invites us inside where her directive “Sing, mongrel, sing” is both tender and stern, and seems as much directed at herself as at another or at us.

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**A Little Middle of the Night**

Poetry by Molly Brodak

*University of Iowa Press*, March 2010
Review by Kristin Abraham

Of all of the Iowa Poetry Prize winners I have read, Molly Brodak’s *A Little Middle of the Night* may be the most stunning, the most complete and beautiful package; every poem in the book is a gem and they all fit together to form a simple and elegant volume that I am pleased to have in my collection.

Brodak sports a voice all her own, with hints of Dickinson, Melville, and Joseph Conrad, as well as influence from visual art and artists, ontological exploration, and surrealism. On the surface of it all is the broad stroke of a world that is so peculiar it can’t be anything but real (at least as real as we think our own daily world is).

One noteworthy poem, “Joseph Conrad’s Last Novel (Which Is Comprised Entirely of Face Colors Used in His Previous Novels),” is “comprised entirely” of vibrant, provocative colors such as “Too Much Swedish Punch,” “Brick Dusty,” “of Quivering Leather,” “of Wet Hair,” and “of Crumbs.”

Much of the success of the poems comes from Brodak’s skillful, playful use of language, which draws attention to the visual and aural textures of words; for instance: “icky baby”; “my blood type is / paper white, / a trill warble, / a new leaf”; “Pleats will go on without me, sweet sucky knee-socks and lavender blubber about the mouth”; “sad at heart / at the thanks for the arrangement: jumbo mums, cheap and sharp”; and

Found books
in the nightstand:

*What Business Should I Start?*
*Why Men Marry Some Women and Not Others*
*Evil Is Not Your Enemy*
*What Do People Do All Day*

Most of this
is How To.
Here’s a book:
*Your Life*
*is Going Off.*
Here’s a book:
*Wake the Fuck Up.*

The different vernaculars and tones bounce off of each other like rubber balls in a small room; sounds of each word and interplay between them is nearly whimsical.

Much of the charm and playfulness in *A Little Middle of the Night* can be attributed to double entendres (which begin even in the very title of the book): “I had on a dress from here to there”; “nothing lives sometimes”; “Distant anger clouds together”; “I met a former friend at some distance”; “They / arrange her hands, as always.”

It should already be obvious by these examples, though, that in spite of Brodak’s skillful wordplay, her poems have a serious, melancholy aura that lends a surprising counterbalance to the humor; often it seems the speakers use language and wit partially in effort to deny a more despondent and inconsolable inner condition.

The speakers in the poems are “terrified at the doctor’s // feverish touch” and planning to “make a fine suit of love and disappear.” They are running from elements outside of their control, fully aware that avoidance won’t rescue them or help them find “something better than happiness.” Nonetheless, the speakers ask questions (“What’s above / our old errors, and above those coldest places?” “Why would I close my good eye?” “Can I choose?”) in hope of finding answers, in hope of finding their way.

Many of the poems are concerned with the “underneath,” what happens below/beyond our consciousness, what we are often focused on. Brodak presents us with a series of poems titled “Underneath”; “Underneath Underneath”; “Underneath at All”; and “Underneath (Side Effects),” in which the speaker(s) are obsessed with ontology and existentialism: “A Good underneath will tell you to go back. You should feel lucky when you hear this // A Private underneath will look like everyone else’s. // A Faithful underneath will be the one you dislike first.”

“Underneath (Side Effects)” gets to the core of it:

Similarly, I like “heaven forbid” but it means nothing to me. That doesn’t mean there is nothing underneath. That doesn’t mean the underneath is full of me.

A small part of what I’ve seen has led me to believe this.
Including the fake things. Mostly I believe there is no me.

So, listen,
I’m afraid of where I will go when I’m under the anesthesia. Don’t think belief is uninterruptible.
but it’s clear that the “underneath” is also a part of every other poem in *A Little Middle of the Night* regardless of its title or content.

The book does seem to rely on a few words and/or images that appear in many of the poems: neon, stars, sky, forest (or pines), outer space, yellow, to name the most prominent; the word “underneath” also falls into this category. This repeated language can stand out and be a potential distraction because at times it seems as if the poet has used certain words as “trustys” elements, words she counts on to generate a poem. However, this characteristic is something that most—if not all—poets share, and the argument can be made that this particular kind of repetition is what holds together a fabulous book of poems, makes a book unforgettable and noteworthy. The final result in *A Little Middle of the Night* is that the poems do, indeed, mesh together remarkably well; the book is unforgettable, and highly noteworthy.

Although it is Brodak’s first full-length book, *A Little Middle of the Night* has the qualities of a book written in the middle of an accomplished poetic career; I look forward to seeing her work progress.

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**Life of a Star**

_Fiction by Jane Unrue_  
_Burning Deck Press_, April 2010  
ISBN-10: 1936194007  
Paperback: 112pp; $14.00

Review by Elizabeth Townsend

*Life of a Star* presents itself as a series of short ramblings of the narrator, who is also the main character. The ramblings could even be called diary entries as they are the thoughts and desires of the narrator. The main character is a woman who imagines herself to be an actress, something that is evident throughout the book.

Through her musings, the reader is able to see pieces of her childhood, her desire for her absent lover, and her imaginary trips overseas, as well as gardens and art galleries she wanders through. She searches both in the real and the imaginary for a love she never had at any point in her life. Her mother seems to prefer another child to her and her lover doesn’t return the love she has for him.

There are times when the narrator stops in the middle of one sentence to start another. However, this wasn’t really distracting. In fact, it made the book seem even more like the entries in a diary.

Early in the book, a number of entries were poetic in their descriptions of things. For example,

> Full-body pupil of the eye. The keyhole image of a room unlit. And all the other darkest, sunken, or as yet unopened spaces in which one might find herself and all her other selves concealed. This is the blackness in which I am often depressed when I am headed toward that fountain.

Poetic descriptions like this helped to make *Life of a Star* an enjoyable, quick read.

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**Hints and Allegations**

_Amanda J. Bradley_  
_NYQ Books_, October 2009
"All along, along, there were incidents and accidents, there were hints and allegations." – Paul Simon, "Call Me Al"  

*Hints and Allegations* has the unencumbered personality of a teenager who has just come of age. It moves through the halls of Amanda J. Bradley’s stanzas with a residual adolescent awkwardness that has been overshadowed by a newfound self-awareness, and the confidence that comes with it.

The book is divided into "Disturbance" and "Equilibrium" (two words one might apply to hormone-charged teendom). The former pits the speaker’s selfness against otherness, frequently in the form of – dare I say angsty – deflections of and charges against "you." From "Choice":

Bogart my life.  
See what I’ll do.  
...Think you are better.  
Think you love me,  
If you must.

Other poems remain unsounded as internal dialogue, like a day’s thoughts scribbled into a nightly journal. "Minnows dodge through my mind’s muddy pool," begins “Thought,” “They collide and gnaw each other’s gills.”

The latter half draws out, its focus trained on expansive themes – memory, death, faith, reason – and its style elongated and controlled in comparison with the first. In “Who’s there,” Bradley writes:

Hold at arm’s length where I am held cradled there, here, what year  
Necessary, secrets are sexy. Growing old, growing aware  
Of what was always there: who created who created who created who

“Equilibrium” uses philosophy and contemplation to counter the petty impulse arguments of "Disturbance." Bradley satisfactorily returns to the Paul Simon allusion of the book’s title: “Mr. Beerbelly Beerbelly / get these mutts away from me / you know I don’t find this stuff amusing anymore.”

Although “her writing is like a high schooler’s” is not a blurb you’d find on a back cover anytime soon, Bradley’s poetry is just that, and sincerely in the best way possible. Bradley recaptures the curiosity and joy of discovering language, and her poems are explorations of all the qualities of printed word, incorporating wordplay and experimenting with enjambment. She writes:

We doublespeak always,  
attempting to step, but  
slipping and slipping and slipping,  
silently bared but  
safely barred as well.  
Do not worry.  
Babble on.

Among a field of jaded and disgruntled literary works, *Hints and Allegations* is a rare rejuvenator. Amanda J. Bradley rejoices in language’s surprises, downfalls and wormholes, reclaiming the page into a playground for words.
In Six Lips, the poet Penelope Scambly Schott explores opposites and interconnectedness, in all its many forms. Her opening poem, “Compass” points us in that direction.

In these landscapes, we encounter an obvious animal/human motif. At times, Schott is her human self living alongside the animal kingdom. But many times she is shape-shifting like the Shaman who becomes animal for a time. The poet, turned animal, is not irreversible as in the Greek god myths. Nor is this a punishment. For this writer, transformation is temporary, representative of her multifaceted self.

Imbuing one’s self with animal attributes creates endless possibilities and images as in the poem “Can’t you do anything right?” when the poet declares to her mother that her “next birth / I will arrive with a golden garden snail / over each miniature thumb.” The poem takes a surprise turn when, instead of wearing snails on her thumbs, she morphs into one: “The stalks of my antennae / will rise in the air, their black eyespots / fixed on her dry lips.”

In other poems, even the inanimate turn animal-like. In Part 1 of “The Shawl Store,” the writer experiences a velvet shawl against her cheek as a seal. Part 2, the black feather shawl turns her into crow. She even warns readers: “When I show up as a crow, please don’t be shocked / you see, the truth is I have always been a crow.” Animal symbolism is furthered by the appearance of a long-haired wrap in “The Long Russian Movie of My Life.” In the garment poems we experience part-animal, as in the archetypal images of half-man/half-beast.

Shape-shifting is an ancient art; its medicine goes way back to the primitives. That is the thrill of Schott’s work, a reminder that this ability is not lost. It has found a way to resurface, this time through contemporary poetry.

Schott also explores incarnations suggesting that: “it was fun being a respected skunk” or “My life as a vulture was something else.” In “My Obituary,” the poet claims where one of her lives ends, another begins. She suggests the return may be in the form of an animal.

Yes, animals are inescapable in this collection. They come and they go. Their movements intrigue as in the poem, “Among the Other Animals” where Schott interacts with a leg-waving beetle, envies the salmon, answers a screech owl until, she says, “I become one in the common clan of beasts / the animal itself, akin to kin.” Sensing a kinship, she feels no separation.

Concerning voice, Schott’s poems declare. Wit ushers forth to disclose sexual acts and lively organs. For example, in the poem “Poor Dear,” there is rumination on penises: “Imagine the drag: / trailing it around / like some third leg / or a mailing tube.” Schott explores her marriage with poetic talk that carries personality. “[M]ine is the old silver-back on the right” she says of her husband in the poem “The Men in the Other Room.” In “Marriage Manual,” we experience the directives she gives her husband for foreplay – those which, at first, aim toward undressing but then stop him suddenly with, “No, I told you, don’t mess with the breasts.”

That being said, there is also seriousness, where there falls a “fragment of sky into my throat as we kiss at the curb.” It is a kiss that flies with her across an entire continent so that in the end it becomes “the one thing that is close and the one thing that is far.” This is my favorite poem. The voice is lyrical, concise; with such beautiful treatment to language.

Other relatives surface, such as her younger sister that she guides into womanhood: “As if by teaching my sister the world, I could hold her.” Schott writes of her father’s death on an island, the place where “his blotched hands / lay open and loose on a summer sheet.” She writes of visits to her dying mother on the East coast, flights that signify a world of opposites. The heart is another reoccurring image, though each has a different beat: “Hobo Heart,” “Heart Failure,” “My Hard East Coast Heart.”

Her signature poem, of ten parts, is “Counting the Body.” It is curious to find Part 1 titled “One Tail, please.” In this poem the poet explores her body beyond body, parting herself open to reach the mythical self.

Part 6, titled “Six Lips,” is four lines. It is interesting to ponder why this small section becomes the book’s title; why the body parts – two of mouth and four of vulva – are carrying the weight of the book. Then again one need not be too analytical. These poems don’t require such dissection. Some seem to emerge from another realm, the subconscious perhaps. It is the reader who is challenged to awaken her/his imagination to experience the writer’s self-portrait. As Schott says of her seventh eye:

I would look inward:
I would study my own soul –
how it intends to keep living forever….

In Six Lips I feel she does just this. The poet goes inward for self-discovery as if entering the underworld. There she is greeted by animals and alter-realities. She has successfully taken all these glorious forms to the surface, where they become poetry on the page.
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