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Edited by

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## OVERHEARD

*From another point of view the woman seems to be resting*, by Gail Sher (San Francisco: Trike, 1982).

*The Heat Bird*, by Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge (Providence, R.I.: Burning Deck, 1983).

*Alsace-Lorraine*, by Fanny Howe (Guilford, Conn.: Telephone Books, 1983).

Modernist women poets, when first read, exert a magnetic pull towards what appears simultaneously as unsolved mystery and ample evidence, as though the often cryptic language carries essential information. It is the poet as bearer of uncertainty—the odd fragment of thought or unexpected usage—that invites me to complete the equation.

I overhear a poet talking to herself, alone in her most private moments, where the expectation of publicly accessible literary language drops away and the true sorting-out begins, in the deep space of the mind where harm can not enter. Here, I find a woman piecing it together, catching some moment of babble or perplexity or unidentified bliss not located yet in the historic design of literature. A woman willing to entertain uncertainty. Gertrude Stein going over and under it; Gertrude Stein going around and around. H.D. refusing, finally, the discrete and manageable version of poetry assigned to her by Pound; H.D. rewriting that limiting and uncompromising mythology which denied her vision of sanity. Clarities asserted, necessarily at odds: "Tell the truth, but tell it slant." Covert messages from a stubborn place to a stubborn place.

Lorine Niedecker's tentative particularity emerging from stillness, as a watchful attitude of mind. Mistrusting the overbearing voices of the world to define it for her. Niedecker intent, first, upon finding, hearing the fragment of her "seeing" rise up in the mind suddenly, catching it outside the given boundary of "poem." Including it. Talking to herself quietly, urgently. Making that break in the imaginary line of force that had bound up and shaped the territory. Pushing to expand or extend the ground of formal occupancy. *What*, of female experience and interior talk, could be brought into the poem and called legitimate.

I've chosen to look at the works of three contemporary women poets of great privacy, whose voices are linked to the prizing of uncertainty as legitimate content. Their voices present difficulty, being at

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once personal and impersonal, reflecting and reflexive. These are poets struggling with metaphysical problems embodied in daily strain. They often talk to themselves in hermetically-sealed speech. One is allowed to overhear, to witness, but is not directly addressed. This is a camouflage of the wary one, suspicious of prefabricated diction and the lack of representation by an organized poetics. Knowing the possible shape or limit of her own poetry *only* as she admits bits of language onto the page. She is regardful of her survival and seeks, in each case, a strategy to preserve a core of being, apart from the given. The voice is inevitably one of profound loneliness and acknowledged necessity.

Gail Sher's book, *From another point of view the woman seems to be resting*, includes four serial works of six to eight pages, including the title poem. Together with the title, their headings announce her tone and preoccupation: "Also as a child she had/wanted to eat," "Even the lady's pressure/next to her," and "perhaps there is no/content paint or sun." Sher is backing off from being too quickly understood, watchful of any impulse in herself to accede to a single version of *how it is*. She, or someone, may appear to be resting. She is, or may be, wrestling as well. There is evidence of effort here. Resistance. And a turning away from any single point of view. She finds her image, then stops to regard it from varying angles, somewhat like looking at several black-and-white glossies, taken at ten-second intervals. Sher's voice embodies the cool distance of an observer taking notation on extreme states of emotion, jotted in the margins of the moment:

Naive or feelings of isolation  
and at the same time naive.

The same woman only a feeling  
of sun now arrested on the floor  
near her chair. Rocking and  
making various gestures in  
concentrated posture.

Sher uses the language of uncertainty. She "presses forward to/  
some extent," not willing to name anything, absolutely. Her often arbitrary vagueness or hesitation is a means of avoiding a static commitment to a single interpretation of events. Her view of the world is continuously shifting...what seems to be:

This scene gives the impression  
of fields. Separated from fields  
by a porch.

A language of flux: "gradual ability"; "(inward breathed words) along/  
these lines"; "Somewhat confused sense or/some boastfulness  
coupled/with something else." Both the untrusted interim and the  
margin that is messy with constant revision, as the writer and subject

effect changes upon one another by fact of this chancy act of witnessing that links them: "Moments held clean and intact/now appears as a wall."

In the poem "Also as/a child," Sher continues to measure out the telling in rather flat, carefully guarded sentences, often minus soft connectives, so that one feels a tension in her seeming objectivity, a hope of keeping some sort of control over what remains uncertain:

Intense expressing in  
striving for something  
(intake) of food  
(inheritance) of  
something.

Having asked for something  
to eat (in) one process  
to eat one (particular)  
part.

As a child, as a grown woman, the anguish of having to ask for nourishment...wanting, acknowledging wanting, asking with some expectation of being denied, some worry of being prescribed for, not fed in a way appropriate to her needs. Seeing this, watching herself see this, and covering for it as the social body and the imagined body split:

To be phased by this. To  
appear calm but actually  
to imagine herself  
quarreling.

Sher uses the asides of parenthetical comment as shadow and echo, adding an underscoring of urgency to the poem's low-key surface, a reminder of Niedecker's "depth of emotion condensed"—the parenthesis being a usage which women continue to find useful in breaking out of a misleading sense of stability suggested by a smoothly proceeding sentence. Here are three examples from "Even the lady's pressure":

- (Conversation) of woman  
in curious posture.
- 
- (Roughness) of feet also  
some cleaning of the room
- 
- With spread of her (sings)  
probing also words.

In "Perhaps there is no content/paint or sun," Sher continues to beckon the reader into a world in which nothing is trustworthy, in which matter (painting and, we assume, the poem) is regarded with profound scepticism. Sher begins to enumerate, with even tighter organization, the accumulating scraps of evidence which account for her doubt:

Perhaps there is no content  
paint or sun. Wood or light.  
1) Makes loving motion as of  
kissed one 2) Achieves  
resistance on a black surface.

She is talking to herself. Making lists. Analyzing. Trying to check for reality, safety. Will the thin ice hold? These poems mobilize continuously, at a mental and visceral level...the noise you don't expect.

To overhear Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge's voice is to receive a canticle of visually stunning observations from the natural world, undercut with warnings to herself—another of the creatures who must begin to make sense of accelerating danger signals. Berssenbrugge's writing is fluid and filmic. In *The Heat Bird*, her eye/(camera) pursues a meandering path. Written in long-lined, densely packed poems, divided into four groups, that path is often located in the world of northern New Mexico, but the narrator's voice struggles to account for more than that which appears to form on the screen. This voice does not trust public speech nor worldly transaction and so it must not take the agreed upon route but prowl, soar, then comment—almost under its own breath—and circle back, hoping that intuition will lead her words towards something unplanned, some intangible moment of vision that accidentally gets freed into the narrator's voice:

This is what I am always trying to do, make  
the air into its form, but I want the real form  
and get scared by obscure wind from canneries  
only when you see completely through it can  
a mass of swifts on the far ridge like a sunspot  
or King Lumber smoke become sieved gold from a river  
you see their yellow breasts, then each yellow breast.

[from second entry, "Pack Rat Sieve"]

Berssenbrugge wants the structure of experience to emerge precisely as the meandering/witnessing intelligence delivers it; for her, meaning arrives through sensation, the surprised juxtaposition of moment upon moment. If she hand-holds the camera, something unexpected may move through her sensing body into the corner of the lens and cause the perspective to tilt. She is not interested in where she meant to go; instead, the literal terrain sheds its light along the way and she locates it by addressing a non-specific "you" with a fictional "I," tracking her moves by using a "personal" form of address:

And I can't predict your trauma. Potent and careless  
as radiation here, which we call careless, because  
we don't suspect anything. Then future form is in doubt  
Like a critic I thought form was an equilibrium  
which progressed by momentum from some original reduction  
of fear to the horizon. But my son's thigh bones

are too long. I seduced myself. I thought  
I'll give it a little fish for the unexpected. Its paw  
moved. My back-bones are sparking mica on sand  
now, that carried messages up and down.

[Fourth entry, "The Heat Bird"]

Her voice seeks disembodiment, a withdrawal of self-consciousness, a merging of perception and the elemental, the glow's relation to the radium it signals. But the increasing misuse of the neighboring Los Alamos land, near her home, for nuclear weapons experimentation, has made that wish difficult and has released in these new poems a grieving voice which solemnly chronicles the landscape's inhuman history of change and links it, intimately, to her own interior shifts:

Glass that melted in the last eruption of the  
Valle Grande has cooled, and you can just run  
among wild iris on a slope, or fireweed in the fall  
Its former violence *is* the landscape, as far as  
Oklahoma. Its ontogeny as a thin place scrambles  
the plane's radio, repeating the pre-radio dream  
At any time, they all tell us, to think of eruption  
as a tardy arrival into present form, the temperate crystal  
I still see brightness below as night anger, not  
because of violence, but its continuousness with the past...

[From fifth entry, "The Heat Bird"]

But the "pre-radio dream" hints at some place beyond language, that can't be located by the senses or the intellect. It is her most profound dilemma: to find a way of giving voice to that which cannot be spoken of, beneath the historical, the categorical, the identifiable. To catch the unspeakable, just as it reveals itself:

She was trying to incorporate  
dead space like an x-ray of a shard that stopped moving  
or spreading sage. Once, she looked down. He hummed  
to himself, and she saw his beautiful feet move  
Then she steps across what she can't remember...

[From seventh entry, "Ricochet Off Water"]

Or, again from the tenth entry, "The Heat Bird":

The buzzard now brings to mind  
a defunct windmill with a heel hub, but no blades. The eagle's  
descending back still bears, after enough time has passed  
when the event is articulate, and I know its configuration  
is not mixed, or our mingling, or the "intent" of a dance

The drift of "reality" gains support from Berssenbrugge's gentle mockery of the logical assumption of sentences. Events appear to form bonds casually, in a reasonable process of ordering, but her scepticism is continually undermining grammar's forward movement just as she appears to be faithfully constructing it. Behind her sometimes baffled voice, there is a grave insistence, a stubborn will to resist any certain

explanation.

Fanny Howe's book, *Alsace-Lorraine*, is really five very separate, densely impacted, highly composed visions of the contemporary world. Each sequence of poems demands steadily of the reader's willingness to participate in the unraveling, decoding process, and to meet with equal necessity the poet's continuous pressure upon the imagination to transform daily emotion into the irreducible fragments of language that will sustain a life beyond the present moment. From *The Amerindian Coastline Poem* (Telephone Books, 1975), through *Poem from a Single Pallet* (Kelsey Street Press, 1980), Howe has been writing out of metaphysical difficulty. It creates in her conflicting needs: to invite your scrutiny while covertly signaling her refusal to tell you more than you might imagine sharing with another of your kind. She courts the impossible and suffers love at a terrible cost, yet is somehow able to render it in language. She is often out of her body, remembering what it was like to be in it. Her perspective is remote, yet charged with a fierce exactness of mind. Conversely, there is no better ear than hers; sounds palpitate, split, slide off at angles so that meaning is always carried at some non-verbal level along the musical line, even while a tentative idea is being proposed or a specific loss acknowledged. She protects her losses by wittily distancing herself with turns-of-phrase as deft as a seventeenth-century metaphysical poet:

Para-derelict,  
was Novembering seven. No sun's  
gold bore down on one  
cold room.

Paradoxically, a yen for heaven  
did not "brought goodness"  
but lit up the bricks  
like ingots, as if each hope  
has money in it.

[From "Hot Glass"]

Or as much in tune with the soul's deep fractures as an Emily Dickinson poem:

The cleft in his heart  
is a part of his beauty,  
which must be separate  
from experience, by never  
being whole-hearted  
towards one object of love.

[From "The Real Thing"]

Fanny Howe is not a poet of statement or image or concrete detail, though she appears to employ all three elements. The irreducible

achievements of her poetry are exacting, yet often ephemeral. Just as one is led to seize that moment she has created in you, she collapses it and the meanings skitter sideways from their boundaries of focus. Her terrain is the musical rendering of imagination and that is the only place where events really happen for her and become transformed into some sustaining hope that allows her to continue, even to desire the daily life in which she resides. She lives in a building, she looks out a window, she rides the train from Boston to New York, she lies under a bridge or on a bed, says goodbye to a lover. But always one is inside her mind, looking back at the event, removed from the world itself, in order to get some perspective on it:

Bulbs of grief, in the garden  
of eiderdown,  
always grow in dream's  
watery base, no fraudulent  
mutations, but unusual  
military doctors & dying dogs.  
Then it's the heroic stature  
of The Same, come day,  
with neighbors scraping shovels,  
make a soul do  
*a pas de cheval*, before the altar  
of the synthetic & chemical.

[From "Hot Glass"]

A major source of tension for Howe is her refusal to accept the boundaries of thought and imagination that others impose. They are as arbitrary as her own, but *not* her own. She is willing to push against the membrane, the closure of agreed-upon meaning, to create a time outside of Time, particularly when the context is love. Heightened connections within her life seem always to be threatened by the measure of hours and days:

Now his dream  
has changed into her life, they live  
inside the  
night meadow, which speeds A strap, a strap  
which will be time, which will hold onto nothing.  
[From "Alsace-Lorraine"]

But with you it puts me up against  
your fortress, fast, where my limbs  
and heart swing onto yours,  
and I pray in a pair  
we will mount the arc  
to the void, and not be flooded apart.  
[From "Common/Wealth"]

It is probably worth remembering that Alsace-Lorraine runs along the border shared by France and Germany and is a region which has undergone capture, capitulation, claim, and governance by France and Germany, on and off. It is a site for problems of identity, division among families, revised location of loyalties and the necessity of speaking two languages: yours and theirs. These questions, looked at metaphorically, move through the long sequence for which this book is named. One feels set among embattled psyches looking for boundaries and resenting them. Nothing is certain. What seems to be important is swiftly undercut by a single line, so that you are taught to doubt, with Howe, the appearance of things. At one instant, she experiences herself as independent, pursuing a course of choice; then the sun shifts position, another's presence enters the room and she is transformed, almost molecularly, as water to steam. It is then that self-mockery becomes her shield against the paradoxical dread of others' terms and, conversely, the terror of freedom. When she is most desolate and uncertain, her poems speed up and subvert any steady claim. When she is solidly inside an experience and loving it, her poems become quieter, longer-lined, moving you with assuredness into her clarity:

then solitude has no painful side  
but sits, translucent, as a glass in water.

Fanny Howe lives most vividly in the moment of expectation. Her spiritual quest is what fuels an imagination which would otherwise be crushed by its burden of reality/clarity.