

POETIC SPACE

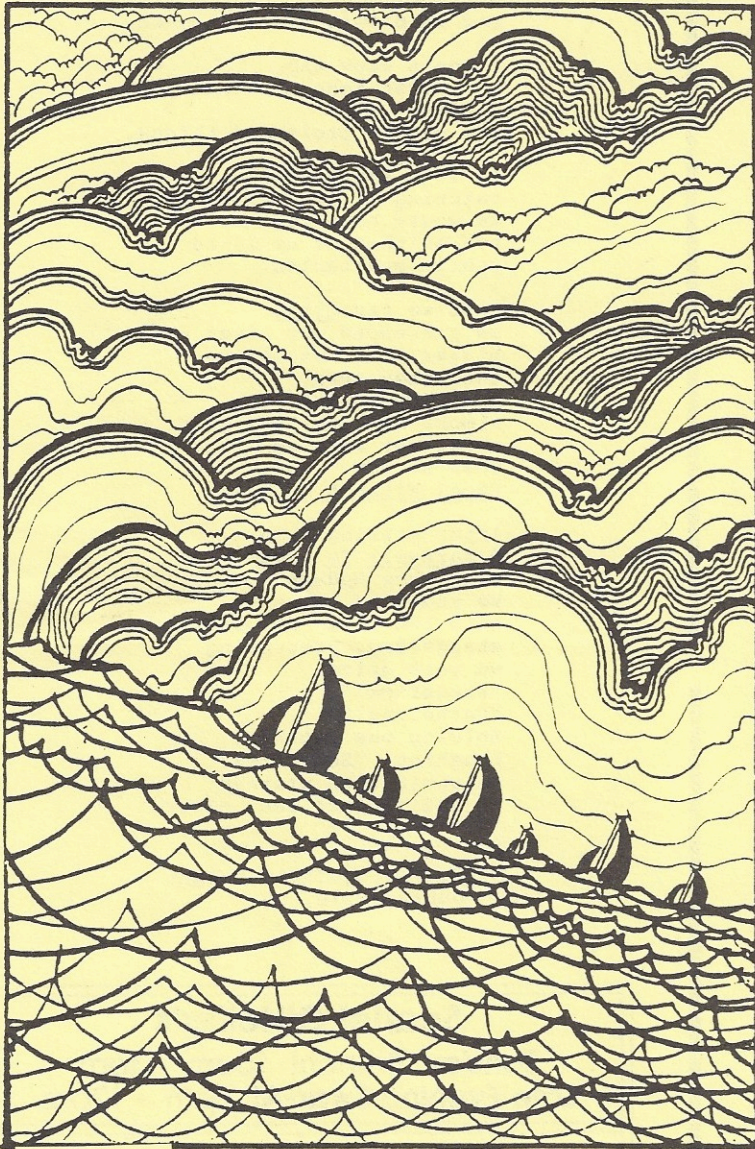
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SPRING



S. Minanel

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GAUGUIN IN EDEN: KOKE AT MATAIEA

Easel by palm,
beach by tide, blue by mountain:
the light leans unblinking
as the breeze brings the place
to life, the sound of clattering leaves
almost lost in the surf forever,
the men swinging their silver fish,
strung on vines, over the rim
of their beached pirogue.

Teha'amana
stands in the doorway, green pareu
knotted loosely at the neck, a smile
as shy as childhood coming and going
like a bird's trill, tongue licking
one corner of her mouth.

He thinks
it's fine to be thirteen, or forty-four,
no matter, as long as he can smell
the dark lushness of the jungles
that are rooted in the humus
of his mind, finding those totems
that bring back a red and orange world
that has no factual existence, but comes
as quickly as shadows do, as shadows
turn the night into the thing
the day yearns for, intensely without form,
without color, humid with emotion.

--Chip Dameron
Brownsville, Texas

MIDLIFE CRISIS

The door of her skull opens.
Dreams persistent as birds
flutter out of the gray matter.

The fog lifts
unsettles that old brain
unfolds it like flower.

Inside the grain of her face
eyes become burl spin
out of their sockets
spin beyond all reason.

Teeth twist out of the jaw
twist like tired trees,
even the body logjams.

Rivers journey through the pores
carry away the brutality,
the carcass breaking up
a rusty violin

sings her guts out
the heartwood
struggling softening.

-- Diane Nesbitt
Cambridge, MA

BOOK REVIEW

Smoking in the Twilight Bar by Barbara Henning
United Artists Books, New York, 88 pp.

This reviewer has many complaints about the condition of contemporary American poetry, but a few rise above the others. Apart from so much of it being badly written, too much of it is simply trivial, meaningful only to its composer. Too much of it is narrow in its concerns, parochial and regional in its scope, and where it is not juvenile, it is all too often utterly childish in its aspect.

Smoking in the Twilight Bar suffers from none of these defects. Barbara Henning writes like an adult, and that alone is enough to make reading her worthwhile. These are poems with a very hard edge to them. Be warned: this is not a book for those who want poetry to laud some kind of idealized fantasy of what life should be. This is a poet who has been around the block a few times and she is not about to make compromises with what she sees as the truth of human existence. This is a book of unvarnished reality.

She inhabits a completely urban world populated with people at the end of their rope. It is a rope, moreover, that was never very long to begin with. Her main characters are women who started from nowhere and have nowhere to go. The scenes are of bars, poolrooms, shabby apartments, cheap hotel rooms, and, always, the streets. Her people are a few notches below the working class. These are our ghosts, the millions of America's metropolitan flotsam, whose sheer numbers alone make their story worth consideration, but who are hardly ever the stuff of poetry.

The first poem in the book should serve to illustrate Henning's world:

One A.M.

It's snowing outside and the girl stands in her pea coat and her vinyl boots, and she looks through a frosted window on Kercheval Avenue. Her man is shooting a game, smoking, laughing, and a fat man stands in the back next to some empty pop bottles. She's afraid to go in, afraid to walk away and so she stands on the outside looking in. Her man looks at her, points his stick at her, this girl who haunts the corner when the snow is an inch thick: the ghost who won't stay home.

While the men in this world are insensitive brutes at best, the women are not much better. That both are equally victimized and trapped in a grim reality not entirely of their own making is always understood, if unstated. The author is not a moralist. Henning condemns through the simple act of observation.

With the exception of the last and longest poem of the book, all of the poems have a flush right margin. I believe that the book is intended to be read from first poem to last, in sequence, much like a novel. Indeed, the poems are arranged in such a manner as to strongly suggest a plot. Each poem is a single scene which builds upon its predecessor until the sense of desperation becomes all but unbearable. Yet these are not prose poems. In spite of the form, this is poetry of a high order.

One look at Lorraine, Henning's main character, should prove my point:

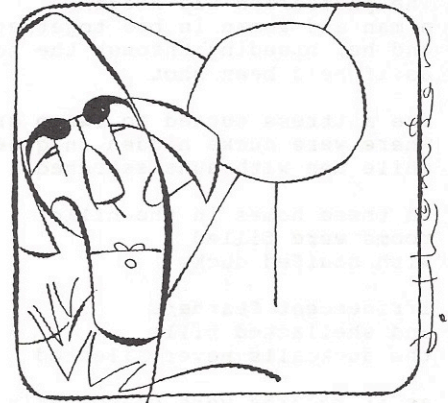
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HOSPITAL SHEETS

James Thompson

Best thing is to be really sick for about a month-- you wouldn't die or anything, not much pain, and you could eat too--but you'd lie there all day between fresh bleached starched ironed healthy smelling sheets-- and read anything you wanted, and watch t.v., and flirt with the nurses, and your lover would worry so much maybe she'd come back

--A. Lipkind
Honolulu, HI



Because I Could Spell Einstein

Crazy Fred, my only sugar daddy, at Abner's 5, was always trying to kill himself, had as many suicide scars on his wrists as a '50s starlet. Afterwards, after he'd drunk 9 or 10 Coors, and his big lips were loose enough to sink ships, and his brown eyes stormy enough to cry rivers, he always wanted to talk about it. I'd have rather talked to my mother about my failures as a daughter, so I'd pretend to be busy washing beer glasses, emptying ashtrays, until Fred finally passed out. I guessed the scars had something to do with him being kicked out of the Navy for being a homosexual, then being disowned by his well-to-do folks, his working as an assembler at Douglas Aircraft instead of an aeronautical engineer, and being a drunk, coming to Abner's 5 after work to dry out first on Coors before going home to his pad next door for his half-a-fifth Cutty Sark nightcap. Fred had bent my ear just once, and that was enough. Besides, I didn't want to get any closer to a crazy man than our mutual fingerprints upon my tiptray. Although I guessed I'd miss him if he ever really did himself in, that dollar a day tip he left me six days a week added up to a lot of sugar a year for my kid's Rice Krispies. Plus Fred always said he like me for my fine mind. I was the only barmaid he knew who could spell Einstein.

--Joan Jobe Smith
Fountain Valley, CA

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The man at the bar pleads with Lorraine. She could become part of a couple, a luminous one night couple who would live happily ever after in the neon lights of the Twilight Bar. Not Lorraine. "Can't help you with that problem, mister," she says. And she spins on her stool, crosses her blue neon legs and looks at a cool, distant black man who sulks in the corner with his saxophone on his lap, drinks whiskey on the rocks, and wants her occasionally.

Or, perhaps, consider this one:

Melodies

In a certain frame house in Hamtramck, the girl sits on a mattress on the living room floor with her eyes wide open, and the boy is high, flying very high. At the round table in the kitchen, he's pounding out a beat, a frantic beat with three men: palms against masonite. She's frightened. If she walked into the room, they wouldn't pull up a chair. She's an outsider, an intruding melody. She's a quiet body beneath a red quilt who'll stay in hiding, and skilled at not moving, she'll pass the hours listening and watching their shadows on the wall.

This is no Wordsworthian romp among the daffodills. When it snows, as if often does in this book, we don't stop by the woods for a meditation on the meaning of life, but head for the nearest bar.

In certain circles, realistic, urban poetry is considered beneath the lofty ideals of the art. I must confess that nature poetry mostly irritates me, not the least because the poets almost unerringly draw the wrong conclusions from their observations. Personally, I do not want a discourse on an imagined Eden where spiritual lessons are taught by every stone and twig. I want poetry that tells me the truth within the parameters that it has set for itself. This is exactly what Smoking in the Twilight Bar accomplishes.

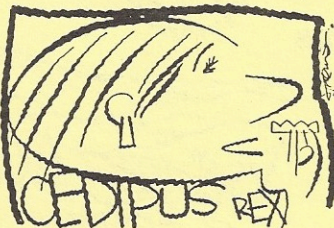
On the back cover of the book, the author's biography consists of but a single sentence: "Barbara Henning was born in Detroit, but now lives in Brooklyn with her family."

Compare that, if you will, to one of my favorite poems in the book:

Saddleshoes

A girl presses her back against grey cinderblocks. She wears an old buttonless coat, nylons with black seams, and a pair of too-large saddle shoes, scuffed on the toes. Dressed like this in her mother's clothes, she cries for the woman who can't come back home. For half an hour, she presses her shoulder blades against the house and then someone—her father—raps his knuckles on the window and she walks along slowly looking down at her feet and the broken lines in the sidewalk.

James Thompson



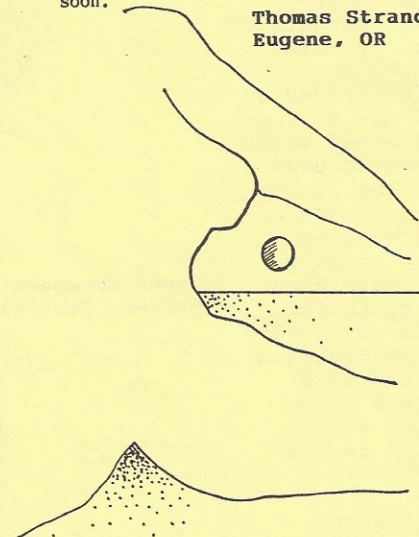
WALT PHILLIPS

The author tells us just enough about the little girl for us to identify with her misery and leaves the rest to us, to our own imagination, which is the best gift a reader can receive.

Just as we don't need to know more about the little girl, we don't need to know more about Barbara Henning. There is no mention of university degrees, fellowships abroad, teaching posts, grants, or even of a previous publication, prestigious or otherwise. Barbara Henning is, for the moment at least (and very appropriately for this book) as anonymous as those she writes about, as faceless as those who pass on the street.

But I sincerely hope that she will not remain so for very much longer. This is a poet I want to hear from again. And soon.

Thomas Strand
Eugene, OR



WALT PHILLIPS

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