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Barbara Henning

Friday, December 21, 2007

Steve Katz's *Kissssss*

I just finished reading Steve Katz's latest book. *Kissssss: A Miscellany* (Fiction Collective 2, December 2007).

This is a very inventive book with stories spanning from poetic narratives to a manifesto to a full blown novelette, all grounded in the ordinary but inside that ordinary one or more extraordinary weird details or tendencies spin the characters off into a different world that reads like a spoof on the crazy world we live in.

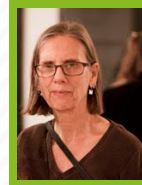
There are kisses in every story in this book and they mean something different in each spot. In "The Derivation of the Kiss," the first person narrator tells the story in lines and it's about the narrator's desire, as well as the author's desire. Katz begins, "It was nineteen sixty-nine, in Iowa City." The narrator has a thing for a clerk in a bookstore; he calls her Helen. He's a writer. They go out to a club, but it turns into a nightmare with bikers attacking people, humiliating them and going off on the narrator and his fedora hat. One of the biker's kisses him. Any minute a rape could occur. Lots of action in five pages. And Helen's hiding behind a musician on stage when the narrator gets out and then the story ends with the writer's desire:

What I have told here is the origin of the kiss, on page
Five hundred and thirty-two of *Swanny's Ways*,
My novel, winner 1995 American Award in fiction
Which you can check out, if reading is your predilection.
If you're curious did I ever kiss Helen, I can't remember.
I could have once, maybe later, maybe in December.

Funny and a quick read. My favorite two stories in this collection are the last two and they are both great stories.

"Parrots in Captivity" is written in the first person, and I have a predilection for the first person. I like the range it allows, the width and breath of consciousness. How much wider can one get? The narrator here, Andrew, used to be an artist but now, he's involved in some kind of straight job and he has an appointment with the President of the United States. The other characters are his girlfriend and his African Grey parrot whose name is also Andrew and who openly critiques Andrew: "I never thought I could do this, Andrew," he mumbles, beak full of what-polly-wants. "But I was perched there in a quandary, saying to myself, *Andrew, you good for nothing parrot guy, what the hell are you doing with your life? It's crisis time.* So just like that I went for it. And you know what? I can do it. I've got the right stuff. Andrew, my man, I'm a goddamned helicopter of redemption."

About Me



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It's writing like this that makes Katz's work so hilarious, and yet serious at the same time, offering a social critique. The language of ego psychology and Trump's Apprentice. You can make it. You can do it. Here the artist who takes up another career, with money at the center.

The narrator Andrew (not a parrot but maybe a parrot) has a girlfriend named Ilayana, a performance artist who sticks her hand into CD slots "and a green mustard glow worms through the veins of her wrist." She writes poems for her HIV, anti-war sequences: "I made this for the NEA. It's in a form I invented called the Rumcroft." Katz is making fun of politicians and also the stylized off-center artists for whom a political/human crisis is an opportunity for a successful artistic project. And I'm wondering: how can art critique or counter the politics of war and destruction when the image and the line is so quickly meaningless?

Narrator-Andrew is on his way to meet with the President. We aren't sure why, but the Parrot-Andrew says, "You tell the president not to blast Iraq so much with his technologically advanced boom-booms. He kills too many parrots."

"Those are people, Andrew."

"God is a parrot. You tell that to the president."

The narrator-Andrew passes by the homeless, with signs playing into the mythology of the politician-war-mongers. Give me a dollar. "I am dying of aids... I am the enemy of all the enemies of my country. . . "I will kill for my country. . . I have no hope. I have no money." At one point Andrew seems like a condescending used-to-be-an-artist liberal with friends in commodities and junk bonds. We don't know why he is talking to the President, but he is. And Bush is posing, his secretary is posing; everyone is pretending they are in the movies. Katz goes on (and we think maybe Andrew is thinking this, too): "We must love him for his John Wayne swaggerette as he strains to make us think he's a real Texas cowboy and not the mediocre Yale punk we know him for. It's hard to make out just where evil resides. He has help, of course from the vice one, Cheney, smirking over his various oil fortunes, but making more; and the Goebbels of the bunch, Rumsfeld, small and self-important; and John Ashcroft, the poor, bloated fundamentalist." This is Katz talking and/or Andrew has a social conscience. Back at home he finds Ilyana in bed with Andrew the Parrot, but nothing too serious. She's actually rehearsing for an NEA performance. When the parrot questions Andrew-narrator about his interview with the President, Andrew says he "asked him whether he thought that in order to defeat the beast, we had to become the beast?" And the President says over and over, no matter what the question, like a stupid parrot: "God is on our side, and our weapons have pinpoint accuracy." The parrot keeps asking, "Did he say anything about the parrot's dilemma?" "He says it will take as long as it takes, and to stop whining."

In the end, Andrew sits in front of the television. We all sit in front of the television, waiting to see what happens. "I have, I know, an illusion of separation from the misery out there by this thin green veil of money. This is money I have earned. We have seen how volatile the green veil is. How quickly we can be exposed, and onto the street. An omen of conflagration, and it's gone, all security. I live there in a world of bubble wrap and

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Styrofoam peanuts. Andrew lives with me. Ilyana is here sometimes. Outside of where I live the life blisters, the life of others. Inside, the pressures are slight, and have little significance. But what is outside, and what is inside all is taken into the heart, weighed and measured there, and it does weigh, and this is what is meant when the heart is heavy."

And the parrot repeats: "The heart is heavy. The heart is heavy. *Grawk*." And "so what" I think. We of heavy hearts sit. And the war machine goes on. Katz's story is witty, ironic, ridiculous and devastating.

In the last story in the collection, "Nowadays and Hereafter, there has been a natural disaster, a storm, and we are on the shore with Tignee, a net maker. He has just lost his wife and his son and his baby in the storm. He is migrating away from the ocean. The story is told in the third person, but the voice is very close to the subjectivity of Tignee. And the reader is very close to the loss Tignee has just experienced. The story begins from the heart rather than from the witty mind as in many of the other stories. Tignee is grieving, a wanderer in a world of strangers who all seem as if they could be his family. A boy runs by with his arms outstretched. Was he his son? It doesn't matter anymore. Tignee comes to a place where the children live in the trees. Little by little we come to know, and so does Tignee that he is living with ghosts. Some of the people are fleeing from the sea and others are fleeing from the "power of hatred and war." Tignee comes to know so much. "Life is the most temporary accident." He and the ghosts build a new world from the bones of others. There is a mythic quality to this story.. The war machine is eating people and ghosts. Finally Tignee organizes a group of ghosts and they make a big net a trap for the war mongers, and then they head back, returning to the sea.

This last story is a beautiful tale, a fine conclusion to Steve Katz's *Kissssss*. Kissssss off war mongers. We are going back to the sea, from dust to dust, from bones to seed, to start over again.

Labels: **fiction collective**, **Kisssss**, **Steve Katz**

posted by Barbara Henning @ **8:11 PM** **1 comments**



Thursday, December 20, 2007

Recent publications and Excerpts from Reviews of *My Autobiogrpahy*

NEW PUBLICATIONS

"Dear Hunting" – Forthcoming in print newspaper, *The Brooklyn Rail*, Winter 2008 (<http://www.brooklynrail.org>).

From "An Arc Falling Into the Bougainvillea." Reconfigurations: A Journal for Poetics and Poetry / Literature and Culture. Issue 1, 2007.

<http://reconfigurations.blogspot.com/2007/11/barbara-henning-arc-into-bougainvillea.html>

"Cities and Memorv". Photographs and Text. Upcoming at *Cvberpoems*.

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<http://www.cyberpoems.com>

Originally published by *Imaginary Cities*, a journal connected with an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Detroit, entitled "Shrinking Cities", 2007. Also as a limited edition photo-poem booklet (Long News).

From "The Animal I am". *Talisman: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*. Number 34. Winter/Spring 2007.

"Little Tesuque." In *Eoagh*, Issue four. 2007
<http://chax.org/eoagh/issuefour.html>

"Seventh Street" Forthcoming in *Zen Monster*, Issue #1, 2008.

"A Telephone Interview with Maureen Owen on Erosion's Pull." *Talisman*, Number 35, Fall 2007. WILL BE AVAILABLE SHORTLY ON MY WEBSITE AS A PDF.

EXCERPTS FROM REVIEWS OF MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

My Autobiography, reviewed by Mark Terrill in *Rain Taxi*, Print Version, Vol 12, No 2., Summer 2007

The idea for Barbara Henning's book *My Autobiography* stems from a collaboration with the artist Miranda Maher, who clipped off the corners of 999 books from Henning's personal library for an installment entitled "999." Henning then constructed a series of seventy-two untitled sonnet-like poems consisting of seven couplets each—selecting a word, phrase, or passage from each of the 999 books, using alliteration as a rough common denominator. . . . The result is a neo-Oulipian synaptic joyride through a series of evocative, hilarious, and surprising contrasts, parallels, and combinations. At the end of the book is a comprehensive index listing all of the various sources for each individual line. One can either read the poems just as they are, letting the lines play off the mind and ear without knowing who wrote what, or one can work their way through wile comparing each line with the index, only to be all the more amazed at how seamless and fluid the transitions actually are, who's doing it with whom, and what magic has been created in the process. . . . While the use of such generative constraints is nothing new, *My Autobiography* is not just a derivative spin-off from William Burrough's cut-up oeuvre or Ted Berrigan's *The Sonnets*, nor is it just another cento exercise in the vein of John Ashberry's "The Dong with the Luminose Nose." It was Oulipo member Harry Mathews who said that "writing the truth means not representation but invention"; in *My Autobiography*, by way of a deft combination of constraints and supple editing, Barbara Henning has conjured up a sort of truth by proxy by merely letting the language speak for itself in an inventive way.

My Autobiography (United Artists 2007) Reviewed by Bill Kushner in *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, December 2007/January 2008.

These sonnets are truly Objectivist creatures (Henning dedicates her book to Louis Zukofsky). What's more interesting about these poems to me? Woven, as they are, with the raw material of language I think they are often funny,

and they give a picture of our times and poetics in a weird way. . . . It's stuff like this that refreshes the language. It's language giving back to language the beauty of the unexpected. . . . I strongly urge more readers to take My Autobiography in hand, and find your own favorite passages in this most challenging and adventurous book.

Labels: **Barbara Henning**

posted by Barbara Henning @ **10:53 AM** **0 comments**



Thursday, December 06, 2007

Brenda Coultas, *The Marvelous Bones of Time*

The Marvelous Bones of Time: Excavations and Explanations, by Brenda Coultas (Coffee House Press, 2007)

When I first turn the pages of the *The Marvelous Bones of Time* I take a breath—the beauty of the space and the fractured lines. I love unevenness. In Book 1—The Abolition Journal—I find myself following Brenda—I'm sure it's Brenda and not a narrator—as she explores and maps out the place where she grew up. She wonders who am I, where do I come from, what is this place, what is this language: "I was a Midway Panther", "I (am a color)", "I knew the names". We are following her on a poetic research project, through memory, observation, digging through texts and talking to people. And the past is always there in the present, the language transformed over time, but still when you set it side by side, piece by piece, Hoozier, Yankee, and those lyrical wonderings and speculations, Whitman-like repetitions, one poetic moment beside another moment, Brenda maps out a life and the uneven traces left behind. How do we define ourselves? Who are we? Here the emancipation proclamation comes back again and again as the border between then and now, between him and her, between them and us. between Kentucky and Indiana. At one point we get on a train with Brenda and she's talking to "the only African American passenger on board" and he tells her "Owensboro [is] Heaven". The next thing you know, in the next poem, we're in Owensboro, Kentucky, walking down the street as she reports on her project.

The second half of the book is a collection of short ghost stories. The three stories I like the best are "A True Account of When We lived in a Haunted House", "Where You'll Be" and "The Shed". The first one is a story of a welder and fashion model (Brenda did work as a welder) who is stalked by an unknown man who eventually forces her to relocate. A haunting? The fear of the unknown stalking you. "Where You'll be" is a story about a father who dies; it's an anti-ghost story, an ordinary quirky story about living with death.

"My sister placed a brand new set of socket wrenches in my father's coffin. The coffin was not very plush: in fact, it was bottom of the line; my mother wanted to spend a thousand dollars more for a plumped-up one, but we talked her out of it because he had always said not to worry about the dead,

it is the living who suffer. The burial policy and veteran's benefits give us

about five thousand to spend, just enough to cover the cost, including something for my uncle Harry who worked part time for the funeral home. My father said he didn't want any flowers, just a rose in a Coke bottle. But he did get flowers, some with angels that played music; he got basket and plants, most still living. My father didn't have a suit, so we buried him in Uncle Jim's old clothes and thought we better call Little Jimmy and warn him, so he wouldn't be shocked to see my dad laid out in his father's suit. We sent my father out into the cold darkness, wearing another man's clothes.

"When I think of death, I tell myself that I'm going to where my father is, and if he's there, that's a good place to be. I'm going to the place where all have gone before me, and that's what makes me human."

Great advice for living. I love the simplicity of this story growing out of ordinary daily life. But finally the story I like the best is "The Shed," a continuation of Brenda's earlier film project. First there are stage directions to make a film in our mind of a pig shed and life around the pig shed, but the pig shed doesn't exist anymore. It's there in the film and it's also gone. And the story is about that process of being and not-being. There are directions for us to create this film in our minds: "Dig a wallow and fill with water." Then there are children throwing their dinner scraps into the "hog slop" and a reference I think to the ghost child in *The Scarlet Letter*, Pearl: "*Can you film the ghost of Pearl? Pan out to the humans, on bicycles and foot, rooting in junkyards on the old Moore place, rooting in ravines full of abandoned cars.*" Then a close up to perhaps the center of the memory, inside the consciousness of a little girl in the pig shed: "I am a small human, so small that my underpants come up to my armpits". And then we move back in time with the narrator for an overview: "I dreamed of so many treasures buried in the earth or of just bones, all the bones buried by time, nature, or natives. Given eternity, we could find marvelous bones." Coultas is a collector, a collagist, a materialist, an objectivist, placing bits of language and narrative side by side, or at angles, and the white space around them gives the impression: yes we were here, yes all is lost, but yes with a little digging around, we'll discover again the past in the present—quirky, deep, ridiculous, outrageous, frightening and sometimes reassuring. In this collection, with this investigative project, Brenda excavates the marvelous human and pig bones in time and place. Thanks, Brenda.

Labels: **Brenda Coultas, Coffee House Press, Conceptual Poetry, The Marvelous Bones of Time**

posted by Barbara Henning @ **4:08 PM** **1 comments**

