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Delving into Multiple Depths: Barbara Henning's 'A Day Like Today'

by [Jon Curley](#) on August 8, 2015





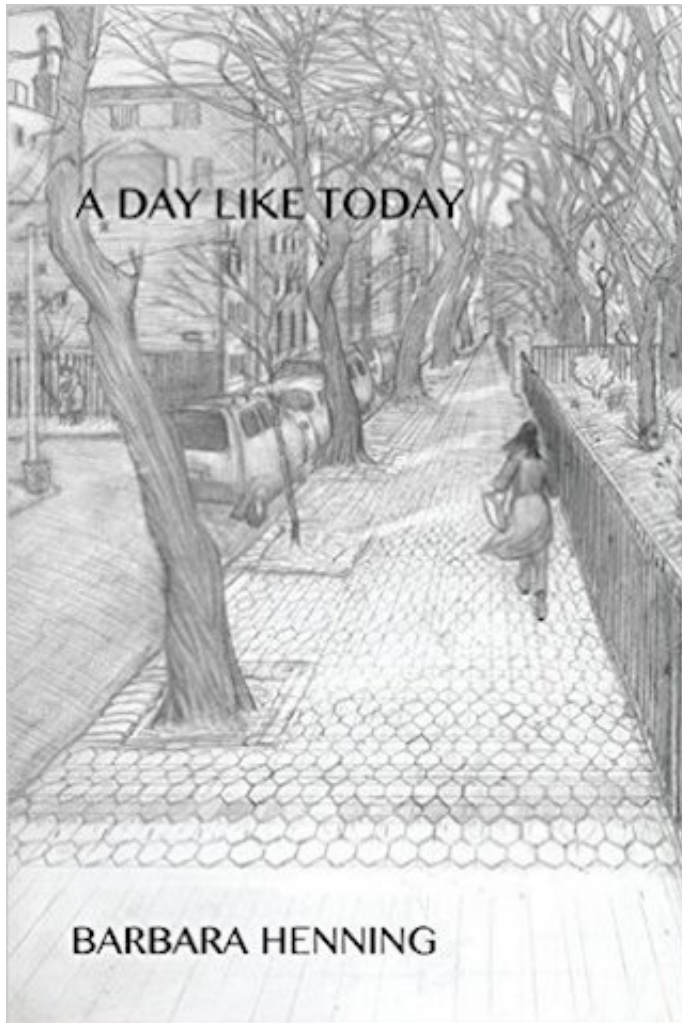
Barbara Henning (photo by Miranda Maher)

Poems preoccupied with geography, for the impatient reader, can feel less like landscapes and more like land mines to be avoided. Lest the poet be accused of a cultish devotion to a specific locale — the crime of parochialism — she or he might settle for delimiting the relationship of the lyrical “I” to its habitat, or else resort to the verbal equivalent of landscape painting, teeming with trivial set-pieces compelling only to the author. Or worse, as William Gass intimates in *The World within the World* (1978): “To suggest that a work is principally a reply to local conditions is to suggest that it is unimportant.”

Barbara Henning has long been identified with two cities, Detroit and New York (she has lived in the latter for over thirty years), yet her art has evaded claustrophobic associations to either. This has largely been accomplished by her attentiveness to geographic particulars in their specific situations, but also by invoking ideas, details and destinations well beyond city limits. Along with precise descriptions of her surroundings comes a steady broadcast of all sorts of chaotic global happenings, often with a polemical political cast that’s refreshing for its forthrightness and lack of liberal-lite centrist banality.

Henning has said as much—the rare artist whose theory gibes perfectly with her practice. Her short essay “The Content of History Will Be Poetry” (published in 2009 for issue 5 of the online journal *Eoagh*) sets the agenda to which her poems repeatedly respond:

The problem is that we are separated from that which is in fact the most familiar. The loosening of the old place. Get closer. Allow for the unknown uncertain. History without straining toward fact and reason. One perception after another. Break apart the diachronic this, and then that, and then that. The top of a large volcano detaches and slides over about twenty miles southwest of here, making a new mountain range and then this valley appears. A valley is a good place, too, for a fort or a presidio. One can see the Apache for miles in all directions. Legendary strength and resistance. Mythic power and vengeance. Poverty, despair and a desire to live. Two fighter jets zoom overhead heading back to Davis-Monthan Air Force base.



All of her work attempts to acknowledge and solve this problem, and her latest collection, *A Day Like Today*, is scrupulously attentive to this intended mission. Composed from daily one-page journal entries written in 2012 and borrowing words and phrases from various, unnamed *New York Times* writers, the sequences cycle from winter to winter—"cycle" being the operative word and vehicle for Henning, who bicycles around the various boroughs of New York and transacts various juxtapositions of her zones of attention beyond the city's scope. In their dailiness and seriality the poems seem kindred to O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, Paul Blackburn's *The Journals* or Bernadette Myer's *Midwinter Day*; however, they range across avenues of apprehension and expectation that proceed elsewhere — as articulated in the last lines of the final poem, "Out of the Elevator":

Exhausted, I peel off
my pants and my wet knee-socks

and then fall deeply asleep,
inner walls bristling with
impossible-to-follow strings
of *this* unfathomable reason
and *that* memory connecting
one image with another.

It is no wonder that the poem ends in exhaustion. The inventory of materials throughout *A Day Like Today* — including local and distant civil unrest, the tumult of personal relationships, meditations on the cruel social disparities from Manhattan to China and all points between — displays Henning's powers of cross-conjuring. Or cross-conjuration, as episodes and scenarios swerve, sever and recast their orientations to one another. "On a Stick" is a short, successful example of this criss-cross of intention, direction and dynamic:

At 4th Avenue and 14th Street,
the street vendor is cooking
meat on a stick. Black
smoke pours out of his
stove, blowing into the
intersection with hundreds
of people coughing and
moving together across
the street. Smoke into
the branches of my bronchi.
Wildfires in California
and the smoke so bad
the athlete rolls up his window.
Man, he says, I can't breathe.

A range of vantages serve aptly to evoke the messiness of a sidewalk epiphany. The poet employs sympathy as the connective tissue.

A Day Like Today has the weird frisson of a micro-epic, its collected monuments, memorials and markers the residue of a restless consciousness as well as graphic documentation of the material world. The avoidance of preciousness is refreshing and crucial. Anticipating where Henning's roving direction might take her from poem to poem becomes a key delight of the volume. The pulse and restlessness of this poetry calls to mind the exacting definition of just such an exhilaratingly venturesome attitude, spelled out by Fanny Howe in her essay "Bewilderment" (2003):

Sequences of lyrical poems have the heave, thrill, and murmur of the nomadic heart. Though they may at first look static, fixed-place poems with a confessional personal base, they hold the narrator up as an idea, even an abstract example, of consciousness shifting in its spatial locations.

Barbara Henning's nomadic heart is fierce, and fiercely aligned with an intelligence that examines its own operations, questioning its assumptions as readily as it strives to capture the outer reality encroaching on its calm. Henning understands the fatuousness of the vile, now popular phrase, "It is what it is" — seldom is anything what it seems—and she encourages us to reconfigure our notions of place and grace, both our grounding and rootlessness in the world.

A Day Like Today (2015) is published by Negative Capability Press and is available from [Amazon](#) and other online booksellers.

Barbara Henningpoetry