



Issue #52, 2022

Edited by Ed Foster, Chris Sawyer-Lauçanno, Bronwyn Mills...



Photo: Bronwyn Mills

MEMOIR

Basil King, "Agnes/Dylan/Gwen"

ESSAYS

Murat Nemet-Nejat, "Dying of Cancer"

George Quasha, "Divine Revelation in the Literal Expression"

Jeffrey Kahrs, "A Brief History of Turkish Poetry Translations into English"

"Todd Swindell, "Standing In Your Own Light"

JOHN ASH

JeffreyKhar, "Ashes to Ashes: A Memoir"

Bronwyn Mills, "In Memoriam: John Ash "

Mel Kenne, "What Can I *Do*?"

Murat Nemet-Nejat, "A Few Thoughts on John Ash"

REVIEWS

John Hart, "Three Books by Patricia Nelson"

[HOME](#)

[MEMOIR](#)

[ESSAYS](#)

[JOHN ASH](#)

[REVIEWS](#)

[FICTION](#)

[ISSUE-51](#)

Patrick Prichett, *Within the Inscribed*, by Michael Heller

Eight by Peter Valente:

books by Estelle Pavón, Anna Blasiak, Estelle Hoy, Kythe Heller, Alberto Caeiro, Red Shuttleworth, Cookie Mueller, and Barbara Hemming.

J. Curley, "On Burt Kimmelman's *Visible at Dusk: Selected Essays*"

Peter Bushyeager, "Passionate Quest," a review of Peter Valente's *Essays on the Peripheries*.

Charles Borkhuis, "ZOOMING WITH SUSAN LEWIS", on *ZOOM* by Susan Lewis

Joel Lewis , *THE SAUNA IS FULL OF MAIDS*, poems by Cheryl Fish

Thomas Fink, on *LOVE'S SHADOW* by Paul A. Bové

FICTION

Carmen Firan, "A Lucky Guy"

Mark Jacobs, "Hibernaculum"

Rob Couteau, Three stories from *Intimate Souvenirs*

POETRY:

**Dennis Ryan:
Five Poems**

About the Pioneer Valley Annual [Poetry Festival](#)

Dear Friends, *Talisman Magazine* will be on hiatus for the conceivable future. Do enjoy this and issue 51 (see top menu)

“Telegrams to the World” :

On Barbara Henning’s *Digigram*

While reading Barbara Henning’s *Digigram* (United Artists Books, 2020), I kept thinking of the way light hits the water and produces pinpoints of wavering lights, that seem to appear and then disappear very quickly, as if nature is improvising. I imagined each of these lights as sounds in time. Henning’s poems are like quick flashes of thought, a mind moving through the pages, to the rhythm of the sounds of the street, and what she encounters there. The staccato rhythm of the poems is like the sound of the subways, or the sound of Bebop. These poems are angular like Charlie Parker’s soloing; they are like airtight riffs on what is passing or almost gone like the memory of events in one’s life, like those “dark scattered clouds – the western sun – a golden hue.” She is like a camera focusing in and then withdrawing from a scene; she is adept at close-ups and long shots; the poems move from the local to the global, from nature to the urban world of New York City, and from memories to what is in front of her on the street, the people she meets. She meditates on the state of American democracy and refers to the bully in charge (we know who that is); she alludes to past loves, beyond reconciliation, or reduced to a complex friendship. Then nature appears as a kind of solace, alluding to the possibility of quiet contemplation and acceptance, and she speaks of “our shared mortality.” There is solace in unknowing, or rather not knowing, accepting the mystery of existence, as she looks at those “trees along 12th street in Brooklyn – light green, locust, elm, poplar, gingko, maple, and two I don’t know yet.” In the natural world there is not that same anxiety, or anger, or sadness that drives people to act against their better qualities; the natural world is cyclical, and bound by different “laws,” largely unknown to man as much as he attempts to define them. Life leads to moments of illumination in the quotidian; these are moments where one briefly transcends pain, moments like when there are “yellow leaves – on the ground – and the sun so bright – it’s almost blinding.” These poems remind us that change is the only constant and that sometimes our memories are the only things that give us solace. They record fleeting moments, catching just enough light to illuminate a moment before it recedes into the darkness of memory. The clarity of these poems is deceptive; they are like that painting you thought you knew and that you witness again, years later, seeing something in it that you never knew existed.

In the speed of life which these poems simulate with their staccato rhythm, there is also the sense of a stillness, a quiet, that resounds in the poems, a wider, more natural vibration; in Buddhism, sound and vibration were the building blocks of the universe; from light was born darkness, and from darkness light: “then off the train – walking east – just as – the moon crosses over the sun – the city in darkness – for a fleeting moment.” These poems are also a testament to longing and desire and their impermanence; a former lover leads Henning to the following observation: “we might have gone on – slightly hungry – you wanted *that* life – he nods again – then I say I love you – he says, I love you too – then he’s gone – just like that.” The emphasis is on his leaving, and the suggestion that it perhaps surprises her or not. She writes of another complex relationship: ““*oh, my white girlfriend* – he laughs – happy to see me – *when you text – my wife sees your photo* – delete it.” There is a search for belonging to the human community, that is at the center of these poems, a recognition of that “shared mortality” or that same air “we all breathe.”

Images flash in her mind of people on the street, of strangers, and children. She writes of “a young woman – with two little ones in tow – talking on her cell – to hold a fossil – to clutch a fragment.” In this passage, she makes a connection between modern technology and prehistoric culture. Our assumption is that rapid advances in technology actually solve fundamental human problems that have existed since the dawn of time but this is false. In some real way, the mysterious nature of reality and existence lies beyond our grasp. In the speed at which we go about our lives we forget that all cannot be known, or to observe the simple things in life. These poems preserve that mystery. Simple observations are worthy of note; in these poems, they are like quick strokes of paint on a canvas:

one pink-lipped girl – rests her face – on her friends shoulder – a guy passes through the car - do rag, sleeveless shirt – a teen

wearing pink lipstick – opens a package – of multicolored socks – neon green, pink, blue.

She is also aware of the passage of time, and after realizing in “Me, Too,” the truth of her mother saying “you will – take my place,” she quickly moves to a somber note when thinking of the motherless children at the border: “the refugees – the cumulative wound – rooms – that murmur – and whisper – remember me – take care of them – take care of you.” She wakes up in the middle of the night, “surprised to be alive – what about – the others.” Here Henning is mixing the present plight of the refugees with a memory of her mother’s words, that she heard perhaps in a hospital; in another poem, Henning writes that she took care of her younger brother after her mother passed away. The “cumulative wound” suggests that we, as a nation, should be outraged. This reminds me of Robert Duncan’s speaking of the unrepentant crimes that America has yet to pay for. In poems like these, Henning shows how memory affects the present, overlays it, producing a third impression, deeper than the two individually, which is embodied as the poem.

Henning is aware of the delicate balance that nature observes to maintain the world; she writes “*be careful – it’s like a string ball – if we keep going around – in the same direction – we will surely unravel.*” It is like unravelling the threads of a ball on which somehow you’ve somehow based your happiness, to find that there is nothing at the center, no gold, no answers. It is also the unraveling of decency that shows the ugliness underneath: a president who is racist, and who demonized immigrants, and incited violence against the LGBT community, and enforced policies that left children without their parents at the border. This country unraveled to show that white supremacy and hatred of difference are still very much alive under the withered cloak of democracy. On Nov. 13, 2016, Henning writes “democracy’s *not* coming – to the USA – anytime soon.” Trump had just been elected. We now know this is true even though Biden won the presidency, since 7 million of the president’s followers will believe, even after all is said and done, that the election was rigged.

In the concluding poem of the book, Henning refers to the *Om Nama Narayana*: “Everyday when I hit – the sidewalk – I think – it will never end – and yet – slowly and surely – the temperature will rise – and the might and mystery – of the cold wind – will surely spread – *Shiva – Brahma – Narayana* – their seeds everywhere – *Shiva – Brahma – Om Nama Narayana*. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, Narayana, is the “Guru of the Universe.” Shiva is well known as the destroyer of creation but she is also the patron god of yoga, meditation and the arts. *Om Nama Narayana* is a mantra that invokes Narayana, a god of protection. Henning refers to the “might and mystery of the cold wind.” The image evokes the anger of Shiva, and the poet’s desire to be protected from the cold. Throughout Henning’s book there is a sense of prevailing mystery that underlies each poem. It is the mystery of life; that all things cannot be known and this mystery must be preserved. Man makes laws and attempts to civilize the world but he cannot fully understand it. Quantum physics has confirmed for us that at the most basic levels of existence there is uncertainty: if a particle’s mass is known we cannot know its velocity. Thus it can be, as if, in two places at the same time which is a paradox and cannot be measured with certainty. As we see, in our current political environment, there is anger and division, and riots in the street. It is enough to not make you believe that the virtues of attempting to create a world of balance and peace based on reason failed. Colonialism, for example, is one effect of creating a “civilized” world and the Greeks had a name for foreigners: *barbaroi*. Let us instead, seek to understand what is unchanging and eternal, the mysteries that remain:

I am Narayana, the Source of all things, the Eternal, the Unchangeable. I am the Creator of all things, and the Destroyer also of all. I am Vishnu, I am Brahma and I am Sakra, the chief of the gods. I am king Vaisravana, and I am Yama, the lord of the deceased spirits. I am Siva, I am Soma, and I am Kasyapa the lord of the created things. And, O best of regenerate ones, I am he called Dhatri, and he also that is called Vidhatri, and I am Sacrifice embodied. Fire is my mouth, the earth my feet, and the Sun and the Moon are my eyes; the Heaven is the crown of my head, the firmament and the cardinal points are my ears; the waters are born of my sweat. Space with the cardinal points are my body, and the Air is my mind.

This is not to say that these poems are mystical themselves. They are very much grounded in the world of global events and people, and bristle with the savvy eloquence of a poet that echoes the writers of the second generation New York school; the tone is casual and frank, conversational; these poems are generous.

Henning has spoken of the poems as “telegrams to the world.” She writes, “At the time I was collecting poetic material from my journals, arranging, rearranging, and collaging in news from the days before and around.” As I was reading the poems, aware of

these statements, I wondered at the point at which these disparate texts cohered to create the poem. But then this mystery cannot be solved; leave it to the academics to try. To be able to make disparate elements cohere is essentially an occult art; a poet's art. I remember one of Alice Notley's poetry experiments at the Poetry Project: a student was asked to choose a word from a box that contained a bunch of scattered words; once the word was chosen, the student was asked to think of the word's opposite and then to show that the opposite was also true. As a result, a duality of meaning was resolved into a unity. Not either/or. I thought of this when reading Henning's poems, since they attempt to move from perception to perception maintaining a relation between these disparate elements; a reader moves with this flow drawing connections over wide fields of perception and observation. But this is also the way memory works; one thing can remind a person of something completely different. Memory is also not linear.

Henning is adept at this art of synthesis. She writes about the artist, David Salle: "David Salle puts – a lot of things – into his paintings – watermelon – a Kleenex box – we put in a lot of things – into our apartments – but the *how* – he says – is most important." Henning puts a lot of things in these poems: perceptions, feelings of longing and desire, love, loneliness, the urban and the natural world, the local and the global, but she does it in such a way so that they are unified in the musical form, that staccato rhythm, despite the duration of the phrases; it's like Parker playing on the changes (the phrases) while the rhythm section keeps the steady 4/4 beat (the beat of the constant rhythm). There is an ethic contained in these poems: "Buddha said – one must light – the path of others – in the filthy waters." That is exactly what these poems do; they light our way in the darkness.

— Peter Valente

[BACK TO MAIN PAGE](#)
