

TALISMAN

a journal of contemporary
poetry and poetics

#32-#33—Summer/Fall 2006—\$15



POETRY, ESSAYS, TRANSLATIONS and REVIEWS by
SHAMSHAD ABDULLAEV • ROBERT BAKER
LAYNIE BROWNE • ANGELA BUCK
VITALY CHERNETSKY • JON CURLEY
ZOË ENGLISH • ASALET ERTEN
LAURA FINGEL • THOMAS FINK
CARMEN FIRAN • NORMAN FISCHER
NORMAN FINKELSTEIN • JOHN HIGH

And here the brutal / is without issue, a dead end.")

In my opinion, there is no poem in the volume quite as powerful and beautiful as "From the Sermon of the Five Afflictions," written just before Shapiro's Objectivist turn, but as I have continued to read and study the poems in *The Sighs along the Harbor* over the last several months, I have found more and more not only to like and enjoy but even to cherish in Shapiro's work. The new poems, anxious as they are about the loss of inspiration that comes with aging, indicate that there is a deal more to be mined from Shapiro's signature blending of high and low effects:

Raphael, the affable arch-angel,
he's the one I need.

I have these questions to put to him:

Why has the music in my head
and heart stopped? What terrible
thing have I done? Explain
it to me gently.

Who created you? Jacob J. Shapiro
And Dorothy Cohen. They created me,
and my dead sister, Annette, and my
younger brother, Allan. Who will uncreate
you? Impossible to predict just now
but my money is on pasttami. ("In a Bad Time," p. 4)

W. SCOTT HOWARD

As Just As Which: Notes Toward a New American Prose Poetry*

Quale Press offers a distinctive statement about what could arguably be called a new American prose poetry. Both Cecil Helman's *Irregular Numbers of Beasts and Birds* and Sawako Nakayasu's *nothing fictional but the accuracy or arrangement* (she articulate key phrases toward that understanding of the genre's evolving tradition. If the prose poem's emergence may be located in Aloysius Bertrand's *Gaspard de la Nuit* (1842), Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), and Rimbaud's *Illuminations* (1872-76), then the genre may be usefully traced (in France as well as in America) along two lines of achievement and influence: cubism and surrealism. For cubists, such as Max Jacob and Russell Edson, the prose poem juxtaposes simultaneous (often incongruous) perceptions; for surrealists, such as Paul Eluard and Ray Gonzalez, the genre limns thapodic (often nostalgic) lyricism. Quale adds a deictical twist to that equation, underscoring each of their texts with the following imprimatur:

quale [kwa-lay]: Eng. n. 1. A property (such as lightness) considered apart from things having the property. 2. A property as it is experienced as distinct from any source it may have in a physical object. *Ital. pron.* a. 1. Which, what. 2. Who. 3. Some. 4. As, just as.

Hence a poetics of disjunctive agency: properties, objects, experiences, and identities grasped in the syntax of their mutually autonomous transformations. Within and against the cubist and surrealist dimensions of the prose poem's recent appearances in the US, Quale aims to contribute new work animated by a purposive (not groundless) indeterminacy. Playful, apt books that matter in which there's at least a modicum of certainty: a what, a who, and others as just as which, but neither mere (*bare were*) technique, nor overly complex (*as if*) idiosyncrasy.

I want to be absolutely clear about one thing in this review: I really like both of these books. Each text, considered within the context of each writer's career, offers a range of serious and edgy pleasures. Cecil Helman is already an established writer; Sawako Nakayasu, an emerging poet. Helman's volume stands closer to the tradition of the cubist prose poem; Nakayasu's, to that of the surrealist mode. In making that determination, the significant factors for me are: Helman's consistent

*Helman, Cecil. *Irregular Numbers of Beasts and Birds*. Florence (Quale Press, 2006) ISBN: 0-9744503-5-9. \$12.00; Nakayasu, Sawako. *nothing fictional but the accuracy or arrangement* (she) (Quale Press, 2006) ISBN: 0-9744503-6-7. \$12.00.

concern with constructing heterogeneous fields of awareness; and Nakayasu's focused attunement to the inherently dialogic nature of lyrical experience. Also pertinent to that reading: Helman's deft irony and unsettling humor, Nakayasu's dispassionate, philosophical stance toward idiosyncrasies. Each writer crafts those strengths toward a new grammar for the prose poem, a new disjunctive animation.

Helman's book consists of 80 paragraphs, each an individual prose poem. The volume is divided into four sections that correspond with seasonal themes: "The Slow Buzz of Exhausted Insects" (summer), "Once Again the Harlequinade" (autumn), "Someone Tells That Story" (winter), and "The Faint Creek and Slither" (spring). Some common topics circulate throughout this collection: poets and artists (e.g. "They Say" and "After the Exhibition"), identities in transformation (e.g. "Heteroglyphics" and "Flour"), and animals (e.g. "Leopard" and "The Second Ark"). One text in particular, "Wolf Novel," connects all three:

A man who is half-wolf writes a novel, dedicates it to his wife. Half the pages are covered with words, the others with paw-prints, and large stains of blood-flecked saliva. She likes half of it, but about the other half she's not so sure. For one thing, the plot is so unpredictable. On one page the hero is singing a love duet with his woman, on the next he's savagely tearing open her neck [...]. (66)

Many of these gathered poems deliver a similarly deranged yet agile glimpse at the blurring of boundaries between self and other, art and reality. Those characteristics resonate with the prose poem's so-called cubist line of influence. However, several texts (e.g. "Love Story," "Girl in Blue Dress" and "Cripple") pervert the prose with syntactical interruptions and intertextual repetitions, as in "Bad News":

Bad news on the TV. *Again*. Bits of bodies, bits of brains. *Again*. The radio bulletins whisper fear: bombs, more bombs. *Yet again*. More cars explode, exploding people, bits of brains. *Again, again*. Every day on the screen, volleys of shots, explosions. Crowds run and duck, the women scream. *Again*. Shouts, sirens . . . *Oh yet again*. Young men in camouflages, beards and bandanas. White smiling teeth and AK 47s. Also bits of brains. *Also again*. Bad news tonight on every channel. Death on every wavelength. *Again*. (52)

Next to "Graves on an African Farm" (which unfolds as a reverse-epiphany) this poem is perhaps the most hard-hitting piece in the book. A good part of that charge results from Helman's careful fracturing of content at the level of the discrete phrase.

Nakayasu's unpaginated volume is arranged into three sections, each distinguished by variations in formal presentation: the first opens with four separate

lines; the second, a block of text; the third, three individual lines. Those general parts of the book can be read as stand-alone passages; they also function collectively as extrapolations upon the volume's title that prompts a synecdochic relationship with the sequence of each and every line and/or paragraph in the overall work. Thus, consequent from and in opposition to the title's rhetorical proposition, *nothing fictional but the accuracy or arrangement* (*she*, the volume begins):

fakes her way to somebody's left shoulder left
stays a long time at the front of
insists her way out of residual longing
is not responsible for, not entitled to it — love, catastrophe [.]

Nakayasu's parenthetical suspension of pronominal references [*she*] and progressive, meandering associations between subject(s) and object(s) span the distance from here through the book's middle section —

talks to a sweet old gentlewoman on the phone, why don't you come and take a look. Goes to the specific location completely central above a restaurant or two above two more floors and enter. Do you like pigeons, says said sweet, do you like pigeons, didn't know of any relationship takes the place stays one night one evening comes home said sweet is at the window with loads of flocking, birds of course of course, knew to expect them yes yes they are practically or actually in the house eating from said sweet's hand her left shoulder even her right and arm and well think for one more minute then pack up get out out [—]

and then on to the final page:

keeps a catalogue of forgettable sounds — an interminable documentary,
as if to forget anything completely was impossible to desire [.]

These sequential glimpses of lyrical consciousness complement the prose poem's so-called surrealist line of influence. However, Nakayasu objectifies her study of manifold subjectivity — tempering what could otherwise slide into the thapsodic mode — through a heightened concern with a gently de-centered mediation and remediation of identity and experience. That apt gesture also engenders, on individual pages and throughout the volume, fields of discourse and painterly assemblages.

W. SCOTT HOWARD • GEORGE KALAMARAS
CLAUDIA KEELAN • DANIEL KANE
CARL KELLEHER • BURT KIMMELMAN
BASIL KING • ORHAN KOÇAK
DOUGLAS KORB • DEAN KOSTOS
BOB LAGUARDIA • HANK LAZER
JOEL LEWIS • TIMOTHY LIU
STEPHEN-PAUL MARTIN • BRONWYN MILLS
BRANE MOZETIČ • SUSAN SMITH NASH
DAVID NEED • JOHN OLSON
CHRISTOPHER SAWYER-LAUÇANNO
SPENCER SELBY • GRACE TASCHEN
HENRY WEINFIELD • RANDALL WILLIAMS
TYRONE WILLIAMS • ANDREW ZAWACKI



Cover photo copyright 2006 by Laurence Wisp

ISSN: 0898-8684