

# Curiouser and Curiouser

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## SELECTED POEMS

Fanny Howe

University of California Press  
2120 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, CA 94720  
223 pages; cloth, \$40.00; paper, \$15.95

When Lewis Carroll's Alice journeys through the looking glass into a parallel but opposite world, the first thing she wants to see is the garden, but not close-up. "I should see it far better," said Alice to herself, "if I could get to the top of that hill: and here's a path that leads straight to it—." But the path is a deception; it veers and twists ("It's more like a corkscrew than a path!") and never seems to lead anywhere. The convoluted, unpredictable physics of her imaginary but suddenly real world frustrates her desire to comprehend the whole of her surroundings. Imprisoned in a dimension in which she can neither make assumptions nor assert control, her only course is to go with the flow and allow herself to learn from the many distracting oddities that present themselves.

Readers of Fanny Howe's poetry may well feel like Alice, wandering through tightly constructed, hermetic spaces that abruptly open to cathedral-ceilinged heights, then iris shut with an opaque irony or terse aphorism. Though the glimmering promise of new knowledge seems to pulsate behind the veil of words like distant lightning, it never quite crackles into full view.

Language, Howe knows, is simultaneously generative and disorienting, and can govern human perception more powerfully than the eye.

No wonder Howe's determinedly indeterminate poetry has lately garnered strong kudos from the Language poets, but, like the work of Rochelle Owens, Rosmarie Waldrop, and other

independents who began experimenting at poetry's margins in the 1960s, Howe's enterprise was undertaken long before Langpo's politically-grounded aesthetics had fully surfaced. Oddly, her early collection, *Eggs*, was published in 1970 by Houghton Mifflin, perhaps one of the stranger poetry titles issued from that commercial house. Though other mainstream publishers would print Howe's fiction and children's literature, *Eggs* was her first and only volume of poems not published by a small press. This limited her exposure to the larger literary world and made her books relatively hard to find, which is why the University of California Press has done a service by issuing *Selected Poems* in its New California Poetry series. Largely a selectively chosen group of serial poems garnered from nine small press collections published between 1978 and 1999, the volume omits much of Howe's earliest poetry as well as work included in books issued by Sun & Moon Press; still, it exhibits a remarkable consistency of approach, tone, and style.

Howe's primary *modus operandi* is the poetic series, specifically, chains of lyrics, minimally punctuated, that present fragmented narratives of shifting consciousness. Though, like Alice, the poet learns to be wary of assumptions, certain articles of faith prevail: a sense of inevitability, the presence/absence of a divinity, and the imagination's power to both organize and transcend the physical world. The first and third of these may be illustrated by a section from "Q":

Wherever I am becomes an end  
Long drives through striped fields

when one episode includes the same  
smouldering gas coals and glass as the next  
one  
checkered with grime

A buried bulb  
develops under these conditions the way  
mothering  
turns the wilds into a resolution

Disjunctive on first reading, the poem uncoils slowly, line by line, until we realize that what we've just read may be, in part at least, a skewed response to Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar." The first lines define the sense of a terminal present, and the second stanza elaborates on the deadening consistency of an all-too-predictable life. But the final stanza offers something completely different, the surreal image of a bulb—glass, man-made—"developing" underground, hidden from sight. Like Stevens's jar, which provides a center for the unruly sprawl of Tennessee woods, the bulb conjures order from chaos. But Howe takes the figure farther than Stevens would (or could, given the limitations of gender), making it stand for pregnancy, a hidden embryo, bulb-like, gradually illumined with life. In an unusual reversal, Howe's simile is more "real" than the surreal artifact it clarifies, as if the imaginative and physical worlds were equivalent dimensions whose borders may overlap at critical moments of high emotion or recognition.

Co-existent also are mortality and the infinite, extremes which play both at the borders and at the center of Howe's poetry. In "The Sea-Garden," she writes, "The human is a thing// Who walks around disintegrating." And what we humans attempt to remake in our image, to humanize, will bear the scars of our own frayed condition:



Rambling snowmounds and still sheep along  
Cheviot Hills, dense fog, dots of dirt,  
snow-banged buildings, scraped fields.  
Land pays the price for becoming human.  
("O'Clock")

Howe frequently aspires to the state of unadulterated nature, seeking refuge in forests, gardens, places relatively unmarred by social constructs, but finds that such sanctuary is impossible:

Into the forest I went walking—to get lost.

I saw faces in the knots  
of trees, it was insane, and hands  
in branches, and everywhere names.

Throughout the elms  
small birds shivered and sang  
in rhyme.

I wanted to be air, or wind—to be at ease  
in outer space but in the world  
this was the case:

*Human* was God's secret name.

The natural world, now thoroughly invested with human consciousness, might as well be just another human product. Or, more accurately, humanity can never escape its own subjectivity: seeing faces in random patterns, hearing prosodic devices in the songs of birds. Nothing is quite meaningful enough until we tweak it into something it is not, into an object for whose existence we can claim some authorship. As one of Howe's most succinct lines puts it, "Whoever acts, divides." Human self-consciousness cleaves the thing perceived from its essence, de-natures it, transforms it into an imaginative act apart from its real self.

This is, certainly, as much a positive form of creative power

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as an obstacle to understanding, but we aren't happy or secure with it because we sense that somewhere back in the mythic past it was used to divide our own selves from a truer state of being. Postmodern and contemporary as Howe's poems may seem, echoes of this lost Eden are as evident as they are in the work of Yeats or Milton or Stevens. The persona in "O'Clock" confesses the desire "to stay close/ to childish things/ like milk and sugar// in my tea, a mother/ who calls darling/ —to clouds darkening/ the daily hills." The voices through which the poet speaks want desperately to recapture a pure moment of real or perceived safety and calm, states no longer readily available in a life that bristles with threats and disappointments. Things have not only changed since childhood, they are decaying as rapidly as we are.

Fanny Howe's poetry is not always pleasurable, nor does it make concessions to the (perhaps misguided) human desire for coherence and closure. Some passages flash with the transient brilliance of an important insight nearly vaulted into words, while others shroud themselves in deep solipsism. But the poet has created a domain of unique sensibility and artistic commitment that stands clearly separate from just about anyone else's. "Why, it's a Looking-glass book, of course!" Alice might exclaim of *Selected Poems*, "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are!" If she were to grow a bit older, she'd know all too well.

*Work from Nothing in the Dark, Fred Muratori's prose-poem noir, appears in recent issues of Denver Quarterly, Fiction International, and The Prose Poem.*