

Essay: *Begin in Singing*



Carole Maso

We have left the cathedral behind us. It is the evening of the act of narration. Still, from every part of this extraordinary world we hear bells. I have come to celebrate. I have come to praise. Begin in singing, Gertrude Stein once said, and I shall. Sing for the growing number of largely unsung women writers who are doing the astounding work of changing the very nature of fiction from the inside—taking it to new places where intelligence is not refused, where allowances of every sort are welcomed, crafting generous, strange, beautiful, irreducible hybrid books that enlarge our notions of what is possible. Both Stein and Austen have said that the novel is everything. And so it is. Imagine a door.

While the mainstream continues its garish self-congratulation of the “cutting edge” nature of its latest commodities, this new group of women writers seems to be finding its way free of the tyranny of working only in borrowed or inherited forms. They are disassembling the old models and constructing works of such variety and range that I scarcely know where or how to begin. I have decided to focus here, in the small space I have been given, on some of the recent and forthcoming books I have been lucky enough to have read.

Hear how the space, as Emily Dickinson wrote, begins to toll.

Among the writers I will look at, there is no consensus as to what fiction should look like or what fiction should do. No manifesto, no club, thank God, one needs to be in. The only common thread between them seems to be a radical interrogation of standard narrative techniques, a questioning of the assumptions of what fiction is, along with an intimation, an inkling, a dream of what it might be.

Renee Gladman’s *Juice* (Kelsey Street, 2000) is a subtle, sophisticated narrative whose subject itself is elusive. A meditative, philo-

sophically driven work, it is a book impossible to stabilize or fix, and utterly seductive in its departures. Here it is, the glimpse that is foregrounded, the slur, the slide of mind and eye as the subject forms and re-forms. This respect for the passing, the partial, encourages a kind of letting go and brings a new kind of pleasure:

About the body I know very little, though I am steadily trying to improve myself, in the ways animals improve themselves by licking. I have always wanted to be sharp and clean. But this is not a story about me. This is about those of us who live among the great ink-stained mountains, the ones between the Twelve Cities and that little island. It is a simple tale, not much to worry about. Though I cut corners to get here, these are the basics of my story: the fact of everybody’s disappearance, a conviction of flight and return, and a loneliness so startling that people will want to paint it.

Pamela: A Novel by Pamela Lu (Atelos, 1999) is another astounding work that inhabits a new fictive space, a space so odd and alluring that one looks up from it a little changed. A series of reported conversations, mimicking in part the representations of ourselves as we appear “in theory, commercials and general conversation,” Lu’s provocative use of pronouns does nothing less than suggest a new sense of what the “I” might be and do. At once distant and intimate, this is a riveting ride. “In my work,” Lu has said, “the sequence of short, anecdotal paragraphs serve as a reproduction of my private storytelling which filters through discontinuous and disjointed events in an attempt to chase some continuity in mood or emotional truth, if any exists.”

Being and non-being seems to haunt Thalia Field’s *Point and Line* (New Directions, 2000), a stunning work of formal audacity and range. Playful, subversive, and intense, its pieces build around evolving and mutating narratives, forming a work of structure and indeterminacy

not quite like anything else. It counts among its influences theater, biology, architecture, John Cage. I read it as the century changed and understood it as such: the first book of the new millennium.

Jane Unrue's *The House* (Burning Deck, 2000) architects with a vengeance an extraordinary space. A refracted, prismatic, cubist tour de force, Unrue's prose is hypnotic, geometric, and consummately intelligent, funny, and ultimately heartbreaking:

My body under your body; my head hanging over until you might have lifted it and moved back onto the bed; you talking about your idea of our future of the cylinder and the cube; my head moved back again to where it was before. Such a little adjustment to the distance between a ceiling and a floor, but there would have been a realignment in it. Not of the cosmos; just the house, rain coming down in the garden on the roof and onto the things in the summer dining garden.

Three other wonderful prose stylists are Mary Caponegro, Lori Baker, and Janet Kauffman. Kauffman's most recent book, *Rot* (New Issues, 2001), is written with such a startling lucidity that the gestures and images feel seared into the brain. This is the story of a father, a Mennonite tobacco farmer, a pacifist, who wishes to die outside in the elements: "He's done it. He's lured things to him... Look at the flies, the commotion, the turn he has taken. There's the blue of his thumbs, and his jeans, torn, the leaves fallen on him, eruptions of larvae, flies at his fly. His gall bladder set beside him like jade; vultures won't eat it, coyotes won't eat it."

Mary Caponegro's latest collection, *The Complexity of Intimacy* (Coffee House, 2001, reviewed in *ABR* 23.3), is a collection of beautiful and disturbing chamber pieces: complex, dazzling, at once dispassionate and feverish, populated by fathers, mothers, inventors, priests, ballerinas, and children of the most exacting order. There are pointe shoes in the freezer—and that's only the beginning. "I'll dance before the setting sun to keep the equilibrium as I nightly drown."

Another family story of sorts, a kind of still life with Mother and monkeys, is Lori Baker's *The Coming of Age of Jane* (Paradigm Press, 2001), a quietly diabolic, witty, and precise work consisting of journal-in-the-jungle entries: "I must look a fright. Face stained with snails and weeping. Thank goodness—no apes to see me today."

In Gail Scott's *My Paris* (Mercury Press, 1999), a diarist in contemporary Paris at century's end collects the bricolage of the city—a place at once ghostly and present. A kind of dialogue with Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1999), it is a work of deep nostalgia and melancholy. A lovely work of accretion, *My Paris* asks us to rethink our notions of where story resides as it meditates on the City of Light and a troubled Europe darkened by war: "On quay. Below. Banners amassing. ***Stop Seige of Sarajevo. Against Greater Serbia. Against Ethnic Cleansing.***"



Kimberlee and Humphrey
by Leyla Sharabi, © the artist.

More thin men. On stilts. Short fat clowns on ground. With hairless mortuary heads. Large brown coats. Crying.”

Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Circle K Cycles* (Coffee House, 2001) is a fascinating book based on the Web journals she’s kept for the last few years. The journals include “Circle K Recipes,” “Circle K Rules,” and “Y2CircleK.” “Touch My Heart Circle K” is a collage constructed from Japanese-English garnered from T-shirts, ads, notebooks, bags, photo albums, towels, food, cars, newspaper articles, etc. “Traveling Voices” is a meditation on the predicament of postwar Japan. In Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* (Coffee House, 1997), an old man literally drags the Tropic of Cancer north, past the border between Mexico and North America, raising questions about cultural and national definitions of literature: “I no longer looked for a resolution to the loose threads hanging off my storylines. If I had begun to understand anything I knew they were simply the warp and woof of a fraying net of conspiracies in an expanding universe where the holes only seemed to get larger.”

The mainstream’s latest head-over-heels affair is with Anything At All About India Fiction, but it never dreamt of Bhanu Kapil Rider or her *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* (Kelsey Street, 2001). This interrogation consists, as Rider states in her introduction, of twelve questions she asked Indian women across India, England, and the United States between 1992 and 1994. The questions include: How will you begin?, How will you live now?, Who was responsible for the suffering of your mother?, What do you remember about the earth?, and What would you say if you could? Responses include comments like: “Steam rising from the cracks in the asphalt. I do not think I will die today.” As it turns out, Rider has not only written all the questions, but all the responses as well: “—The project as I thought it would be: an anthology of the voices of Indian women....” “—The project as I wrote it: a tilted plane.”

There are so many others to include here:

Fleur Jaeggy’s *Sweet Days of Discipline* (New Directions, 1993), a delicious postwar Swiss-boarding-school novel written with such monstrous control and insight that at moments while reading you experience the distinct feeling of levitation; Alison Bundy’s brilliant, madcap *Duncecap* (Burning Deck, 1997); the deranged fairytale dreamspace of Kate Bernheimer’s *The Complete Tales of Ketzia Gold* (FC2, 2001, see page 22 of this issue); and also from FC2, Lidia Yuknavitch’s *Liberty’s Excess* (2000, reviewed in *ABR* 22.5); Laura Mullen’s wicked, genre-bending *Tales of Horror* (Kelsey Street, 1999); Brenda Coultas’s remarkably honest and touching *A Summer Newsreel* (2nd Story Books, 1999); the electricity of Dodie Bellamy’s *The Letters of Mina Harker* (Hard Press, 1998) and the “disembodied shreds” of her *Cunt-Ups* (Tender Buttons, 2001).

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Coming from New Directions in the fall is the fiercely beautiful surrealism of Yoko Tawado’s *Where Europe Begins*: “The chef arrived,” she writes, “with a large knife in his hand. When he took a bow, everyone burst into applause. He placed the blade of the knife against my back and stripped off my scales. The scales flew into the air like cherry blossom petals, and my skin burned. There was a roar of applause like waves breaking.”

Forthcoming as well is A.B. West’s evocative meditation on time, space, and mortality, *Wakenight Emporium* (FC2). At once luminous and gloomy, there is something breathtaking in these pages. Mysteriously, the piece awakens deep shadow longings in the reader—primordial and distant all at once. Imagine a door.

Let us not stop here. We have been kept from each other for too long. My invitation to you is to write to this publication with the names of others who we must not overlook or miss this time. (I have not forgotten Ann Quin, who took her own life at 37 and whose miraculous books are now being reprinted by Dalkey Archive. Or Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who cannot be resurrected enough times—murdered

in 1982, at the age of 31, her groundbreaking *Dictee* reprinted last year by the University of California Press.) Let us sing, unreservedly, while we can.

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