

Place, Berrigan's last residence in New York:

The major planets are shifting (shivering?) but out of my natural habit,  
Self-kindness,  
    I play them  
something Nashville something quality  
and there is the too easy knell of the games chapel  
The tempting scornful opposite  
Cathedral virus and goof immunization:  
The curves of the Spirit are not very interested in the conquest of matter.  
Color is the idiot's delight. I'm the curves, what's the matter? or  
I'm the matter, the curves nag:  
Call it Amber, it doesn't ride nor take to rider  
Amber it doesn't make me want to pray, it makes me see color  
as we fail to break through our clasped hands.

The whole is marked by the excitement and frustration of a working mind. Berrigan takes solace in the intimacy of "self-kindness" and "clasped hands," abandoning modernism's preoccupation with ideas and things for something like no feelings but in choices.

For Berrigan, the art of living was not a matter of extending the greatest average happiness over the longest possible lifespan (moral miserism). Rather, it was a matter of living in his feelings and those of everyone around him—of approaching as much and as often as possible a pure excited state in which a thing noticed becomes not a new toy but part of the furniture, equipment for living. What this meant for his poetics was that a line had to maintain a relation to the lines around it, as if the lines themselves were in conversation. A good line could be expected to recur in other conversations, sometimes as a reproach, sometimes as a remembrance, and sometimes just as a sound.

Jordan Davis

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Ange Mlinko. *Starred Wire*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2005. 64pp. \$15

You'd think Ange Mlinko would grow weary of comparisons with New York School poets. *Publishers Weekly*, in its review of the present volume, lauds her "Frank O'Hara-inspired verve," which is probably related to "the clear-eyed big-heartedness of Frank O'Hara" the same journal discerned at work in Mlinko's debut, *Matinees*. *The Believer* ups the belle-lettristic ante: where *Matinees* betrayed "a faux-slapdash, sociable concentration very, very close to Frank O'Hara's," the new book is "half John Ashbery, half Harriet the Spy."

*The New Yorker* restrains itself to noting that Mlinko is obviously influenced by “the conversational, paratactic style of Frank O’Hara.” Ron Silliman strikes the inevitable meta-note by observing that *Starred Wire*’s “back cover hollers ‘New Yawk School, New Yawk School,’” and furthermore that “if you like the poetry of the New York School, you’re going to feel completely at home with Ange Mlinko.” The back cover in question sports blurbs from John Ashbery and Charles North, while Bob Holman, who chose the volume for the National Poetry Series, manages in his encomium to name-check Ashbery, O’Hara, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, Alice Notley, Barbara Guest, Bernadette Mayer, and Ron Padgett. I presume he ran out of space before he could get to Ted Berrigan.

What is strange about all this isn’t that it’s inaccurate—one look at Mlinko’s poems confirms their affinities—nor even that Mlinko, far from being tired of the comparison, embraces it, proudly declaring herself “a New York School poet” on her blog, but that the New York School should have produced an aesthetic that, well into its sixth decade, continues to inspire an exuberant and honorably derivative poetics. It is hard to imagine that a young poet proclaiming herself a Beat or SF Renaissance poet at this late date would be met with anything but ridicule. But Mlinko has mastered her predecessors’ styles “from highlight to crosshatch, in the Aeolian distances, / amid such gypsies as one becomes in the true illusion” of a successfully negotiated agon. If *Starred Wire* retains the deceptively casual register of Mlinko’s first book, it is also more adventurous and more finely wrought than *Matinees*. Many poems work expert changes on contemporary poetry’s marriage of lyricism and near-cartoonish abstraction, made the more beguiling by what seems at first to be an easy play of surfaces:

Meanwhile the music  
strokes so rapidly it uncoils in understanding, not time,  
adrift in technical registers holding relations in light patterns  
all the night till morning’s mimosas under blue sky embowering  
our nicer noise to a gold-stringed noon acoustic.

Where one suspects pointless wordplay (“It exercises cerise”), one is advised to keep reading, as lines adrift in technical registers (“Even the Baroque gets lost in it”) reveal relations that uncoil as contemplation yields to understanding:

Recalling the equations derived for ballistics—  
aiming cannonballs is not like squaring lintels,  
  
and skyscrapers are all lintel.  
There isn’t a straight line among all these that never meet;  
  
I will write away for it.

An argumentative impulse belies the clever surface pleasures of most of these poems. “Keys & Scales” turns out to be about maps, not music, but the pun is purposeful, and the tropes meet in the final couplet, in which the metaphorical engines of cognitive mapping and actual mapmaking are made musically cognate: “The wilderness took shape; the stars were of where / Two had met, in honeydew shadow, and made maps praise.” Wonderfully unlikely turns of phrase appear like bits of brilliant but nonchalant cocktail conversation: “The buffalo of philosophy”; “a jaw of pines and water towers”; “Day is a fine discrimination to get away with / lipreading through the moving leaves”; “Schoolkids jumping the jellyfish fences / Wearing cranberry jackets / Through the paisley briars and stars / In starred wire.”

In the midst of such quasi-surreal pyrotechnics one might find a show-stopping rightness of perception, as in the final couplet of “Everything’s Carousing”:

Sparrows petulantly, like petals, adding subtracting  
to crumb-strewn café tables, then boarding the ferries.

Where another poet might take a whole stanza to describe the frenetic, absorbed, graceful hopping of sparrows, half-flying from ground to tabletop and back again, Mlinko nails it with four repeated consonants and the judicious omission of a comma. “I was trying to describe the perfect library,” she writes at the end of “Poetry as Scholarship,” “when I remembered that all you need to know is its etymology, rallying place.” Mlinko has a facility that seems intuitive but must be the product of long study: “It’s the sort of weather Tybalt murdered Mercutio in.” “In January there isn’t the same participation. / The tree that was lit up is dark.” “Today we’ll see, wild epiphenomenon, how to stay under the sky.”

If there is a problem with the book, it is its occasional willingness to loaf at the post-avant doorpost. The lazily conventional intrudes, and one could be reading any poem printed in *Fence*: “Dear Soho. Dear Sappho. Dear Orpheus. Dear Silenus. / Dear King Midas. No, dear Soho”; “A sick manager, mammal, Malthusian / induced to become a patriarch, patricide.” Such lines will be familiar from any number of contemporary journals catering to a period style of forced ellipsis and levity, whose practitioners can seem to write solely in order to flout the potentialities of pathos, as if genuine feeling or intellection in a poem were enough to earn one the opprobrium associated with confessional poetry. Underlying this aesthetic is the unfortunate assumption that there exist two warring camps in English-language poetry—but, to quote Ghostface Killah, it don’t have to be this way. Many of the most intriguing poets now at work seem to perform something like the “double refusal” Pierre Bourdieu diagnosed in “Flaubert’s Point of View.” Merrill

Gilfillan's quietly experimental poems, for instance, provide reasons not to believe poetry in English is irredeemably Manichean, beholden either to the Language school or to epiphanies involving deer. Jennifer Moxley, Donald Revell, C.D. Wright, and Forrest Gander come to mind as well. And Ange Mlinko, despite her lapses into the sort of chatty patter that infests so many hip journals, can bring us to that necessary point where a cricket is thrown out of a house "like rain bounced off a small false roof / over the spiral volutes of its capitals"—where, that is, our "view of the sweet / hypoglycemic across the street" unoccluded, our interest in "precise correlatives to describe the randomness of the universe" might be sustained long enough for us not to mind that we will never find them.

Michael Robbins

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Howard Akler, *The City Man*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 2005. 154pp. \$14.95

Because the *Chicago Review* is a serious publication, given to sober criticism and averse to fawning blurbs, I feel bound to reveal straight away that *The City Man* contains a simile that strains my objectivity. Toronto, 1934: pickpocket Mona Kantor, trailing a mark through Union Station, watches the back of the sucker's head and finds "His yarmulke askew like a large lazy eye." Consider yourself warned.

In games of word association, the utterance of the word "Toronto" is answered inevitably, instantaneously, with the cry "Rhythm!"

This claim does not seem so far-fetched in the world of *The City Man*, a spare, episodic first novel from Howard Akler. Pickpockets, hustlers, touts, and grifters ease through Toronto's Depression-era streets, their speech as deft as their fingers and feet. Good timing here is not just a tool for conning bateses, pinching pokes, scoring pits. It's a sign of a sensibility, a kind of knowingness. Characters with rhythm of movement or language see and sense things to which other Torontonians, lazy-eyed suckers all, are oblivious.

In the manner of its characters' clipped but rhythmic speech, Akler's third-person narration taps out an easy patter, often in imagistic sentence fragments. Parts of speech are rationed in the downtrodden city, forcing readers to fill in blanks—pronouns, verbs, articles—the way impoverished citizens patch their suits.

Mona, our grifter heroine, has the most preternaturally perfect timing in the novel. She is a stall: that half of a pickpocketing duo responsible for