

REVIEWS

Karen Volkman, *Nomina*. Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 2008. 71 pp. \$16.

Karen Volkman's three volumes of poetry are linked by an obsession with numbers, and especially with the not-number, zero. Take one of *Nomina's* fifty untitled sonnets:

One says none is nascent, noon is due
when two's bleak blinded hybrid twins the light.
None says no one numbers less than two,
the one who days, the one who darks all night.

Noon's cold name is cloven, frigid height,
a one-division in the random, fault
split in fusion's faction, no one's bright
eyeless acme arcing—cohesive vault.

That one were none's skulled infant, second sight
of two's twained woes, and tangled toxic root,
nearer to nothing, nameless, sequent blight,

as two's black ruse slits mind a riven fruit.
These sumless parents, two and null, make one
Queen of Quotient, who adds her x to none.

On one level, the sonnet offers a mini-allegory that literalizes—indeed, personifies—absence (zero), self-love (one), and union (two). But the virtuosity of Volkman's wordplay immediately amplifies and undercuts these narrative seams. Note the “operations” at play in the first stanza. “One” says that “none” (no one, noon) is coming soon, apparently right about the time that one and two “twin” the light with a “hybrid” (this is what happens when one and two multiply). As a verb, “twin” can refer either to conjoining or dividing: the pun is perfect. “None” then declares one to be nothing (that's what happens when one and none multiply), and what follows leaves it unclear whether it is zero, one, two, or “none” of the above that “day” and “dark” all night. And this is only the first four lines: the blurring of numbers and names and narratives continues, ever denser, stranger, stronger. In the end, zero reigns as “Queen of Quotient,” who transforms whatever it (“she”?) encounters. As in algebra, these lines assert, so in the romantic triangulation that marks the sonnet tradition: one figure is bound to swallow another.

The echo of Dickinson's "Queen of Calvary" above, like the playful adaptation of a metaphysical "noon," point to a long-standing engagement with that poet's style and thought. Volkman's first collection, *Crash's Law* (1996), takes its title from Dickinson, and opens with her famous lines: "The Zeroes – taught us – Phosphorus – / We learned to like the Fire." Just as in Dickinson's poems, zero is for Volkman a concrete exteriorization of the condition of lyric utterance, speech that emerges only by elliptical constraint, by way of the "circuit" or "circumference." In this first volume, though, Volkman's project is hobbled by strands of pattering alliteration, unbearable pet names, predictable syntactic deformations (nouns as verbs, abstract nouns as concrete ones), and other tics from the workshop woodpile. *Spar* (2002) has some of this, too, but here Volkman's aural intelligence guides a more substantial investigation—one that continues in *Nomina*—of the cognitive content at the border of nonsense. This is the site, for her, of what has to be thought of as a species of revelation, and zero emerges as its primary metaphor. As one prose poem has it, zero speaks a language all its own: "my zero, windy and sleepless, how to teach it? It speaks to the rain, the spare precipitation—it says, Desert conditions, but I fathom the sea—and rain in its meticulous sermon mumbles back...my zero, sum and province, whole howl, skies the all" ("There comes a time to rusticate the numbers").

The difference in *Nomina* is not merely that the poems are stronger but that the volume is so much more ambitious. The choice of the sonnet sequence is the first signal of this ambition. The keynotes of the Petrarchan tradition—unstanching desire, astrologic and providential fate, loss of the will—appear in familiar, if disorienting, forms. There is something here of the Elizabethan sonnet's heritage, too, most obviously in the acutely compacted and playful language. But like any successful engagement with conventionalized poetic models, *Nomina* is nevertheless difficult to place. An epigraph from Gilles Deleuze sets into motion the volume's strange combination of sensorial distortion, narrative shape, and logic: "She knows that the more the events traverse the entire, depthless extension, the more they affect bodies which they cut and bruise." In Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*, this sentence refers to what Alice "knows" in the world of *Through the Looking-Glass*: that depth is an illusion. Alice is a hero for Deleuze because she understands that language is material, as objects are material. One *builds* with words. Deleuze is interested in isolating Fregean "sense" from "reference"—isolating that aspect of language that distinguishes propositions from one another even when there is no denotative difference between them ("the morning star is the evening star," is the canonical example). Having concluded that conventional analytic methods have not satisfactorily explained sense, Deleuze resorts to a nonconventional heuristic that combines fantasy (Alice's world) and the dialectical grounds of

paradox. *Nomina* takes up this project thematically; shades of Carroll lurk in Volkman's partly visible narrative (a questing girl, monsters, talking flowers and numbers). But *Nomina* also takes it up philosophically: these sonnets attempt to exemplify sense rather than analyze it, presenting intricate, shapely near-nonsense sliding freely among referential nodes.

The significance of Volkman's prosodic fireworks, then, is that they powerfully engage the mind even as they defer representation. Perhaps Volkman is, as Pound said of Swinburne, a poet who neglects the "value of words as words," that is, the meaning-bearing value of words. The salient question is not whether this neglect of conventional meaning is acceptable but rather what other kinds of value the poems urge on us. In the manner Deleuze describes as heroic, Volkman treats words as objects for reanimation; their significance is most apparent in their strangeness. Consider the volume's opening sonnet, another panegyric to zero:

*As the dream a consciousness adored
beaches its semblance in a mist, a mere
oval emulates a circle, austere
lack, swart spiral. Opacities are poured*

*in midnight ciphers, alembic of the shored
remnant, naufrage the hours cannot steer
north of founder, and ruin is the clear
attar on the tongue, trajectory of toward*

*blue as blindness in the ocean's stare.
Oh the minus when it runed and roared.
Lucid cumulus (the wind's white hair),*

*indignant plural of the single word,
rages, retrogrades. Omega air
all formless fire, a body of the lord.*

Naufrage (shipwreck) is an important word for Mallarmé, whose own powerfully aural sonnets anticipate (and might well have influenced) Volkman's own, and the "attar" of the tongue appears to borrow from Dickinson: "Essential Oils – are wrung – / The Attar from the Rose / Be not expressed by Suns – alone – / It is the gift of Screws –". Apart from tracing these allusions, though, what can be said of language like this? Is it designed to render us mute? Certainly, these lines do not allow the extraction of portable propositions that other poems might. One might begin instead on a more basic level, the level of diction. The antique language here shows Volkman's interest in lost semantic traces of familiar words (keep your OED handy) and in neolo-

gism by way of surprising combination. More basic still, note the number of times that one is forced to make an “oh”—whether of pleasure or pain it is difficult to know—when reading this poem aloud. All roads—aural, bodily, referential—lead in one way or another to an “austere lack,” zero, the absence that haunts this entire volume.

Volkman occasionally relieves this high seriousness with lines of self-parody. In certain ways, these are the book’s most instructive moments, for we see in them Volkman’s own commentary on the project of naming and un-naming in poems: “How does a namelessness name?...jouissance of the burning to seem / occult, aureate, aspect, thread, / not number that nevers the scheme” (“Reticulation of a premise”). In other cases, she borrows elements of fable to keep poems that evade, blur, and self-devour from vanishing entirely into the air:

Now you nerve. Flurred, avid as the raw
worm in the bird’s throat. It weirds the song.
The day you die darkly in the ear all wrong—
all wreck, all riot—the maiden spins the straw,

the forest falters. Night is what she saw,
in opaque increments deafening the tongue.
Sleep bird, sleep body that the silence strung,
myrrh-moon, bright maudlin, weeping as you draw...

With its tense oppositions and reversals, the scaffolding in place here offers clues of a tragic tale. The more familiar use of the verb “nerve,” meaning something like “to strengthen” or “to embolden,” may here also echo an archaic connotation having to do with ornamentation. (This possibility is reinforced by the adjective “flurred,” or decorated with flowers, and the appearance of that perennial lyric figure, birdsong.) The “maiden” of this fable, like the Lady of Shallot, exists in a timelessness of sorrow. She is haunting precisely because she defies allegorization. Of true fable, then, this one retains only shape: almost any meaning could be poured there. What is most striking, perhaps, among these lines that so powerfully invite and defer narrative description, is the apparent faith that “weird[ed]” song, language that “eats its excess,” will always bear fruit. “No word survives the color of the deep,” Volkman writes, “this black unsinging”; yet these sonnets body forth demanding vocal performance. That is strange. It is really something.

Michael Hansen

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