

Donna Stonecipher, *The Cosmopolitan*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2008. 84pp. \$16

The figure of the cosmopolitan is difficult to locate. Like her nineteenth-century counterpart the flaneur, she is always on the move—but unlike the flaneur, her city is the world. Donna Stonecipher scrutinizes this figure in her third book, continuing a project, begun in her earlier work, of exploring the experience of travel abroad in the years following the Cold War. Moving past the ironic Orientalism of the love poems in *Souvenirs de Constantinople* (Instance Press, 2007), Stonecipher has sharpened her poetry's underlying suggestion that the ethos of cosmopolitanism is implicated in the brutal frameworks of imperialism and colonialism. These poems, however, avoid heavy-handed polemic in making their point: *The Cosmopolitan* playfully defamiliarizes the language of cultural tourism and consumerism to reveal the extent to which we have absorbed and naturalized their logic.

In Stonecipher's hands, the work of the prose poem expands while its length contracts—a few sentences, or even a few words, suggest multiple narrative possibilities and critiques:

White flower. Artificial scar. CIGARETTES. Like a park without a crystal palace, without a white flower built like a cupola, without an origami swan without its empire, built like a white flower. CIGARETTES. The green Subaru floated very slowly under the bridge.

Making familiar objects seem exotic, and vice versa, the poem appropriates the strategies and language of advertising. Stonecipher gestures at a particular history of commodity fetishism in the one-word invocation of Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, constructed in London in 1851 as part of the Great Exhibition, a Victorian celebration of industry. This particular park is "like" one "without" the objects named in the poem (except, perhaps, the cigarettes and the green Subaru), suggesting that this is merely "a park," *any* park in *any* place, and that the Crystal Palace can be understood more as a symbol than as an actual place. The poem activates the distance between the past, with its recognizable icons of material progress, and the present, in which the decentralization of capital has left an "artificial scar" on the landscape of the park where the Crystal Palace once stood. The poem thus makes its meaning in the charged space between two options: a romantic melancholy for the lost Crystal Palaces of the past and an ironic need to locate their substitute in the mass-produced green Subarus of the present.

There is a striking resemblance between the miniaturized worlds of these poems and the miniature objects inside of them. The idea of the miniature becomes a near obsession in Stonecipher's project:

Detroit is shrinking. Manchester is shrinking. Leipzig is shrinking. In the souvenir shop she found miniatures of the city in snowglobes. Why is this how one likes to imagine the visited city, forever in the throes of winter? Why is this how one likes to imagine the visited city, fitting into the palm of one's hand?

The city becomes something like a collectible article that, as Stonecipher's speaker puts it elsewhere in the book, "The visitors carried home...tamed in glass." "What is miniature is liberated from the petty tyranny of use," she wrote in *Souvenir de Constantinople*, echoing Walter Benjamin. In this poem she chooses the blighted urban landscapes of Detroit, Manchester, and Leipzig, once-formidable centers of manufacturing and trade now reduced almost to ruin. The implication here is that the desire for kitschy souvenirs is an instance of the same power that has created such postindustrial landscapes. Even our snowglobes have global consequences.

Once the city has been reduced to a manageable size, it can assume its place alongside the other objects in the collector's display case:

In the cabinet of wonders dismantled into the glass case there were ivory miniatures: saints, castles, madonnas, migrations—carved by a patience it is impossible even for the elephant to remember. "We" are no longer tantalized by the tiny. And what *of* the entire book of Exodus carved into a single cherry pit?

The now-dismantled "cabinet of wonders" contains promiscuous arrangements; the sovereign cosmopolitan imposes its new shape. This act of making reinvents the violent origins of earlier acts of making (the making of nations, the making of empires). Stonecipher here makes a wry joke on the elephant's legendary memory: the patience of the carver is impossible to remember not "even" but *especially* for the elephant—because the elephant is dead.

Even if we are in on the joke, though, it can be difficult to understand what these poems want their readers to conclude:

The disciple asked the prophet of the postmodern: um, whose displacement exactly did you say you were speaking to? Displacement, embankment: some words have liquid centers, like some chocolates. Each day around the world, more and more villagers leave home to disappear into cities.

The prophet is a pundit whose language is meant to mystify. Yet the disciple's request for clarity is in earnest. Which villagers, and which cities? Does it make a difference? Is displacement a mere word? The answer to this question is both yes and no. The speaker's gloss—"some words have liquid centers, like some chocolates"—registers the idea that the meanings of words

are not uniform, and that there may be a hidden, even decadent pleasure in analyzing and denouncing global inequality—from afar. Meanwhile, however, inequality grows. Cosmopolitan irony registers this fact—it can see the disciple and the prophet for what they are—but offers little in the way of consolation: “Over a double espresso he said, ‘I hate the phrase “late capitalism.” Maybe it’s actually very early.’” There are two jokes here. The first is on the speaker: his wit itself is a luxury item whose existence depends on the economic system he laughingly dismisses. And the second joke is on us: capitalism is probably not going anywhere any time soon.

Is Stonecipher critiquing the myopia of the Western consumer who complains about Marxist jargon even as his actions confirm the force of its critique? Or is this cosmopolitan free of utopian illusion, an unlikely hero? These poems are preoccupied with the nuances of such ambiguities, and the neutrality of their language at times makes them difficult to interpret, as one of her speakers acknowledges:

She wrote, I want to be seen through. He wrote, But you are deliberately opaque. She wrote, I want people to want to work hard to see through my (really quite superficial) opacity. He wrote nothing back. She waited, but he wrote nothing back.

This cosmopolitan wants her readers to “work hard”—but why should we? What is her position? Is it cynical? Worldly? Critical? Detached? Engaged? These poems can sometimes seem like instances of the very superficiality they seek elsewhere to overturn. Yet even in this opaque moment, Stonecipher’s indirections and ironies exemplify a rich, critical self-consciousness.

Justin Parks

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Linh Dinh, *Some Kind of Cheese Orgy*. Tucson: Chax Press, 2009. 128pp. \$16

Linh Dinh, *Love Like Hate*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2010. 240pp. \$16.95

Reading the poems in *Some Kind of Cheese Orgy*, I was reminded of the increasingly hysterical prose Linh Dinh has recently been writing for the leftist newsletter and website *CounterPunch*. “Pissed Off Zombies,” for example, rails about Americans’ complicity in imperialist violence and their eagerness for more of the “snuff show that’s Iraq.” It would work well in paragraphs. Meanwhile the novel *Love Like Hate* imports a phrase from one of Dinh’s