

Jackson Mac Low, *154 Forties*. Edited by Anne Tardos. Denver: Counterpath Press, 2012. 314pp. \$22

Although Jackson Mac Low is best known for writing according to strict constraints, the poems of *154 Forties* are bound together by a looser common form: eight five-line stanzas, each concluding with one especially long line and one especially short one. This is Mac Low at his least Cagean: no acrostics, no decks of playing cards, just—as he puts it in his introductory note—“words, phrases, etc....seen, heard, and thought.” The resulting variety draws out Mac Low’s perpetually conflicting tendencies: between procedure and free association, found and composed texts, formal stringency and eruptive messiness. It seems that Mac Low, in the last decade of his life, finally found a form capable of suspending his divergent poetic personalities. The number of poems in the collection—as Anne Tardos’s introduction suggests—may indicate the magnitude of his ambitions for the cycle (there is at least one other collection of poems in English literary history with 154 entries). With the collection’s size comes a certain amount of bagginess and inconsistency: at their worst, the poems are runny and hackneyed. At their best, however, they are imaginative and technically astute, expanding the expressive horizons of Mac Low’s idiom while retaining contact with his proceduralist roots.

Mac Low’s introduction insists that the *Forties* are meant to be vocalized, and the texts Tardos has assembled are performance scores as much as they are poems. Mac Low meticulously studs his lines with accents, spaces measured to indicate an elongated pause between words, and hyphens that slur words together. The pronunciation keys for foreign words at the bottom of each stanza are a bit much, but in general the diacritics clarify Mac Low’s intentions without being obtrusive. Taken together, the stanzaic constraints and the rhythmic annotations indicate Mac Low’s complex negotiations between orality and proceduralism, his desire both to make his poems sing and to subject the singing voice to formal strictures. As Number 63 (“Clean-Spitting Muddy Yellow Moods”) puts it: “a condom around his project supported maximal emotional expression.”

While the sprawling topography of the *Forties* does not lend itself to crisp generalization, the poems do seem to gradually evolve from an emphasis on variable rhythmic effects to a (partial) emphasis on syntactic cohesion. Mac Low’s ear is at its best in the early poems, which (like their diminutive predecessors, the *Twenties* (Roof, 1991) are as precise in their rhythmic and phonemic feats as they are indifferent to their semantic intelligibility. The

first stanza of Number 1 (“Unannounced Sights”), for example, concludes with this zinger: “deal slap placket attitude tubes.” Each member of the trio that opens this line—deal, slap, placket—pivots around the lateral consonant “l,” anchoring an otherwise nonsensical list in a phonemic constant. When we arrive at the bisyllabic “placket” after its two monosyllabic predecessors, we feel a sense of partial closure, only to land one long beat later on “attitude tubes.” The repetition of “too,” first in an unstressed and then in a stressed syllable, closes the line with a decisive stutter. “Unannounced Sights” is not in any sense a poem about plackets and attitudes, but a poem reveling in weaving, jerking stresses and ricocheting phonemes. At their sharpest, the *Forties* sustain such rhythmic precision throughout long passages, as when “Headline-Grabbin’ Storm Front” (Number 41), wrestles this sprawling line into obedience: “globular corpuscle loden diáphanous sácrilege patterning groined telesácrifice - / massacre patented súffering quotha.” Mac Low strings together a series of tangled syllables that seems to go on several words longer than it ought to, with three stresses placed on a piercing, hard “a” sound. The grinding enumeration of multisyllabic (and often faux-technical) words leaves off abruptly, suspending the poem’s progress for a moment before landing on the gentler cadence of “quotha.” This impish archaism, in addition to providing a light-footed pivot into the next line, retroactively transforms the torturous slog that precedes it into a unified utterance—something that someone has said. The “quotha” is a kind of pithy, virtuosic coup: Mac Low seems to fling the jolting, almost violent parataxis of one line over his shoulder and step lightly into the next.

The later *Forties*, while by no means tin-eared, tend to depart from rhythmic pyrotechnics in favor of syncretic experimentation. Mac Low’s late voice comes into full bloom here, maintaining a commitment to procedure, yet often coming close (but never too close) to “about-ness.” Personally, I have always associated Mac Low’s Cagean commitments with a certain terseness and austerity, but poems like Number 87 (“A Stable Person”) are positively garrulous, tempering Cagean proceduralism with Steinian improvisation: “Staring at the blackboard who is listening to thought as a window sphere / the color of notes on a page a maze that’s falling into letters appears as light.” Lines like these take the shape of sentences, but allow their components to drift into different syntactical configurations: is the blackboard “listening to thought as a window sphere,” or is “who” the beginning of a question? Is “maze” the subject of the verb phrase “appears as light,” or is it “the color of notes on a page”? The gentle, murmuring progress of these lines, however, belies this complexity. At other moments, Mac Low is able to suspend multiple vocabularies within a single poetic thrust, as in Number 114 (“Root & Branches Sensibly Old-Fashioned”): “insistent on scattering networking

clumps over curlicue surfaces swathed in cinnamon / sophism foundering in data.” This line fuses voluptuous organicism with technophilia, producing heteroglot descriptions that have a certain intuitiveness despite not existing in time and space (networks don’t have clumps, and surfaces can’t really form curlicues).

If Mac Low’s willingness to flirt with syntactic and semantic cohesion in the late *Forties* comes as something of a surprise, so does his intricate use of poetic imagery, which results in a few failures but a number of triumphs as well. Number 64 (“Who Builds White-Clocked Billowing Walls?”) is notable for its command of a kind of fuzzy, inhibited pictorialism. Its final lines coalesce into an image cluster that might be thought of as a landscape:

Beset by catatonic-séizures’ slippery architecture
gesturing close to rivers’ conscious oblivion
vértigo - transformations scramble the sky
awkwardly grounded in acrid velour as flowers stare at surfaces surprised by
lattice-work or
white-clocked billowing walls

This image has impact precisely because of its failure to be a coherent image. Mac Low’s own “slippery architecture” conjoins a series of spatial relationships that don’t quite add up to a landscape: a “scrambled” sky is “grounded” in “velour,” “flowers stare at surfaces,” which are “surprised” (the surfaces, not the personified flowers) by a more specific type of surface, “lattice-work.” The lovely “white-clocked billowing walls”—which treats walls as flexible membranes and clocks as a textural attribute—crystallizes this sense of uneasy, fluid spatiality. “Awkwardly grounded,” indeed.

Despite the book’s novelty within Mac Low’s corpus, the relentlessly knotty and obstinate quality of the *Forties* will be familiar to readers from any stage of Mac Low’s career: ungainly technical jargon, lines that run on too long, stresses that fall on the wrong syllable. This ungainliness is precisely what works about his poetry, indicating the dissonances between conventional poetic content and procedural form that give his output its energy. Even as the aging Mac Low expanded his poetic tessitura, he still retained contact with the essential strangeness that had always driven his work. We should be grateful that this older, wiser (but not too much wiser) Mac Low has lived on in Tardos’s faithful curation.

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