

ogy, we might note that while Derrida certainly never posited “the idea of a self” “as a mass of collected information,” such a nearly empty formulation does seem characteristic of what we might call the Language poets’ vulgar poststructuralism. Corless-Smith rightly complains of an “anti-intellectual” dismissal of Language poetry he discerns in academe, but it is almost a definition of anti-intellectualism to view reductively phenomena that are not reducible to one another. I don’t know what is more disheartening: that so many young poets continue to advance a facile critique of subjectivity under the banner of ostensible politico-artistic liberation, or that they believe that setting a bunch of pseudo-philosophical sentence fragments to verse constitutes such a critique.

Michael Robbins

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Sarah Law, *Perihelion*. Exeter: Shearsman, 2006. 116pp. \$15

Sarah Law’s third book of poetry, *Perihelion*, is full of sequences: a twenty-sonnet sequence about monsters, another ten sonnets about tai chi, and forty ekphrastic poems about Italian Renaissance art and architecture. Each sequence is followed by a cluster of lyric poems that provides the book’s soft tissue: pets, pea pods, orbits, oranges, and a rubber club. It is a well-organized book and at points a technically rigorous book. But Law’s investigations into her poems’ subjects reveal her perceptual distance from them, and as a result readers rarely sense the poems’ necessity. *Perihelion* is a book *about* things, not *of* them.

At her best, Law lets the poems’ music guide her observations into unanticipated terrain. Take, for example, the opening of “Parting the Wild Horse’s Mane,” one of the tai chi sonnets:

I flex on your neck, High Stepper.
You streak the length of a flank, a taut
bow of the stars in their fire formation,
pulsing. Two snorts in the wardrobe,
luck in the heart, gas in the lock
of your bone-long jaw. I think
you must have been hit by a master,
someone in leather

The poem is wisely tethered to an inextricably local experience; and here Law resists the cosmic or epiphanic in favor of the visceral. The speaker integrates intimations of violence into her childhood memory of feeding a horse. (These lines bring to mind Chris Ware’s Jimmy Corrigan dreaming of

a horse climbing up wooden stairs in moonlight at his grandmother's house, only to be woken by his father's leather-gloved hand.) In Law's poem, such violence ends up being the means of exploring the horse's elegance, which is manifested in the tai chi move: "I'm scooping the waves of your grace apart." Law captures the horse's lean, natural beauty in the elongated assonances and the slant rhymes that buttress the staccato "High Stepper." Her irregularly stressed four-beat lines skillfully underscore the kinetic struggle between the swooshing of a mane (or a tai chi gesture) and the "stabbing at sugar and velvet."

Most often, however, Law's poems feel like arbitrary writing exercises. The sequence "The Baptism of the Neophytes" evokes nothing more than amazement at Law's diligent accrual of forty different responses to artworks that seem to have had little impact on the poet: "La Pala d'Oro" in St. Mark's Basilica embodies "wisdom, holding you in such / reverence, a costly liverage"; Brunelleschi's "Ospedale degli Innocenti" inspires "blood cours[ing] through / this fragile banality"; and Botticelli's "La Primavera" reveals a place where "there are no qualifications for hope." The first-person speakers gird each poem with confession or reflection, straining personal meaning out of disparate platitudes.

"The Baptism of the Neophytes" reveals Law's eagerness to have something to say. Prolivity, however, does not fill the void. Rather than bringing us closer to understanding the import of her subjects, her loquacious accounts only serve to emphasize their tinny chime. The poems gather a "huge collection of despites," a "map of meanwhile," and "fossils of becoming," but the tropes only underscore the sense of being perpetually distanced from any real action or consequence.

The book's title, *Perihelion*, suggests risk, an edging toward the sun, but instead the poems consistently hedge: "Almost destroyed. But soaring." There is no real danger in speakers "singeing for the sake of it / [their] sky-tight lines." There exists no real sacrifice, no *duende*, and as a result the poems end up gesturing toward transformation without showing any real experience of it: "Somehow, she's the turning poignancy— / deliquescence of iconostatic applaud / And shades of sumptuousness to come." Most of these poems seem steeped in the Suzuki method, full of a practiced technique that ultimately fails to bring us closer to anything luminary.

Many of Law's poems want to be playful, but they are belabored rather than enjoyable. Coyness and corniness abound: "You're as raw as the fall of / a sparrow, shot for a lark. Don't flutter away. The takings get / totted up here: it's a one-flight stop." "The world's your lobster, matey, / it's cherry red and biting, / and any assignation to the pot's / / the lot of lobster plots." "Your golden puppy dissipates distress. / Time has passed alright, but Elmo's tail / wags in zen essence of its own atoms, / a brace of universal zest." The

poems are generally exaggerated and uneconomical. When Law's accretions destabilize her focus, the layering of images can be successful, but it far too often overdetermines what would have been better left alone. Law's *Perihelion* suggests astronomical scale, but the collection ends up feeling like a mobile of model planets spun by a restless hand.

Leila Wilson

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Peter Finch, *The Welsh Poems*. Exeter: Shearsman, 2006. 146pp. \$16

The Welsh Poems doesn't make much new. But that's not Peter Finch's project. Across the book, Finch figures the poem as a site of cognitive waste, a word-fill. The collection includes extended permutations, poems gleaned from websites, found-language chunks, and stream-of-consciousness blocks—all pointing away from notions of originality and toward ideas of infinite transformation. Regrettably, however, Finch's ideas are often more compelling than their realization.

One long poem, "Easy X-Rays," includes four columns of words in reduced font spread across four and a half pages. It ends in eighteen repetitions of the word "waste" (which pick up three earlier iterations and a single "waist"). The poem draws a connection between language and discarded excess; it works best as a visual exemplification of the mind's detritus. Reading it, you have to wade through an awful lot of verbal rubbish.

Those familiar with experimental poetry will quickly recognize the strategies required to read Finch's work. (The best experimental poetry, on the other hand, challenges the conventions that allow for its categorization.) Uninitiated readers may simply refuse to read the refuse, as the book is chock-full of fluff like the following from the poem "Tea Room":

They took the road back in a car that leaked marking its territory as it went like a cat. Cat. Cart. Critch. Kringle Cat. Coot. Cooloop Cat. Cancan Teenan-dan Can Deeta Canrowtoo Canreeta Canrowtoo Cancreela Crimb Crime Crark Cat. Cob had two one huge with a lazy tongue one black and white with fragile bones so deep down in the fur you knew it had to be old.

Such stream-of-consciousness heaps leave readers without a sense of destination or satisfying necessity. The "huh" or "huh?" that follows may be the most illuminating criticism available.

To balance this engagement with excess, Finch also consistently alludes to spiritual encounters with blankness: "I favour the cessation of particle movement, gaps between, cold." This, of course, recalls some eastern spiritual traditions, which clearly inform Finch's work. He overtly points to such an