

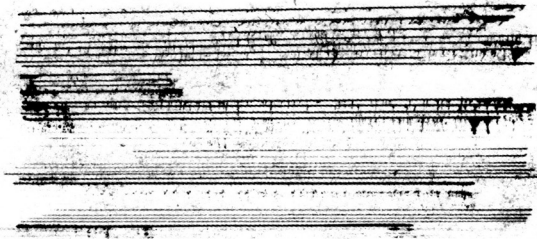
REVIEWS

Caroline Bergvall, *Drift*. Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 2014. 190pp. \$19.95

Caroline Bergvall's *Drift*, like many works of documentary poetry, from Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" to M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, tests the elasticity of its own methods and materials in order to intensify the ethical pressures of the story it tells. *Drift* recounts a 2011 tragedy in which a small plastic boat carrying Libyan migrants ran out of fuel in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Though the migrants sent repeated distress signals to passing fishermen, cruise ships, and NATO warplanes, they received no aid. The vessel drifted for fifteen days' time, during which sixty-two of the seventy-two passengers died of hunger or thirst.

Drift does not treat what others have called the "left to die boat" case neatly as a "case," because doing so minimizes the extent to which crimes of inaction implicate the broader functioning of modern society. Rather, the text inhabits multiple points of subjectivity, each of which is narrowly focused: survivor accounts, NATO statements, and sonar tracking technology (in "Report," a documentary account of the vessel's drift); personal reaction (in Bergvall's own creative "Log"); historical investigation (in "Hafville," modeled on the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poem "The Seafarer"); and drawing (in the series of ruling lines that open the book, only to end abruptly). Though these sites of subjectivity are intensely diverse, each one takes up a myopic focus through which the text emphasizes personal difference rather than social commonality. Modernity's drive towards individualism engenders a focus on self-perfection, which, when taken to the extreme, becomes self-obsession. In its polyvalent and jumpy explorations of subjecthood, *Drift* investigates the way that radical individualism leads to social apathy and to crimes of inaction.

The first sixteen pages of *Drift* comprise a wordless visual poem that presents an abstract rule or stave on which an actual text might be written. Entitled "Lines," this series of line drawings is a mimesis of poetry: it imitates poetic form, but, devoid of language, it refuses poetic content. Here, for example, is the ninth drawing in the series:



Each drawing seems to be the product of a tautly perfectionistic impulse pushed too far, especially when the lines veer off, marring their arranged order. They prefigure a later entry about the technological advances of medieval writing and illustration. In “Log,” Bergvall tells us she has

become fascinated by the medieval ruling lines with which scribes would prepare the parchment for writing and for illustration, and the various tools they developed for greater regularity and to speed up the tedious preparations. Line follows line follows lines. Horizontals, verticals.

The ruling lines appear in *Drift* as an interrogation of efficiency. In using them here, Bergvall reappropriates a technology that was developed for maximizing efficiency, “for greater regularity and to speed up the tedious preparations,” and perverts it to the point of self-obliteration. Jagged, seepy, and polydirectional, the drawn lines are awful ruling marks. In their stubborn rejection of utility, in their brutal mimicry of language, and in their insistence on proliferation, they become a signpost for hyper-individualism, which is both constrained in its narrow focus on the self and expansive in its draw to artistic creation.

Two subject positions mark the poles of *Drift*'s experiments with focus and fluidity. True to its navigational roots, Bergvall's “Seafarer” relentlessly seeks the structure of directional logic. Though it carries the connective fibers of forward-motion, its locomotive thrust is pockmarked by its wildly specific content, meaning that it eviscerates its own causal order:

Elsewhere in *Drift*, “they”/“we” can also turn into a “you” that represents a tunnel-visioned “I.” The jumpy subject inverts its relation to the outside world so that the objects it faces orient themselves to it, rather than the other way around:

This is totally flipping • you look down • its a fine day • caught in quiet susp • theres a small root or a stone sticking up from the tarmac • just under your foot • keeping you perfectly susp • ended • a very small root or a stone is upsticking from the strata top layer tarmac • you bend down to pull at it • it isnt a root at all nor is it a stone • looks more like a bone or a tooth • could be a large wooden oar with carvings from an old sunken ship • looks very much like a tooth • clean it up with your sleeve • def no þing like any tooth youve ever seen • not like the tooth you had removed the other day • its more like a • or some þing •

You put the tooth in your mouth • doesnt fit at all now thats a relief • feels like a large sail in your mouth • its big it pulls at your jaw •

In this jarring turn to the second person—the first of the text—Bergvall explores the restrictive logic of self-absorption. What kind of logic governs that if you see a tooth on the ground you worry that it is your tooth, and you aim to fit it in to your own mouth? Even after realizing that it is not a tooth after all? Here the reflexively gummy language and narrow orbit of possibility make the problem of the lost tooth the problem of self-involvement.

The same kind of logic that leads one to see a tooth in the tarmac and think, “Mine!” is also the logic that makes intervening in harrowing situations so prohibitive. For the fishermen, helping the migrant vessel could have meant being accused of smuggling; for the cruise ship, it could have meant jeopardizing the safety of its passengers; for NATO, it could have meant diverting energy and resources during a time of great political upheaval throughout the Mediterranean. Yet *Drift* itself doesn’t provide this information. Though “Report” is informative, it leaves out some of the most telling aspects of the vessel’s drift. It doesn’t tell one, for instance, that the vessel almost entirely skirted the prescribed zones of responsibility as dictated by the national naval boundaries of Malta and Italy. Going directly to *Forensic Architecture*, Bergvall’s key source for “Report,” one learns that the vessel entered into the Maltese search and rescue zone for just two hours, aside from which it drifted in NATO maritime surveillance area, where nationalities have no legal responsibility to provide aid. *Drift*’s omission of this geopolitical context speaks to the work’s stubborn partiality, to its emphasis on vortices of self-obsession.

For all its investigations, *Drift* is insular; it avoids complete engagement with its subject matter in order to emphasize the totality of modernity's narrow focus on individual gain. Ethical obligation remains evasive throughout, even when directly addressed in "Log" or when the consequences of its neglect are brutally relayed in "Report." It is one of *Drift*'s many drifts.

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José Antonio Mazzotti, *Sakra Boccata*. Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2013. 70pp. \$14

Sakra Boccata. Simultaneously "sacred mouthful," "devil's foul breath," and a euphemism for cunnilingus, the title of José Antonio Mazzotti's book resists easy and direct translation. *Sakra* in Italian (*sacra*) means sacred, but in Quechua (*saqra*) it signifies a "mischievous demon," obscenity, or mere ugliness. *Boccata* in Italian "refers to strongly exhaled or foul breath," but in Spanish the equivalent would be *bocanada*, a word that can be divided into "boca" (mouth) and "nada" (nothing), thus connoting an impotent silence that the title, in its pregnant untranslatability, seems to both qualify and refute. But *Sakra Boccata*, foremostly, describes a plural-tongued invocation, a prismatic orison to the "amber goddess" that signifies nothing obtusely specific, and yet, in its aural repletion, sets into motion an ecstatic androgynous lyric that celebrates the "primordiac flesh" of She, "Mother of all mortals," who "appear[s] even on Chicago walls" in a splendid shattered moonlight that effaces crude solar distinctions and the worn semantics of the everyday. Mazzotti achieves an alchemy of the word that does not gesture at shamanic transformation but enacts it in the aural fabric of these polytongued poems.

The title's blend of Italian, Spanish and Quechua represents Mazzotti's own heritage as a Peruvian poet with Milanese roots who writes in Spanish but is grounded in the high-ridged richness of Quechua culture. The aural complexity of the title indicates the amount of layering—erotic, linguistic, and alchemical—present in the polyform language and construction of *Sakra*'s twenty-eight poems. Twenty-eight is the number of days it takes the moon to orbit the Earth, and as such the poem sequence might be conceived as a lunar cycle that traces the moon's shifting erosion and rebirth. The "She" who features in the poems (the She who is invoked by *Sakra Boccata*) goes unnamed; She is instead a principle, an aspect, a depth, a surface that changes face (or body) with each poem. Perhaps it is blasphemous to give her a name other than what She arouses or evokes, stimulates or engenders, disguises and reveals. An organic, alliterative *eros* provides a regular impetus for image-coherence and prognostication: