

Winter 2006

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Craig Morgan Teicher

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Recommended Citation

Teicher, Craig Morgan (2006) "On Andrea Baker's Like Wind Loves A Window," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 65 , Article 59.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss65/59>

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On Andrea Baker's *Like Wind Loves a Window*

Slope Editions

By Craig Morgan Teicher

In his exciting essay "Revenge of the Poet-Critic," Charles Bernstein argues for the evocative possibilities of shifting forms in poetry and prose. He says:

...what I'm interested in...is strong, abrupt changes in emotion. So something that's somber turns into something that's like a Borscht Belt comedy routine which turns into something that's perhaps elegiac—because all those emotions can be relevant to a given topic or series of topics.

He's not advocating collage, as he specifies elsewhere, in this case specifically referring to prose, though the idea applies to poetry as well: "I am proposing a modular essay form that allows for big jumps from paragraph to paragraph to paragraph...." Substitute "stanza," "line" or even "word" for paragraph, and we're talking about poetry. We've reached a poetic moment when self-conscious language is at the forefront of much of today's poetry, but when poets are also responding to a need for earnest expression of emotion. Hence we have a poet like Andrea Baker, whose poems leap great distances from line to line and word to word in terms of subject matter or orientation, while expression of clearly discernible emotions or moods is a constant priority. Baker, along with a handful of other young poets such as Christine Hume, Karen Volkman, and Jim Behrle, is writing in an emerging vein of new poetry that favors, in Bernstein's words, "semi-autonomy as opposed to disjunction" in terms of the relationship of images, lines, stanzas, etc. to each other, offering both the earnest emotional expression and the self-conscious language that contemporary poetry and the culture it is being written into have come to demand.

Baker's perplexing and thrilling debut, selected by Donald Revell for Slope Editions, does not easily give itself over to interpretation. Instead, it gestures toward meaning, seeming to aim carefully at its target, then letting the arrow fly without tracing where, or if, it lands. These poems do not pretend to be able to nail down any final conclusions about the murky and complex issues they undertake to describe: marriage, mother and daughterhood, and the

relation of the self to the things and creatures of the world. Baker's gesturing takes place in both content and form, as the stanzas strive toward shapes, often couplets and tercets, if not scraps of prose, which they do not sustain. The voice is quiet, serious, sometimes droning; the fragments and sentences attempt to reach a conclusion, then trail off midway. The elements of these poems are related, though by the mood they evoke more than anything else, allowing for the gathering of "semi-autonomous" parts that nonetheless cohere into an emotional whole.

The book comprises three sections entitled "Gilda"—previously published as a chapbook by the Poetry Society of America—"Bird," and "Body," as well as a prose-poem preface. The preface, which is a series of unrelated paragraphs with several recurring refrains, does not do anything in the way of explaining the rest of the book, but it does introduce several of the major themes as well as the method by which the poems are conducted. In the middle of the second page comes this lovely sentence: "And so I paid \$2.35 for the artichoke because I wanted that type of intimacy with my husband." Seemingly random—no shopping trip or husband appears earlier in the piece—the sentence compresses and conflates the relationship of worldly and domestic tasks with the unquantifiable inner life of a couple in a relationship. The "type of intimacy" described is the type that costs \$2.35 for, perhaps, a good artichoke as opposed to a bad one, or the type that garners gratitude for preparing a good meal with care. Either way, or whatever the interpretation, the relationship is not direct or clear, but it communicates the incommunicable complexity of sustaining a marriage in a way that only a poem can. And rendering incommunicable ideas and feelings in language that otherwise cannot be paraphrased is ultimately the goal of this book.

Accretion of association is one of Baker's principal tools. Beginning with a theme, such as "birds" in the second section, Baker gathers clusters of vaguely related images, words, and ideas that, taken together, give a unified sense of overall meaning. It's a kind of riffing, a careful word-association game with undisclosed rules and parameters. The poem yields itself as we begin to have a sense of what those rules and parameters might be, as in these cascading lines from "Migration":

Baskets of men wearing cardboard beaks float
below plane-wings pretending to be birds

the shine of their silver mouth jewels reflects the light
in patterned expression

like repeating lines of movement
or the way they pull out a
dead bird
on an alchemist's
table
then
push it back in
or mother's long breaths
in fragile summer
and the metal taste of water
expresses the future

The poem shifts its orientation word by word, beginning with a surreal image that is almost impossible to envision—men dressed as birds floating in baskets beneath a plane's wings. It then moves on to an abstraction ("repeating lines of movement"), then an odd, mock-historical fact ("an alchemist's table"), followed by intimate, domestic details (the mother's breathing and the taste of tap water), which evoke a kind of nostalgia for childhood, which, in expressing the past, points toward its opposite, "the future." We are not meant to divine a metaphoric argument from these disparate elements. Rather, the poem urges us to plumb each part for its emotional value, and then to add those values up to arrive at a whole that is unfathomable other than as the sum of its parts, much as the elements of real experience have no meaning other than that which we assign them by simplifying and omitting.

Elsewhere, even sparer poems attempt to communicate the intimacy and violence of marriage, as in a series entitled "coming home poems." The associations between words are often musical before they are rational ("we wife // bitter leaf"), and counterintuitive though expressive of a mysterious logic ("this chair showing tarnish // its metal skin longing / like a meal"). White space figures the stuttering "semi-autonomy" of images and ideas, which, again, do not exactly match up but gesture toward a coherent narrative:

how do you leave this flesh
for the question
as if you could leave

from my simple hands

Other high points include the “Gilda” series, which features haunting drawings mingled with the text, and “Rest, with water,” a re-imagining of motherhood which concludes with the stunningly brave statement, “There are too many references / for a mother’s love and none of them say: // *product of my sexual love, this is my child.*”

These are very quiet poems, meaning that it may take multiple readings before this book begins to fully engage a reader’s attention. It has the subtle quality of the sound of snow falling, which, at first, goes unnoticed and then suddenly becomes overwhelmingly beautiful. The book demands it be read on its own terms, which is a fault and a virtue. Certainly, Baker is susceptible to the frequent criticism of contemporary poetry: that it willfully alienates readers, requiring a specialized education, or even initiation, to be understood. This is a difficult book, which also beckons the criticism of those who believe inaccessibility is all that keeps poetry from a larger audience. But Baker draws the reader in by requiring that s/he do a good deal of the work of filling in the associative blanks, enabling the poems to express a far more esoteric, complex, and ultimately *realistic* version of experience than poems that presume most words mean the same thing for everyone.