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Emilee D. Kilburn

University of Rhode Island, emdiki93@gmail.com

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Metamorphosis through Modern Poetry

Emilee Kilburn

Faculty Advisor: Peter Covino

Honors Project 2016

Author's Note

Over the course of my Honor's Project, I produced a combination of critical and creative works. Here, you will find a selection of that work. This selection includes an essay written in response to Mina Loy's poetry, specifically the poem "Songs to Joannes"; a selection of two original poems from my final chapbook *Adult Coloring Book*; and samples of editorial commentaries in which I provide explanation and reflection on other poems in the collection.

Because I plan to pursue publishing the work in my final chapbook, I am only including two of the ten poems. I hope they interest you enough to look forward to more.

Reading into a Flicker of Loy's Experience

Mina Loy's poetry offers a diverse survey of the avant-garde movements associated with Modernism. Her embrace of Futurism, however, shaped some of her most notable work. Loy discovered Futurism when she moved to Florence and became intimately involved with the movement's leaders, namely Giovanni Papini and F.T. Marinetti (Ramazani, Ellman, O'Clair 268). Valuing the Futurist focus on new ideas and rejection of traditional principles, Loy began using Futurist aesthetics to explore her preferred, but socially taboo, subjects: female sexuality and feminist politics (Fursland). One of Loy's most recognized works on these subjects is a sequence of poems first titled "Songs to Joannes" (Loy 269-272), later called "Love Songs"; it was inspired by her failed romance with Papini. The poems serve to not only disrobe the pretenses of gender relations and female sexuality, but to also trouble our relationship with poetry and the dynamics of language. Readers who intimately engage with just the first section of "Songs to Joannes" will gain a glimpse of Loy's struggle to expose social truths through new ideas, new ways of thinking, and new poetic forms.

In the title of the poems, "Songs to Joannes," Loy establishes an alias for Papini. In doing so, she hints toward a central urgency of identity—how names and words can act as pretenses to mask truths. Loy seemingly presents readers with "love songs," but in reading the series of poems they discover a lack of conventional lyricism, what Alfred Kreymborg might consider "sardonic" songs (Ramazani et al. 269). The first stanza of section one is "root[ed]" with raw words and images that jar readers who expect an ode of love (4). By beginning with the clinical and slightly derogatory word "[s]pawn," Loy plants a Futuristic seed in the poems (1); she hints to readers that the following work is new—from a different species of poetry that "[p]ulls" away from tradition and attempts to bare the complexities of not only love and sexuality, but language as well (6). "Spawn" also carries a sense of evolution, which aligns with the Futurist movement's

“forward-looking vision” and Loy’s personal desire for the revolution of gender relations (“Aphorisms on Futurism (1914) by Mina Loy – Introduction”). Readers will notice how the subject matter and language in “Songs to Joannes” evolves over its 34 sections, becoming more complex and uninhibited.

Loy’s use of quotation marks to punctually inhibit “[o]nce upon a time” (5) suggests an intention to expose the irony of “[f]antasies” (1), which mask female sexuality, as “garbage” (4), and to do away with the artistic rules that uphold them. Loy seems to advocate for a greater recognition of the sexual disparity between men and women by juxtaposing disparate ideas in the second stanza of the first section. She first places “[e]ternity” beside a short-lived “sky-rocket” (9); then, she pairs a celestial phenomenon (“[c]onstellations”) with a terrestrial one (“ocean”) (10). Her point, signaled by the “bengal light,” is that, what people perceive (“eye”) as incongruent can actually be balanced on the same line. Through her poetry, Loy argues that females are equally and rightly sexual and capable beings as their male counterparts. She suggests that the “rivers” that “run” through everyone are the same: “no [one is] fresher / [t]han” the other (11-12). Even though Loy recognizes female sexuality as a “suspect place[]” (13) in society, she does not let it inhibit her from using poetry as a “subliminal flicker” to push against traditional boundaries and elicit response.

The entirety of “Songs to Joannes” flickered into a somewhat fiery scandal when it was published in 1915. In 2016, however, readers of Loy’s “Songs” can embrace both her sexual and linguistic passion. In doing so, they also realize and embrace their own passions. Loy empowers today’s artists to break through the “[c]oloured glass” (18) and expose their own truths.

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Print.

Textured

 by Emilee Kilburn

~Inspired by Gregory Pardlo

I was born east on a rising sun a snow-
stale sky cradling my crown. I was born
to two faces of the world
separated by oceanic dispositions and
abstract fault lines—I induced détente.

I was born a miracle motion
out of the still wake. I gave
forgiveness, I granted if only.
Only, I was born retrograde
in a fast-paced brazen-grained space.

To the weighted world I was born
an unstressed syllable: I beat
softer, slower, stronger.
I was born singing against a natural
cry—I was born to a lullaby.

Lulled by fluting fingers and
kneading palms, I was born needed.
Fleece fed, I was born beside floral framed
hearth-fire. I bore warmth with blink
sparks; I broke water by crested smile.

I was born balanced on a beam
of fantasy and faculty;
spirit leveled with carpenter's pencils
and embroidered by a tea-touched tongue.

I was moved by words before I was born.
I am alive to their labor.

Player

by Emilee Kilburn

The moving walkway seems misplaced in this casino corridor.

So did you: clad in that matter-of-fact charm, grifting the back tables of class.

I don't gamble, but for you I flushed. Put my number in the pot, bought your bluff. At least, you paid for lunch.

Bet I look odd now, neon-lit in this house of slots. You remind me of a natural stud, standing easy as the conveyor runs.

Deal me a smile—I'll see your ace exposed deuce. That charm's counterfeit; put down the truth.

You're a moving walkway, too-late-mistake.

Editorial Commentary: “Adult Coloring Book”

The poem “Adult Coloring Book” was born from Professor Covino’s provocation to make a list of five things I currently consider as “cutting-edge.” On my list, I wrote “adult coloring books,” thinking of the one my grandmother gave me for Christmas and how trendy they have become in the recent year. For days, I carried around the list with that idea, trying to develop it into a poem—nothing. Before deciding to put the coloring book idea away, it came up during a conversation with a friend. His question: “Is there nudity in it?” made me look at the subject from an entirely different angle—one that exposed more fine lines than cutting edges.

In the poem, I attempt to draw fine lines between several themes: innocence and maturity; whiteness and color; female and male. I do so in unconventional ways, using spacing, punctuation, sound texture, and contradicting diction. The poem is not meant to “point” out a specific subject, but “point” toward a more open and comprehensive view of looking at a subject. The first line, “Don’t blush,” prepares readers for the poem’s movement through a complex (“complexion”) territory of language and ideas. The liberal spacing creates room to untangle the “pattern[s]” and interpret the poem’s “facets.” Everyone perceives patterns, colors, and shades somewhat differently—what you may see as “white,” I may see as “off- / white”; what one person believes to be a flaw, another might consider a treasure. The motivation of this poem is the need to open doors—space—in order to explore different forms of beauty and ideals. This is suggested by my use of punctuation, dashes and a colon, marks that push toward new ideas and open the conversation to multiple possibilities.

“Adult Coloring Book” can be read in respect to the works of Mina Loy and Wallace Stevens. In Loy’s poetry, she works to disrobe pretenses; in Stevens’, he works to expose perceptions; in my poem, I attempt to do both. By the poem’s end, readers should experience a

revolution or “turn over,” in which they are more conscious of the fine lines we create with language and within society, as well as more open to a “broken” kind of perception that allows for multiple views.

Editorial Commentary: “Constellated”

In the poem “Constellated,” I attempt to chart various images, emotions, and thoughts encoded in the complex web of memory in my brain. The result is far from seamless, offering both a visual and conceptual piecemeal that challenges readers to connect with the poem as they connect its words, lines, and ideas. The idiosyncratic spacing and line breaks are not meant to frustrate readers, but open them to experience the poem in a similar way to how I recollect the memories.

The memories that populate this poem center on a childhood moment with my younger sister, Alaina. Although we are 11 months apart—Irish twins—our personalities are polar opposites. She has always been outgoing, adventurous, and impulsive; I tend to be more reserved, careful, and introspective. Our clashing personalities manifest in the poem’s challenging and unhinged structure; but, in this careful structure the poem is powerful. The fact that I am so different from my sister, and she from me, is what makes us special. We are complements of one another; and, when we are together, we can be both wild like the poem’s form and lovely like its language.

The poem starts in a specific place: “that fox tower,” which refers to the hotel at Foxwoods resort and casino. When I was around seven years old, my parents took Alaina and me there for a weekend. I remember feeling transported by the lights and heights of the buildings, while my sister’s fascination was with the elevators and all the buttons. The “You” I begin with signifies both my sister and me, and how we started our lives at nearly the same time. As the poem progresses and becomes more fragmented, Alaina and I start to diverge and grow apart. The nature of our personalities and relationship begins to fluctuate, reflecting a more recent moment in time; one in which I have become more adventurous and bold. Alaina, in some ways, is held down by the “buttons” of our childhood, but I have moved past the limits of my

comfortable world and am extending myself into a more challenging space, searching for something that is still uncertain.

The fear expressed in the poem is dual: I fear the uncertainty of my future, and I also fear the loss of connection with my sister as I move toward that future. Near the end of the poem, the pronouns “her” and “me,” the “you” and “I” all start to blend again, and the identity of who is Alaina and who I am becomes lost in not only the memory of the poem, but also in the future that the poem suggests. The last line, however, disrupts the natural blend once more, making a clear distinction between us: we may be almost-twins, but we are also our own persons. In blending our identities, only to then divide them, I wanted to illustrate the ease of our sisterhood—how growing apart and embracing ourselves will never diminish or dismantle the togetherness that we share. No matter how far apart we find ourselves, Alaina and I will always be able to connect the dots to find each other.

Editorial Commentary: “Affixing Essence”

I wrote this poem after Professor Covino’s provocation to embrace a more wild writing style and address my idea of God. At the same time, I was studying Mina Loy’s work, which flourishes with a wild, Futurist aesthetic of speed, invention, idiosyncrasy, and complex vocabulary. “Affixing Essence” is an attempt to interpret “My God,” using aspects of Loy’s autonomous approach to poetry.

The poem takes a form that is unbound by stanzas and generous with space. The lines are brief and lacking punctuation, which adds to the poem’s vertical scale, speed, and resonance. Each line is roughly equal in syllables, except for the first that carries the weight of the word “God,” while also leaving space for its interpretation. My idea of God is indeterminate. Although I grew up exposed to my grandparents’ Protestantism, I never practiced faithfully. I do believe in a God; however, I am not fixed to a specific image. I am open to multiple perspectives, multiple understandings. I believe in a God that is also open to multiplicity—to being a bit of everything and discriminating against nothing.

In the poem, I exhibit an array of rich words: “ambidextrous,” “amorphous,” “arborescent,” “effervescent,” and “phosphoresce.” The words carry separate meanings, yet they seem to share a similar sonance, or essence of sound, that creates harmony on the page and among the mixture of the images. The “Essence” that inhabits the poem is fleeting, only fixed in the 18 lines before it “vanish[es]” off the page. In this immaterial ending, I wanted to convey an understanding that my idea of God reads differently than someone else’s. Whatever words or descriptions that come next remain open to the reader’s interpretation and my changing views.