

Recent Poetry

“Cue cards off the Devil’s sleeve”: Recent Poetry

Dogbane Campion (David Watson)

1984

We were pleased to see number 1 of *Seditious Delicious* (PO Box 6981, New York NY 10150), an openly anti-authoritarian (antiauthoritarian, too?) poetry magazine. As in all poetry journals, be they little self-published magazines or fancy, established publications, you can find the usual mix from poems so bad they make you wince, to spirited and even thrilling songs. Here I even appreciated the stuff I thought bad, since in contrast to the self-serving gunk found in so many small reviews, even the failed attempts in SD often reveal good instincts, if only with a cracked voice. (Anyway, what is “good” and “bad” is ultimately a question for archeologists; if you feel the beat, dance.)

Reservations aside, there are many good riffs, some ghostly acrobatics here, for example, this prose poem by Eric Lerner:

“One day three sisters trail the beautiful wives of the police through a shopping mall. When the wives step out into the sunlight, the sisters make their chance and step on the wives’ shadows. That night the three sisters sit around a steaming kettle. The shadows scream to be let out of the shoes. The sisters conspire grins and drone the police manual backwards, then shake out their shoes into the kettle. Next to their sepulchral husbands, the wives flame into sunflowers. The police go back to work. After some months, they are in their locker rooms and the steam is playing tricks with their heads. One curve of flesh merges with any other, and their hearts are ticking off the months. The next day they will read their own names on a list of suspects.”

There is great promise in such a song book—here’s wishing them luck and looking forward to more. They want: “anti-authoritarian poetry in any styles, traditional to punk, including song lyrics, prose poems, and experimental poems.” While they are looking for poems which “subvert the system,” they also want visions of a world “based on pleasure, peace and cooperation.” Such a world, they write, “will be inherently poetical.” All those submitting material will receive SD, but if you want your submissions returned, include a self-addressed, stamped envelope. ‘F.P.’ by Theodore Enslin, Zeisling Brothers Publishers, 768 Main Street, Willimantic CT 06226. \$1.75

This chapbook treats George Meteskey, the “Mad Bomber” of the 1950’s, as the offspring of our brutalizing national experience: that

violence that hangs
like the morning after a fall hurricane
flattened the forests,
and left the smell of death
over things not quite dead.

Meteskey is the individual up against the vast wrecking machine which unleashes that same violence on this land, that “dispensable man/acting in his own behalf,” the “despised individual” who is “more terrible than an army—/an army in which he himself might serve.” Some of Meteskey’s own words appear in the poem.

“Captain Stalin,” by Neeli Cherkovski, Summer 1983 issue of *The Alarm*, Box 26481, San Francisco CA 94126. \$2

“Captain Stalin,” says the author’s preface, “is only partially a political poem. It also evokes my own Russian ancestry.” This evocation is the most attractive aspect of this long, fragmentary piece:

Your friend, Russia, wrapt in a shawl, boils potatoes in her tears,
frozen to soil...

(One cannot help but be struck by the double meaning of “wrapt.”) Cherkovski prepares a broth of Lermontov, Anna Karenina on her way to the Gulag, strong tea for a samovar, dramatic nightfalls and matted earth, all a “dangerous illUminated planet,” on which the “Georgian Tiger”

walks out of Siberia.

Gnaws his way
into the Kremlin Palace.

“Death is at hand,” declares the poet. The poem is a long shriek against the totalitarian state, and the monster who inherits and incarnates it.

Unfortunately, the poem is marred by the silence on the “Captain’s” old comrades who gave him his job. If the poet had merely focused on Stalin, that would have been understandable. But Lenin seems absolved; in fact, there seems to be a contrast implied between the two in the opening section, which is only confirmed by other poems and graphics in the book. Sorry, but to the degree that poetry is political, it should have good politics—the original motivation for writing the poem according to the writer. Yet at its best it manages to convey that sinister and suffocating atmosphere which had to accompany that vengeance whose “heart/is a hydroelectric station” (Lenin or Stalin here, Neeli?), that “Inventor of a new form/of mass suicide.”

The romance of the American Living Room, by peter plate, self-published, from PO Box 8456, 537 Jones Street, San Francisco CA 94102. Free, but donations for postage would probably be appreciated.

I like this book for a number of reasons, first because it is raw and unyielding, like graffiti sprayed on the walls of a burned out store: It can be a tough anti-poetry, adventurous, riding the poetic image like “a long black getaway car.” There is a sense of freedom which suggests that this vehicle could easily be abandoned for something better—a poetry of the streets, a discourse not contained in books, perhaps.

For plate, “revolution is a crime of passion/for all people to commit.” (“lesson number one: adventure”) History is a penitentiary and its inmates “sleepwalk/through the steel and concrete each night” to create “the big screen drama of human insurrection forever,” only to “wake up hungover,/back inside the pen.” (“in the exercise yard”)

I also like the book for its desperation, for its recognition that even “revolution is not enough.” (“the post industrial age is almost over”) He’s not really trying for poetry, but for something deeper, “a sweetness destroyed by an apocalyptic nightmare.”

This said, I should state my reservations—too much fascination with violence, sniping, vengeance, sometimes slipping into posturing (perhaps; in fairness, also the result of desperation). Human insurrection should not in this way be diminished to a big screen drama.

Plate should keep writing poetry, transcend the nihilistic “suicidal integrity” for a different kind of integrity—remembering as someone once said, that if you stare at a monster long enough you become one yourself. I would be very interested in seeing him pursue that “sweetness destroyed,” since poetry can revive it in us all.

Exquisite Corpse, (P.O. Box 20889, Baltimore MD 21209, monthly, \$10 a year, \$1 for single issues, \$1.50 double issues).

Last but not least this droll and scintillating little journal from the Culture Shock Foundation. Andrei Codrescu, who apart from E.M. Cioran is the most eloquent madman to come out of Transylvania since Dracula, brought some copies of his *Corpse* when he came to read poetry here in Detroit this March. We hadn’t seen Andrei in years, which we regretted, for we found his poetry stunning.

Andrei has the nostalgic, almost distracted air of the exile. But juggler that he is, he keeps adding more and more planets to his invisible scaffolding, in a manner both understated and manic. I get the feeling that he’s reading cue cards off the Devil’s sleeve.

Andrei strikes me as a natural (or unnatural) anarco-anarchist, for example in his poem “Revolution”:

the key
to this
the key

to that.
what do you
need
keys for
if we are gonna
break down
all the
doors?

He also distrusts technology (beware of poets selling you on machines)—photographs, for example, “those square paper Judases of the world,/the takers of love’s image of all things.” (“About Photography”) In fact, he hates “everything that moves faster” than his own body since “everything that moves faster than my body/does so by a cheap trick.” (“&”)

Andrei manages to hot foot the edifice with small, but well-placed, and very lethal charges. A few lines of poetry are worth a thousand essays.

Exquisite Corpse is like the surrealist game from which it derives its name: a dreamy amalgam—in this case, of obsessive, sometimes baroque equilibrist tricks; obscure insiders’ dialogues on poetry, which remind me of what the FE must look like to the uninitiated; and wildly freewheeling, sometimes hilarious, poetry, letters and essays. A delicious corpse to be sure. (The poems quoted are from Andrei’s *Selected Poems*, 1970–1980, Sun, 1983.)

Postscript: Since this review was written, another edition of *Seditious*, and a new *Exquisite Corpse* have both appeared on our doorstep. I haven’t had a chance to look at SD yet, but I devoured this delicious *Corpse*, marred only by a cover article (“The New Orality: The Word Becomes Cassette,” by William Levy), which falls into the same old gadget gladhanding that too many poets and artists are seduced by. The discussion is too long to take up here, and I’ll write a poison (quill!) pen to them later. The *Corpse* is always a mix, and always worth reading.

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