

Reticent Verse

Jim Feast

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A review of

Digigram by Barbara Henning. United Artists Books 2020

Many poets have used broad strokes to deplore the current reactionary environment (as Eliot Katz does so superbly in *President Predator*), expressing their outrage, disgust and sadness, but Barbara Henning in *Digigram* takes a different route, examining how the coarsened political climate has insinuated itself into all the interstices of everyday life.

The book takes the form of abbreviated diary entries that span the time from Trump running for office in February 2016 to April 2018 when he has taken charge and begun splintering the Constitution; the poems touching along the way on the world's continuing refugee crisis and the threats to wild nature.

There is stream of consciousness here, but not as in those passages in *Ulysses* where Leopold Bloom's thoughts are caught on the fly. Here, a collage is created with snippets from the stream that are braided in with bits of narrative, daily media content and reflections, everything irradiated by the worsening national situation. It's the type of interlacing Dos Passos did in the U.S.A. trilogy in a less modulated way.

To create this nuanced quilt in *Digigram*, Henning will describe, for instance, sitting in a coffee shop with a friend "with Parkinson's – my friend – doesn't qualify – for disability – so says the voice – at Social Security." The author thinks of similar depressing circumstances in the Midwest, "old men – shake their fists – at holes in the sky – where steel mills – used to be." This connection leads to a reflection on other sky phenomena, "blue jays drive – hawks and owls – from their territories," churning up the thought, "merciless bureaucracies – merciless sky."

And Henning is not just empathizing with others' suffering. She herself is suddenly displaced from the East Village where she had lived on and off for many years. She opens "an envelope – rent increase \$200.00." It's not something she can afford and when she confronts the landlord, saying, "but I like living here," he replies, "come on, Barbara ... when you get older, you should move." The owner's self-serving prevarication here is linked back to the actions of one higher up the power chain, "with tiny hands – and a tiny brain – like the tyrannosaurs ... the bully had to develop something – an ability to lie and deny."

From life's daily stew of conversations, street scenes, interfaces with the faceless bureaucracies, and the flight of birds and the homeless through Tompkins Square Park, using a carefully crafted, reticent verse, Henning creates a sense of the incremental impact of the ruling elite's ongoing assault on human liberty and dignity. Paired with this chronicle is evidence of how people are dealing with the stress. From overheard conversations on mass transit ("a little boy to his friend – I'm scared of the president") and interactions with students, grocers and an acupuncturist, she garners a sense of the public's reaction, which goes from apathy and resignation to fear and obliviousness. In contrast, in the reactions of those with whom she is close one finds camaraderie, widened sympathies, mutual aid and (as commemorated in her attending a performance "at St Marks" where "Laurie Anderson tells – a story – with her violin") the creation of gently insistent, progressive art.

Jim Feast is the author of the poetry book *A Strange Awakening of Light that Takes the Place of Dawn* (Autonomedia, 2020)

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