

Transitory Poetics: February 2016

written by Toby Altman | February 10, 2016



Transitory Poetics is a monthly review series by Toby Altman focused solely on current and upcoming chapbooks. You can read the introduction [here](#).

This month, I looked at three very different chapbooks, each of which articulates a vision for what feminist poetics can be in the present literary moment. As she documents the conditions of a female body under the insistent surveillance of the male gaze, Kristin Sanders digests the rhetorical energy of avant-garde writers like Lyn Hejinian or Bhanu Kapil. Her sentences bend syntax against itself; her textual experiments challenge the relation between narrative, image, and text—compelling us to reimagine what a poem is. Amy Narneel braids together the personal and the political in direct autobiographical prose. If her writing recalls Anne Boyer’s essential investigations into medicine, class, and literary production, it also opens new territory: working through childhood trauma, and the intersections between race, gender, and medicine. Finally, Danielle Susi’s poems scrutinize paradoxes of language, perception, and memory—working from elemental difficulties to larger problems of identity, with a spare lyricism that belies the philosophical complexity of her work.

I think there’s something exciting about the aesthetic (and sometimes political) distance between these chapbooks. We seem to be in a transitional moment. Conceptualism no longer dominates critical discussion. As Cathy Park Hong [recently argued in *The New Republic*](#), the poetry that has taken its place is united not by aesthetic, but by political commitment—a commitment to being activist, engaged, polemical. As a result, it feels like there’s a lot of space in contemporary poetry—space for collaboration and engagement across aesthetics, space for difference between aesthetics. Maybe the poetry wars are finally over, and we can dispose of the tiresome debate between ‘lyric’ and ‘avant-garde.’ Then again, maybe not. But these three chapbooks testify to the width of contemporary poetry. And they testify to the way that poets working from very different places can engage a common body of issues, while retaining their difference.



This is a map of their watching me by Kristin Sanders
[BOAAT Press](#), 2015

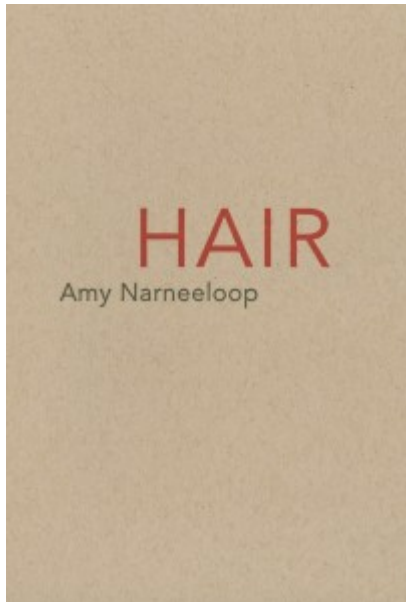
An introductory note from the editors at BOAAT Press proclaims, “each book cover [in our chapbook series] is usually/sometimes made from these materials: cotton lintens, recycled paper bags, banana peels, seaweed, Spanish moss, wildflowers, seashells, shredded money, and construction paper.” The editors go on to specify that this book, *This is a map of their watching me*, was bound in the intricate Japanese style, “*Asa-no-ha-Toji*.” My copy seems to be made from a thick recycled paper: it has the consistency of light burlap, and it’s a little wrinkled from being handled—the book reacts to touch. But look through the pictures of other copies of the book on the BOAAT website: one seems to be bound in wood, another in burnt paper. Each book is its own thing: mechanically reproduced, and yet also individual, unreproducible, an object with an aura.

This book is not merely a vessel for Kristin Sanders’ poems: it engages in conversation, dialectic with the poems it contains. It raises a series of question which, in turn, occupy Sanders’ poems. Questions like: what is the relation between a work of art and its frame? What happens when the frame is itself a work of art? Most of the poems are captions, but the images to which the poems ostensibly refer are missing, or blank. Above, or next to, each poem we find an empty box: these boxes are just about the right size for a picture; they seem to be the survivors, the last remnants of a presence that has somehow been erased. Or maybe, they are themselves images: like Robert Rauschenberg’s famous *Erased de Kooning* drawing, these empty boxes invite us to look more and more closely at what remains, the weave of the paper, its imperfections and creases—an expressive grid, a minimalist painting. A brief note from Sanders explains these expressive absences, sort of:

We began our collaboration in June: two large black notebooks, passed back and forth. We each had one at all times. He drew (women who were not me); I wrote (to people who were not him).

If the blank boxes represent these drawings, their blankness may be a kind of protest: a refusal to reproduce the male gaze and its creations. Indeed, as the title of the book suggests, these poems are concerned with the gaze, with the way it imposes itself on its objects—and constructs them according to its own needs. At times, the voice is confessional and direct—and the imposition of the gaze feels personal, an expression of a failing relationship: “I was busy being classified. I was busy being looked at...I was busy making myself look one way for them to look at me in another.” At other times, as in “Fig. 2: What the girls say,” the voice becomes collective and anonymous: “Feels good when you watch. Feels good when the camera is in the room...Feels good when our bodies make a crowd gasp the men gasp feels good.” The pleasure that the voice announces is duplicitous, double. It expresses, at once, an embodied satisfaction in the conditions of the gaze—even as it indicts its own pleasure as an expression of the internalized logic of patriarchy. As the poem closes, Sanders insists upon the underlying violence of the gaze and its constructions: “the words,” figure 2 continues, as if objecting to its own language, “don’t feel good they hurt us like here is an edge to tie you up wound wound wound.”

As a result, the poems often seem to be fighting with their own language and voicing. So too, the blank boxes grow and shrink, as though they are fighting with the text for space. It is a pyrrhic war in which, at times, the boxes succeed in nearly pushing the poems off the page. Beneath one particularly imposing box, Sanders writes, “She was always pulling her body into the smallest spaces.” The poem becomes a site of contested embodiment, a reservoir of body in an ongoing conflict with a gaze which seeks to control and deplete the body. At other times, the poems push the boxes into tiny confined spaces: beneath one such shrunken box, Sanders writes: “Here is my body: my upright, my all-yours body.” What starts as a triumphant assertion of independence becomes quickly an expression of dependence. “I was thinking in squares and photographs,” she writes, “No, no, in shells and oil pastels, smeared like heat on our spines. What watery language. What slow hope.” Sanders refuses to locate where her thinking—or where her writing—finally rests. It moves, fluidly, dialectically, between the blank space and the poem that describes it, between the gaze and the body, between pleasure and resistance. In the only poem in the chapbook staged inside a box, she asks, “Which side of the page am I on. Which side of the eye am I on. Which side of your eye am I on.” The questions are insistent and, crucially, unanswered.



***Hair* by Amy Narneeloop**
[Ugly Duckling Presse](#), 2015

In *Hair*, Amy Narneeloop launches into an inventory of her body—an ongoing project which, here, takes the form of a personal encyclopedia, with cross-referenced entries dedicated to “Breasts,” “Shame,” “Hair,” and “Dust.” Her work responds to a fundamental problem: how can the body be an object of knowledge? In other words, how can you even write about a particular body—given that it’s in motion, growing and decaying; given that it’s written on (and written as) interlocking modes of power? The questions are perhaps too abstract for the plain spoken particularity of Narneeloop’s work. Yet, with an alchemical verve, she transforms the mundane details of her bodily existence into a sustained meditation on gender, race, and identity. For example, in the chapbook’s centerpiece, “Hair,” Narneeloop recounts how,

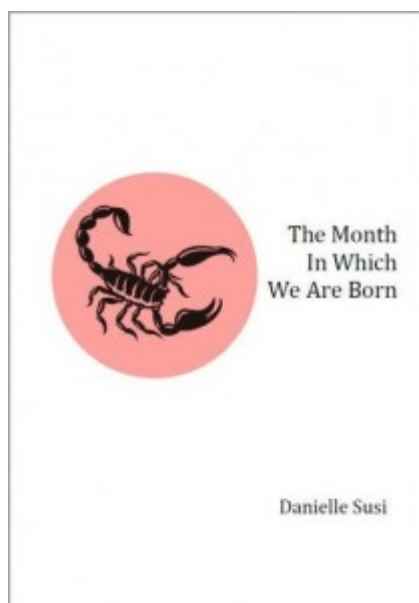
I lost a third of my HAIR due to a MEDICATION switch eight years ago. I thought that the medication was fine, but that doctor was a young doctor...[Y]oung doctors always increase low doses of MEDICATION, even if they don’t treat the symptoms you’re showing. Low does of MEDICATION irk young doctors.

Under the quiet sarcasm of these lines, there is a howl of protest against the carelessness of young doctors and the medicinal regime they represent. For Narneeloop, the loss of her hair is also an assault on her racial identity: “All Black people can spot a mixed child with a white mother. The pathetic HAIR gives us away.” To lose her hair is not only to lose some of her public legibility, it is also to lose her capacity to shape and construct that legibility for herself. “Hair” documents this as a struggle between public and private authority over the body, and it is a struggle that Narneeloop wins. At the end of the piece, she details her current hair-care regime in loving detail, announcing: “I have curly HAIR. It falls around my shoulders. It’s dark brown.” This fact feels like a triumph—an assertion of her capacity to construct and care for her own body, in the face of insensitive medical regimes. “Now no one knows they used to laugh at me when I walked into Mr. Eby’s class,” she writes, “That girl is taken care of now.”

That's the real question, then: not just how to write about a body, but also how to take care of it. *Hair* patiently documents the mundane rituals of clothing and caring for her body, emphasizing the difficulty and fragility of these rituals. For instance, the chapbook opens by recounting Narneeloop's difficulty finding a proper bra when she was a girl:

My mother got me some sort of sport-top thing that didn't stop my BREASTS from flopping around in gym class...The other girls, the ones a year older, who didn't know me and who seemed so statesmanlike, so wise, told me I needed to talk to my mom. I told her I wanted a bra.

"The other girls" are, in a way, the opposite of the "young doctors": they carry and dispense knowledge about the female body, "so statesmanlike, so wise." This knowledge is both unofficial and salvific, providing relief from the predatory gaze of "the boys who took aerobics with the intention of watching the girls' girls jump up and down..." If Narneeloop's problem is hypervisibility, though, she quickly confronts the opposite problem: "[my mom] picked out A cups and B cups and tried to put me in them, and my body refused, and she could not see it." And at the end of "Breasts," she remarks on the way this in-visibility has pursued her into adulthood: "Even my lesbian friends, who talk up their eye-to-cup coordination, think I wear a B cup instead of a DD." In her frank, unashamed account of her own body, Narneeloop confronts this invisibility by consistently making the body visible—as a creation in motion, as text. Further, in recounting her struggles with her body, Narneeloop contributes to "the other girls'" project. That is, she contributes to an extensive, and potentially liberatory body of knowledge about the female body, constructed by women, for women—knowledge which, with its care and its carefulness, cuts away the authority of young doctors everywhere.



The Month In Which We Are Born by **Danielle Susi**
[Dancing Girl Press](#), 2015

Danielle Susi's poems are full of things: a doorjamb, "a wilting cheeseburger," a dandelion. She makes these concrete and palpable—her descriptions of them are thrifty, unfussy, and alive with feeling. For example, her poem "What is remembered within the plaid lining of raincoats," is a litany of such objects:

The bright red of child bending down to a cold apple on the grass lifting up to expose it to the mouth of a horse. Blue dress chewed by cow like cud...Touch an electric fence barricading rows of dirty white sheep. Forced into the capture of a photograph while your eyes cry raw red.

The world of the poem emanates from the objects she names. The photograph implies the parents who take it, frame it, keep it—and the child who finds it and writes a poem about it. Yet, as Susi's poems exploit the capacity of objects to invoke a world, they remain suspicious of their own capacity to adequately name. For instance, in the chapbook's opening poem, "Ode to Absorption," she contemplates the word red, noting that its use implies a contradiction between appearance and essence:

A red vessel is red
because it reflects its own color. When we say
"this bowl is red" we mean
it is not itself.

Compare the tautology of the first line to the paradox of the last: "a red vessel is red"; "it is not itself." These statements make sense, of course, in context, but only because of the way Susi's sentence pulls across her enjambments, unifying otherwise disparate and irreconcilable pieces of poetry. But (and here's the cool part) Susi uses this synthetic capacity of language precisely to demonstrate the incapacity of language: the failure of the word red. "It is not itself," she writes of the red bowl. But she could be describing language itself, the act of naming, or perception—which, like language, is tricked into thinking that the absence of red is red. One thinks of the "bright red" of the child in "What is remembered": at stake in this indictment of language is a broader inquiry into the reliability of everything that depends on it, including memory itself.

Indeed, 'it is not itself' is a kind of motto for this chapbook, which consistently investigates the faultiness of memory and perception. In "Pareidolia," for example, Susi records quotidian encounters on the train—"I sat next to a woman eating McDonald's / on the train today"—alongside misrecognitions: "I thought I saw John Lennon / get on my train today. // I thought I saw Morgan Freeman / sitting in the corner of my train today." As the poem mixes mistakes with factual observation, it becomes increasingly difficult to sort out which is which—a confusion that builds to a kind of crisis of personal identity:

I thought I saw my mother
on the train today.

Today on the train,
a woman looked at me

as if she had raised me.

Here, the distinctions between people—the identities that they acquire through long relationships like motherhood—seem to be dissolving by virtue of perception itself. But how else are we supposed to perceive those distinctions, those identities? By now, I hope, this kind of paradox will seem native to Susi's poetry. She is the kind of writer who excavates the impossible, the paradoxical, from even the most mundane acts of naming and seeing. And she does so with economy, in short clear lines, which nonetheless cut to the marrow of the problem.

**** Note of Disclosure: Danielle Susi is a Contributing Writer at Entropy.**

For poets or publishers interested in having their work considered specifically for Transitory Poetics, please feel free to email Toby Altman: altman.toby [at] gmail.com