The New Age of Vers Libre

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THAT OUR EYES BE RIGGED, KRISTI MAXWELL; SATURNALIA BOOKS, 2014
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STORM TOWARD MORNING, MALACHI BLACK; COPPER CANYON PRESS, 2014
ISBN: 978-1556594724; $16.00; 96 pp.

BARELY COMPOSED, ALICE FULTON; W. W. NORTON & COMPANY, 2015
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ALMOST ONE HUNDRED years ago, in "Reflections on vers libre," T. S. Eliot wrote

> The most interesting verse which has yet been written in our language has been done either by taking a very simple form, like the iambic pentameter, and constantly withdrawing from it, or taking no form at all, and constantly approximating to a very simple one.

It's no wonder Eliot, an expansive writer stuck in the suffocating life of a clerk, was attracted to both rule-breaking in poetry and the idea that those breakages hurtle us toward wonderful new poetic aesthetics. But historically speaking, the idea didn't really stick.

For a long phase in contemporary poetry, perhaps from the '50s through the '90s, the notion of exploiting the ghost of formal poetics wasn't really en vogue. There were clear and delightful exceptions, to be sure, but for much of that time form was for formalists, language play was for language poets and storytelling was for narrative poets. Poetry and poets mostly stayed in their predictable and predetermined boxes.

But change is inevitable, and books like Richard Siken's *Crush,* Timothy Donnelly's *Cloud Corporation* and Hailey Leithauser's *Swoop* all prove there is still plenty of territory to cover in Eliot's dream of vers libre. Three recent collections—*Storm Toward Morning* by Malachi Black, *Barely Composed* by Alice Fulton and *That Our Eyes Be Rigged* by Kristi Maxwell—also manage to break the traditional prosody mold, deftly tip-toeing the line between sound and sense. The heavy rhyme, refrain, repetition, beats and skips in these poems take readers on a rollercoaster ride: sometimes smooth and whip-fast, sometimes jarring and looping, but always full of twists and turns that enthrall.

The rollercoaster metaphor especially stands in Kristi Maxwell's *That Our Eyes Be Rigged*. This collection exacts a price for your pleasure. It will lash you around and test your limits, but it will also bring great, freewheeling joy. And if you happen to be a reader chiefly concerned with joy—of language, of its games and trickery and bravery—then Maxwell's poems will satisfy your thrill-seeking spirit.

Make no mistake, though: these poems are not easy. Maxwell's pieces—some lineated, some disjunctive prose paragraphs—taunt the reader with almost-meanings, grabbing onto a narrative one moment and splitting it open the next with a startling surrealistic image or a quirky manipulation of language. In Maxwell's world

> We stick to things we are quick to. The field's dialogue goes like this: trough, trough. And, yes, the answers in the shape of cows, in the shape of hogs to which we cluck sweetly.

There's a hint of Gertrude Stein in the author's juxtaposition of strange, often seemingly unrelated words; but unlike Stein, Maxwell insists that sound and sense do depend on each other, revel in proximity and ultimately change each other both semantically and rhythmically. When Maxwell writes, "a rhyme reveals an uncanny relation," it recalls all the uncanny relationships she's offered us in the text thus far. In "Which We Ask, Exist" for example, pairings make us keenly aware of the complicated relationship between words and reality:

> the hunger from the feeding
> the hunger from the feeling
>
> and
>
> A head bruised by wood
> A heart bruised by what would

In the first couplet, those parallels of word and meter make the change from feeding to feeling almost imperceptible, a subtle and genius commentary on the ways people numb overwhelming emotions. Conversely, in the second couplet, breaking the parallelism in the second line emphasizes the lingering hope of lost or unrequited love.

Maxwell weaves a strange ars poetica that comments on possibilities and slippages. Her poems ring a bell, but then repetition distorts the tintinnabulation:

> A pharynx / A fox clot / A fever

How do you say again
How do you dew a morning
And/or
Do a mourning

With / (out) / adieu

For Maxwell, the key lies in the necessary decisions we all make with diction. Her refrains remind us, through repetitive sound, that every choice is in some way related to another, and that every word has the potential to evoke another:

It is a choice we will make, each having inherently to do with language.
It is a choice we will make—having, inherently.
I bask as if basking were invented for me.
I verb, and that verb fills itself with the action known as basking.

The poems in this strange, challenging collection are "interested in creases / Increases, decreases," and investigate that interest through the words themselves. The sound play that takes advantage of everything—alliteration, homophones, transpositions, refrain, slight variations in sound and letter and rhythm—gives a feeling of change blindness, that fear that if you stop paying attention for even a second, you'll miss everything.

Frequent changes—in life, in music or in poetry—are often exciting and evocative, but few would say they're easy. In *Storm Toward Morning,* though, Malachi Black's tight, precise, almost-but-not-quite formal poems make it look simple. His aesthetic is a refreshing example of the "interesting verse" that Eliot hoped would both push and pull at traditional structures. *Storm Toward Morning* can be thematically dark, full of loneliness and theological struggle and philosophical musing, but Black's currency is music and he trades in it very well, making otherwise weighty subjects feel, if not light, then at least gentle. And he acknowledges it even within the work, as in the book's first poem "Under an Eclipsing Moon," in which the speaker stands outside a hospital on a dark street that is

too overcast to know what sort of slim
lip the moon has grooved into the sky.

So what can I, whose veins are purpled through
with bits of broken glass and vodka,

whose heart claps like a shoe, what can I do
but play a drunken, pill-induced sonata,

watch it backflip and rebound, caterwauling
in a somersault of sound around the room?

Just as the book's music reverberates around the room of its pages, the often frazzled, always self-critical speaker spins frantically but neurotically through his life. These poems, which nod to traditional musical rules but rarely fully embody them, concern themselves so deeply with looming questions of death and God, with pain and its numbing, questions that navigate between structure and chaos the same way Black's prosody and rhyme do. The themes, as well as the music, live in what Eliot called the "contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse."

Like Maxwell, Black also looks to the shape and rhythm of language itself when considering the universe and its possibilities. In "Traveling by Train," a restless train passenger is "lost / between the meter and the desperate rhyme / of clacking tracks." Later, in "Query on Typography," Black asks: "What is the light / Inside the opening / of every letter?" which leads to the question

Which is source
And which is shrine
        The light of the body
Or the light behind?

What is the body's importance when confronting the eternal? This query is spurred on by the pace of Black's prosody. The entire second section—one that questions the possibility of God—is the closest to true traditional form that Black offers. There, a crown of sonnets grapples with the weight of both ancient history and modernity at once, funneling it through the lens of the speaker's experience, the speaker's body. Like the human body, it is imperfect; he can't help but break the form in moments of excitement, fear or reflection, as in the poem "None," where the first line of iambic pentameter devolves into broken trimeter:

you are the one: you are
the venom in the serpent

I have tried not to become,
My Lord, You are the one.

Reading this work we are carried on a current of meter toward the inevitable, storming with the speaker toward whatever morning will bring.

Still, where one poet's music marches a reader forward, another's can work more like birdsong, catching onto a set of sounds for a few moments until some other trill arises to replace it. Alice Fulton's *Barely Composed* is like this, carrying readers through its pages not in straight lines, but in sweet zigzags of sound and meaning. The same tools some poets might use to create a metronome effect—moments of regular meter, for example, or refrain—Fulton employs to spiral a reader off into new directions entirely. Fulton sets this up early in the book in "The Next Big Thing," wherein one speaker shouts

> I feel free as water fangling over stone and falling
>
> with a dazzle on the next big thing, presence
> ribboned up in ink, instant and constant
>
>
> all tied up in a gift. Just wrap the world
> around a pen and draw a cradle in a lake
> and in the cradle draw a flywheel
> free from mortal rust.

Fulton's speaker might be sending a barbaric YAWP over the world in that first piece and others, but many of her poems spelunk murkier psychic territory, from plain old sadness to anguish and trauma. But no matter what depths these poems reach, their music still ricochets and echoes, a companion to the speaker's grief. In the very next poem, "Claustrophobia," Fulton writes of unrequited love:

> Nearness without contact
> causes numbness. Analgesia.
>
> Pins and needles. As the snugness
> of the surgeon's glove causes hand fatigue.

These lines are metrically even and lovely—perfect trochees in the first three, like a surgeon whose hands remain steady despite numbness—and break down in the fourth as if fatigue is ultimately winning. In Fulton's poems the content presents itself, in this case through

images of unresponsiveness and suffocation, and the music mimics it. Rhymes pull earlier words and sounds more tightly into the scheme so that the stanza draws inward like converging walls, claustrophobically.

Barely Composed's fourth section, packed with elegies and nocturnes, is especially well-wrought. Time slips away in great handfuls in these poems. Bareness reigns here, but is described in a language that is anything but:

> Then emptiness grew more empty,
> the scent of scentlessness.
> How could it be?
> When emptiness is that which can't be
>
> emptied any more, neither malicious nor
> a state that welcomes us
> with munificent alohas.

Like Maxwell and Black, Fulton manages, purely through jubilant language play, to offer hope in the darkest moments. When she needs to sound flip, she'll throw in a teenagerish "like" or an exclamation point. But when she needs to you to remember that she knows her stuff, she'll get technical, political, as in "Personal Reactor" where: "the reactor was heaviest, a black mass / in its cosseted capsule, its lining finer / than its outside." The collection is bursting with invented words, scathing sarcasm, the occasional erasure using blackout marks on the page, symbols and emoticons. Fulton extracts everything possible from the language, the aural and visual, the sentimental and colloquial, the rational and the ineffable.

Ultimately, Fulton's sense of play is a hint for the reader who, at first glance, takes this book's title as a promise. Multiple readings (preferably out loud) of the collection reveal that, far from being barely composed, it is actually a feat of language engineering.

In *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* John Hollander writes that poetry and music "affect a listener in some subrational fashion," partially by relying on "the communication of feeling rather than of knowledge." Of course, instinctively we already know this about poetry; words and images create our intellectual readings, sure, but rhyme, meter, music often spark something more primal, a visceral set of responses. And while there is overlap there—images can spark emotions and sound can send us on an intellectual journey—the general idea that playing with sound and music in poetry can create intense emotional responses that are *separate from the meaning* of the poems is very bold, indeed.

But if separating what we feel from what we think about a poem is too Herculean a task, perhaps that's less important than simply recognizing a trend many recent poets are exploring: a fantastic inclination toward pulling a reader's emotional trigger with the power of sound. Whereas just a few years ago paying razor-sharp attention to meter and rhyme might have seemed like the jurisdiction of only *certain types of poets,* exciting writers like these are ushering in a new age of contemporary poetry that is accessible for everyone: the Era of *Vers Libre.* Even when addressing the frightening and the traumatic, this is a brave and exuberant poetics—verse that would make Eliot proud.