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Blind Rain

Louisiana State University Press

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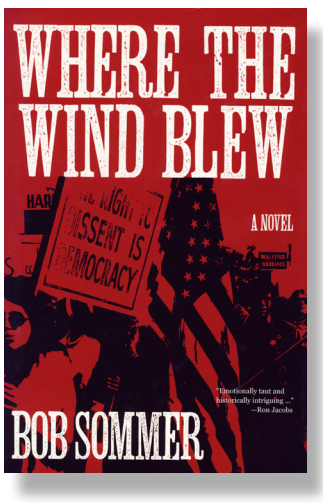

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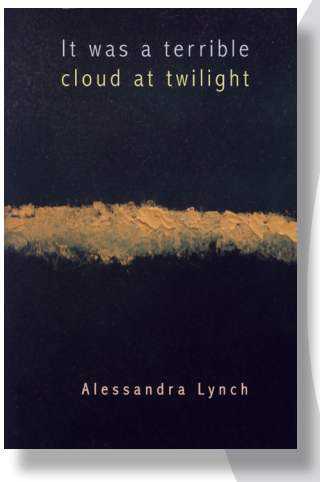

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It was a terrible cloud at twilight

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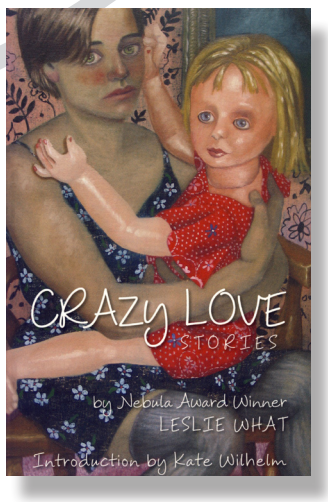
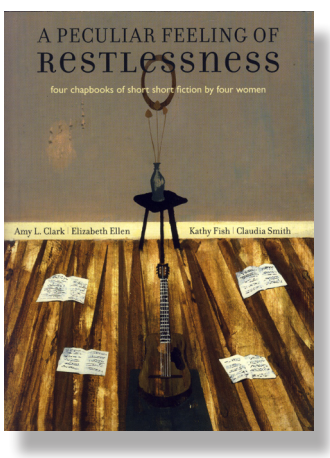


L. Timmel Duchamp reviews
Leslie What

Crazy Love

Wordcraft of Oregon

"Leslie What demonstrates a gift for delving into heart-wrenching matters with a lightness of touch."



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Innovation Never Sleeps

Hit-and-Run

Stephanie Eve Boone

Where the Wind Blew

Bob Sommer

The Wessex Collective
http://wessexcollective.com
324 pages; cloth, $27.95

Where, precisely, the line between courage and cowardice resides, I do not know. But I do know that Peter Howell, alias Peter St. John, is not a brave man. For one thing, he spends a lot of time running away; first, in 1970, he flees the scene of his anti-war group's maiden-bombing-gone-awry (there's the expected caveat: "no one was supposed to get hurt," but dynamite is tricky business, and even the most careful of us occasionally sets an alarm clock to go off twelve hours too early). With several of his friends and an innocent bystander dead, Peter runs. He abandons his mother, leaves the anti-war movement behind, and goes underground, eventually reinventing himself as a successful entrepreneur and family man in suburban Kansas. Nearly thirty years later, his cover blown by a savvy high-school reporter, he leaves his wife and children to face a scandal-hungry media and lights out for the territories.

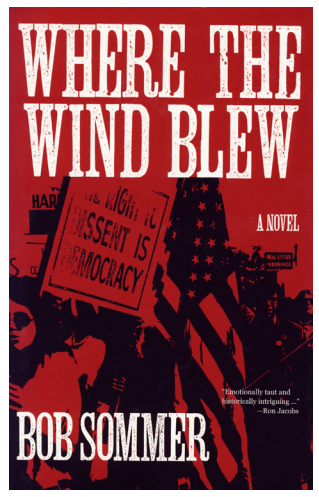
Peter's thirty-year odyssey, beginning with the call to oppose the Vietnam War, brings to mind the heroic journey: he encounters unfamiliar territory, leaving the safety of student life for protests and subversive attacks on institutions; he faces temptation in the arms of siren women; he makes perfect marriages with mother-goddess characters, first in his youth and then in his middle-aged suburban life; he performs labors and undergoes physical and mental trials; during his aimless cross-country journey, he rests with a holy man and a mountain woman. The archetype is relevant here because of those instances in which it does not apply. The would-be hero fails numerous tests. Peter does not resist the sirens, he abandons the mother-goddesses, and though he vaguely intends to bestow boons on his community by lifting the veil of ignorance about Vietnam, he appears to be just as motivated by self-importance as social justice.

The Circle (his wanna-be-beyond-SDS gang) uses methods that are often as cowardly as risky: for example, trashing the offices of the campus ROTC and setting bombs in corporation headquarters. Theirs is the kind of misdirected antagonism which attacks lieutenants, even unwilling or unknowing lieutenants, as poor substitutes for well-protected generals. It's hard to argue with The Circle's position, especially knowing what we know now about the war in Vietnam. But The Circle operates on the fallacy that the ends justify the means, the same kind of thinking that led to so much trouble for Vietnamese civilians and American soldiers.

Where the Wind Blew *is not intended to be a story about a hero but a parable of regret.*

So *Where the Wind Blew* is something unique: a heroic journey without a hero. It may have taken Odysseus ten years to get home, but at least he was trying. Peter thinks about returning to his family, turning himself in, but never seriously considers it. "He was going back…but not yet—in a day or two": this kind of sentence becomes a refrain. Peter drives from state to state wallowing in guilt but doing nothing about it. He makes excuses, and heroes don't make excuses.

Then again, *Where the Wind Blew* is not intended to be a story about a hero but a parable of regret, and those stories are truest when the protagonists are people like us, ordinary people who are neither excessively virtuous nor intrinsically evil. Hit-and-run drivers don't have an abnormal disregard for human life, but simply value self-preservation above honor. It's probably a lot easier to keep driving than to hit the brakes, attempt first aid, and admit to a crowd of angry people that you are a terrible driver. And so Peter drives on.



Most readers will see bits of themselves in Peter. He is smart but directionless, full of impotent disenchantment with a hawkish government. He is a follower, as most people are: he never proposes violent action (writing editorials is more his style), but he doesn't need much convincing before he goes along with his friends' ideas. Who among us (on, one hopes, a less militant scale) hasn't been there? Peter is young and stupid in a way that many young people are stupid, and while he grows out of violence, he doesn't grow out of cowardice. That's what happens when you leave a heroic quest unfinished.

Peter has a foil in Marcia Rojas, the teenage reporter who sends his life into a tailspin. Both are ambitious and well-meaning, but hurt others because they do not realistically envision the ultimate results of their choices. Marcia is too busy imagining her Pulitzer win for "scoop[ing] every paper, every news service, every everything in the country" to think about what Peter's exposure will do to her classmate Emma, his daughter, and the rest of the St. John family. She soon regrets writing the story and works to earn their forgiveness by striking up an unlikely friendship with Emma and reaching out to Peter on the family's behalf. Her crime, if you can call it that, is smaller, and perhaps her penance is less difficult than his would be. But it is never easy to atone for your wrongdoing. That takes courage.

Stephanie Eve Boone teaches English and writing at Niagara University and Canisius College. She also writes for The Buffalo News *and* Terrain.org: A Journal of the Built and Natural Environments.

Serious Play

Ned Balbo

It was a terrible cloud at twilight

Alessandra Lynch

Pleiades Press
http://www.ucmo.edu/englphil/pleiades
80 pages; paper, $16.95

Alessandra Lynch's second collection, winner of the Lena-Miles Wever Todd book award from Pleiades Press, confirms her place as one of her generation's most original poets. Lynch's poems—sometimes dense, sometimes offhandedly abstract—are always fluent and surprising, wryly responsive to the world. The opening poem of part 1, "Dog Drifting Out," establishes the poet's stance: a dog drowns in an icy lake, "[t]he death of a star // in a sky we can't touch." But the dog is Sirius, too, as the speaker explores "*first loss*": "Who could fault a star for walking / across pallorous blue satin?" Through this metaphor, the image blazes to life: ice, sky, and satin are one, reversals of height and depth complete. "Meditation on Fish" is even more immersed in metaphor: the fish are "spent arrows, blackly nosing forth" or "whiskery, mad-eyed, stealthy undercover bullets." This rush of metaphors gains momentum, but what keeps them "hanging" in water, she muses, is "some meditation guarding necessary shallows, / …stunning / their slighted faces against the imagined." Lynch's puckish closure takes aim at poetic pretense, reaching well beyond the fish that were originally her subject. Indeed, her sense of humor is central to her vision, a means to undercut the pretension that lesser poets rely upon.

Lynch's persona, often prankish, masks the most serious kind of play. She seeks the point where real-world objects verge upon ideas, with language the medium that contains them both. This exploration of limits—those of the world, those of language—occupies a liminal space where poems fan out across a spectrum; they don't move *toward* the abstract or *away* from the real world, but comfortably back and

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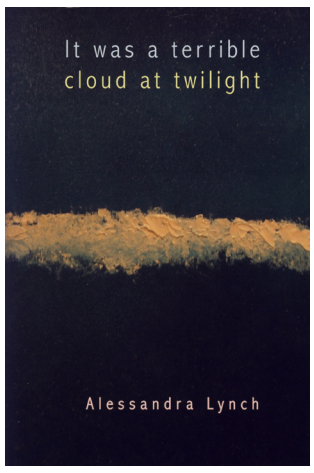

forth through all that lies between. "A Letter. Like Blazing" reflects both the Deep Image tradition and symbolists like Arthur Rimbaud: "When I rose from the ditch / I left a swift petal / in lieu of presence," the poet's exploration of eros achieved through color and witty shifts—"the local bees shimmered in their grove with what blazed // between your hips & mine." "Violence, the Word" offers another dimension, its title enjambing into the poem itself: "I once found beautifully familiar. / Bruised chinrest of the violin, gaunt / clef pinned to its corner." The violence/violins pun reflects Lynch's penchant for wordplay as images hint at the violent potential of innocuous household objects. When the speaker admits, "I could no longer let it into the house," the imagery turns more violent still:

> And when the bomb became an instrument,
> I lost my singing lantern.
> And I watched us take good care of the end—
> spooning our sockets, piling dirt….

Partly through its violent contrasts, the poem embodies another strength: through Lynch's exquisite control of tone, figures of speech become real things. Music might promise to restore a momentary calm, but "the notes/were fugitive birds…,/ tearing through the deadly staff": clearly, "tear" and "deadly" hold no consolation. The risk of language becoming real—tangible and penetrating—seems not mere rhetoric, for Lynch, but an almost physical sensation.

Lynch's second collection confirms her place as one of her generation's most original poets.

Elsewhere, the poet conveys an affecting tenderness. Her sequence for Lucy Grealy (best known for *Autobiography of a Face* [1994], a memoir of disfigurement) explores the poet's grief: Grealy has become her book, "a dissolution / of threads and glue and inky strings / and the blocky prints of an animal / in snow, harmed, halting." More direct, less prone to wordplay, these poems rely on different strengths: simplicity of syntax and economy of expression. In the opening stanza of another elegy for Grealy, Lynch considers her friend's absence: "*You were there / in a yellow chair* I recite to the sand, / the speeding clouds, the bay." This capacity for awe—whether at the nature of loss or at the natural world's wonders—lends urgency to Lynch's wordplay: it is always the means to an end, a way to embrace or ward off the world, its ironies signaling shifts that broaden her, and our, perspective. This is nowhere more evident than in the collection's title poem. The "terrible cloud" of which Lynch speaks both terrifies and holds us: "a threadbare wolf pressed in smoke" or "a tyranny of doves," it shifts, at the threshold of night and day, to become "men in gasoline-proof / jumpers," "a faint sketchy / hand trying to touch / a boulder impossible / to budge." Whatever its shape, it signals loss: "*How lost / have lost; how many lost lost*," the breakdown of syntax to chant more proof of its overwhelming power. All who watch the cloud are "[wearing] the same smoke": finally, the cloud *is* us as we become intangible. Afterward, of course, comes silence: the white space of the page. But we have Lynch's restless intelligence to fill and shape that silence, to show that this "terrible cloud" contains much beauty.

Ned Balbo's second collection, Lives of the Sleepers *(University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), received both the Ernest Sandeen Prize and a* ForeWord *magazine Book of the Year Award in poetry. He is also the author of* Galileo's Banquet *(Washington Writers' Publishing House, 1998).*

Creamed Eggs

Paul D'Agostino

A Peculiar Feeling of Restlessness: Four Chapbooks of Short Short Fiction by Four Women

Amy L. Clark, Elizabeth Ellen, Kathy Fish, and Claudia Smith

Rose Metal Press
http://www.rosemetalpress.com
208 pages; paper, $16.00

This reviewer's selected notes, questions, and considerations upon receiving, reading, reflecting on and assessing the literary merits of *A Peculiar Feeling of Restlessness: Four Chapbooks of Short Short Fiction by Four Women*, a recent title from Rose Metal Press:

***A priori*:**

- If the contents of this volume—whose squat, squarish, thickness-enhancing shape and handsome, slick, aesthetically pleasing jacket design make it as much a pleasure to hold as it is to behold—are anywhere near as impressive as their packaging, then this act of reading might well be as lovely as the object that shall facilitate it.

- The paper, page layout, and typeface are also very nice, and the information provided at the back of the book regarding the genealogy of the font, Sabon, described as "one of the most legible text faces," is itself an intriguing short narrative of sorts, not to be overlooked.

- It seems strange and curious, yet potentially very clever, to bind four chapbooks together into one volume. Yet aren't chapbooks most properly the territory of poetry? Might then these pieces of short short fiction be intended as prose poems?

- On the other hand, do I really know what a chapbook is? And as for short short fiction, should I familiarize myself with its formal parameters, if they do indeed exist, to further substantiate my reasons for rarely reading it? Is it irresponsible of me to simply Google these terms? Should I bother reading beyond the Wikipedia entries now that the generally held consensus of said website is that it is "really quite an excellent resource, you know, and so much more reliable than it used to be"?

- Answers to myself, respectively: Not really. Probably. Not really. Probably.

A Peculiar Feeling of Restlessness *is both a fetching object and an ultimately, if not invariably, absorbing read.*

- Results of my "research," respectively: Chapbooks have a long, rich history and can contain all sorts of texts, though they are now most commonly used for small collections of poetry, and so on. There is, as I had assumed, a lot of disagreement over what differentiates short short fiction from very short fiction, sudden fiction, flash fiction, nanofiction, and an eventual, for the sake of conjecture, picofiction, yet they are all supposed to contain something along the lines of recognizable plots and protagonists no matter the length, and so on. Googling anything will lead, in due course, to porn, whose rapturous and engaging historical contours are, of course, quite thoroughly delineated on Wikipedia. And so. And on.

***In medias res*:**

- The book's preface, a casually witty and enjoyable text by Abigail Beckel and Kathleen Rooney of Rose Metal Press, is essential reading in so far as it explains how and why these four writers were brought together in this particular volume with this particular title and this particularly female cast. It's a great few pages. Beckel and Rooney seem to really relish running a press.

- The book's introduction, by Pia Z. Ehrhardt, opens with an elegantly engaging, masterfully executed sentence that reads like a viable short short on its own. Sweet.

- Yet the introduction also includes some inexcusable tripe like this: "And how many times did the writer get up from her desk for Cheez-Its rather than look at the eclipse directly, only to sit her butt back down again and finish what she'd started? I'm thinking a box full." Salty.

- Worse yet, the same introduction describes each writer's contributions to the collection with enough adjectival opulence and adulatory applause that it begins to read like a Ciceronian biography of Princess Diana as written by John Updike, revised by Danielle Steele, promoted by Oprah Winfrey and orated—by a fist-raising, toga-clad, cigar-smoking Bill Clinton—in an early-A.D. Colosseum.

- Bitter? Sour? Umami? Wouldn't it be fun to ghostwrite that biography?

- Regarding fun things and imagined ovations: The book's first section of short short stories, "Laughter, Applause. Laughter, Music, Applause" by Kathy Fish, is refreshing and delightful, an excellent sampling of this talented writer's approach to the genre.

- Interestingly, nearly all of Fish's stories are in the present tense, and many of them somehow channel, with great texture and efficacy, the vicissitudinal charms, challenges, and illusions of childhood, kinship, and family.

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- So I wonder: Is childhood in some way most correlative to the present tense? Are families, or notions thereof, as well? Memories, sure. Plans, sure. But is there not a certain immediacy, a certain sense of less-subjectified observation, indeed even a relative lack of uncertainty that one might consider concomitant with the present tense, on the one hand, and the blink that is childhood and familial links on the other?

- One might, I think, yes.

- Anyway, Fish's light touch and ability to incarnate a personality in the turn of just one dependent clause make her prose both pleasurable and effective. When her families sit around a table eating, for example, "creamed eggs on toast," you can visualize and smell those creamed eggs even if you have no clue what they are. I, for one, do not.

- Googling it. Got it. Prep time: 10 minutes. Next link (almost): Porn! Duh.

- Troubling: I would most politely describe myself as *not a fan* of short short—and so on the shorter—fiction. At all, really. It can be funny. It can be clever. It can be touching. It can be an ingenious little thing someone wrote down, without doubt. But it rarely lives up to what it purports to be. Fully realized narratives and the like. Yet a chunk of good prose is a chunk of good prose. So a series of good chunks by the same writer, like archipelagoes of sticky lumps in cream of wheat, can be quite savory.

- Or more to the point: the book's second section of short shorts, "Wanting," by Amy L. Clark, is also very good. Whereas Fish's strength lies primarily in conveying youth and family ties, Clark's finds its zenith in her portrayals of intimate encounters, couples, relationships, and variably incendiary—or sometimes resigned, even glum—passions. Her opener, "Measurements," and "Story for Mark, Who Probably Needs Clarification" are exemplary.

- Note to self: If the second half of the book is as enjoyable as the first, seriously consider reading more short short fiction. Or more specifically, seriously consider reading more chapbooks of short short fiction published by Rose Metal Press.

***Post medias res, ad finem*:**

- Re: Note to self: Nevermind. Or rather: Consider, though not so seriously.

- In other words, the book's latter two portions, "Sixteen Miles Outside of Phoenix" by Elizabeth Ellen and "The Sky Is a Well" by Claudia Smith, are neither as strikingly resonant nor as generally cohesive as the first two. They are more embittered, which is fine. And more tragic, which is fine. At times quite vindictive, even livid. But that can all work just fine. Indeed, such narratives could be categorically stunning.

- Is the space of short shorts too restrictive, then, for such tales? Does a fiery story need more room to gather flames and spread?

- That cannot be. Or maybe so. But no matter. For what undercuts the latent force in both portions is their somewhat aloof, distant stance, not to mention that Ellen's and Smith's chunks of prose are often taut where they'd be better slackened, slackened where they'd be better taut. To be sure, a short short that works is one whose succinctness level is very close to exact.

- So the problem is quite simple: in these last two chapbooks, that level is too often off. If good chunks don't follow one another regularly enough, you pay more attention to how they go down. Which is not always a good thing.

- Nonetheless, one very good thing is Ellen's "Eastern Standard," from which the book gets its alluring title. To understand why is to read just sixty-four words. To wit, not even six lines.

***Ex post facto*:**

- *A Peculiar Feeling of Restlessness* is both a fetching object and an ultimately, if not invariably, absorbing read.

Paul D'Agostino lives in Brooklyn, New York. He is barely employed but stays very busy. He can often be found skateboarding in Lower Manhattan or under the BQE near Union and Meeker. His novel, as yet unpublished, is called Petey in the Details.

A Walk in the Dark

Carol Niederlander

Blind Rain

Bruce Bond

Louisiana State University Press
http://www.lsu.edu/lsupress
80 pages; paper, $16.95

In "Blind Rain," the title poem of Bruce Bond's remarkable sixth volume of poetry, we meet an old man become blind, his "eyes gone dark, / white with age," listening to a litany of delicate sounds that the "blacklash of rain" (recalling "many rains") creates. In those few lines, one catches Bond's intricate lyricism: the eyes are dark, as well as light, and the rain not only from a current downpour but also rain *remembered*, perhaps as a punishing "backlash," through the fog of dementia. We're brought into dream territory and up against the devastating reality of old age. Allusions to gardens background Bond's poems in childhood or to that mythic time before "the fall," when world and self were one. In the foreground, however, Bond imagines human beings who stand like trees thrashing in a storm, their branches caught in the "teeth" of stars. Bond's work is a walk in the dark, both delicate and searing, and deeply personal without becoming confessional. His beautifully crafted, allusive poetry asks a great deal of a reader—but it returns even more.

Dedicated to the memory of Bond's parents, this book considers the price human beings pay for consciousness. "Afterlife," which ironically, *begins* the volume, invites readers into the story. It begins,

> If you find yourself staring in your sleep
> the way a boy stares into a campfire
> on a lake of ice, his head lit, eyes closed
>
> if how you come to love this place
> is how you leave it.

The boy with his life ahead and the man who knows he must soon leave his are destined to change places: "If fathers in their frustration, their pride, / become the sons we cannot console," then "here where the dark opens the graves of books," we kneel "to read, repeating, repeating," struggling to parse out the meaning of what we create, and what we *are*.

Bond's work is a walk in the dark, both delicate and searing.

It's hard to understand ourselves, much less another. The narrator of "Wake" feels the distance between himself and his students; they "look up and wait / for my first questions, knowing so little / of my life, just as I know so little of theirs." In another room, a dying man struggles to remember language. His son leans in to listen, hears only the "far surf / where life first sprouted its legs and crawled / ashore to dry its tail in the morning sun." It's a funny, surprising image. The animal body carries an ancient sea within but dearly loves those moments in the sun. That inner void is invoked again when we hear the sighs "of buses expelling little flocks // of coats." A sense of their own anonymity propels the "coats" toward

> that brief sensation, uninvited
> small in voice and stature

Detail from cover

> though not without its hunger
> ……
> the physical greed
> of being, here, ever more
> helplessly here, here
> or so the moment wants to believe.

Few want the moment to end.

Bond, who holds an MA in music performance, pays homage to the work of musical artists. They include Bud Powell, the probably schizophrenic jazz pianist, and Glen Gould, the reclusive concert pianist. Concerned friends once locked the manic Powell inside a room where "the only open door was the lid to his baby grand." Powell played out his inner panic,

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shedding "such grace, / such jeweled and horizontal showers" you'd think you felt "a bright wind thrown from the rock of the skull." His groaning voice was "a great / branch sweeping the broken glass of rain." In "North," Bond portrays the Canadian Gould as mesmerized by the emptiness *outside*: "What he loved in the cold white meadow / of this, his northern province" was "a falling open," in which he could hear "the slightest wind at the valley's rim, the quietest branch, the deepest pulse." "Blue Instrument," the final poem in this set (recalling Wallace Stevens's "Man with a Blue Guitar"), returns us to the central narrative, repeating and extending images from preceding poems. A boy's hands rest upon his mother's as she skillfully plays piano. Years later, though, her hands are merely "fitful" in a room with "no music, // no books, no natural lighting, nothing / to graze her nerves with its cautious beauty." And "No, she says, to the pill, the spoon, the prayers…No, she says, with her head like the blind / musician sinking into a soft chord, // the kind of no that says, yes, its here…the hush that takes you with it as it fade." Even Stevens's meditative consolations—art and the beauty of the sensory world—fail her in the end.

"To the Skywalkers," the most striking poem in this book, may also be the most courageous. It praises those who have the skill to "walk / the skeletal heights":

> Who hasn't wondered what it takes
> to kneel over the great sky-well
> here and there a cinder of wings
> to know the opening beneath you
> has you like a hunger. You listen
> in vain for the hammer as it falls.

Those burnt wings probably belong to Icarus, who lacked a sense of the proper scope for human ambition. The sky walkers, though, have the balance and "the gift of nerve that holds them / to their task," which is a kind of *seeing*: "It wakes them to the world they watch / time and again, forever waking, //until, that is, they descend."

The book's final segment introduces an ancient icon: a palm with an open eye in its center, conflating a sense of touch with true vision, with tenderness and compassion. The motif appears first in "Crucifix," which describes the body of Christ as a "lover with his torn cloth / over his loins." Christ's hand, pierced and bleeding, provides a "peephole" into what could be "anyone's fate." In "The Return," the narrator relates how once he "loved the future the way a wick / loves the fire that eats it," ruefully recalling a young woman, entangled with him in "the backs of cars" while all around them hung "a wreath of cricket." "*Going out*, we called it," he explains, understanding things differently now. To truly see and touch—to "throw a life into the life / you choose, into the one who chooses, / the mirrored mirror of the physical / eye,"—is to escape the narcissist's mirror. There are echoes of both John Milton and Homer in his hard-won knowledge:

> For those who wait, it seems to come
> from a great distance, returning the way
> a father does after years at sea,
> his too large coat and the hat he holds
> doused in the indigent rain.
>
> *True*, we say, as of one returning
> but also of the eros of return.
> Why is it always one woman now
> balancing the scales of my bed?

The final exquisite poem, "Will," bequests the future itself: To "the locusts that blur the lyres of their shells" the narrator leaves "my blindness at the end of day." To the "pincers of ants dismantling a bird" (that is, to death) he leaves "the bitter patch at the tip of my tongue," and to "the porch light haloed in a scribble / of moths," he leaves his "boyish appetite." To his father's memory, he leaves "the bread crumbs of my name," the fairytale path home of orphaned Hansel. The cycle of life and death, without return, is quietly acknowledged. The poem and the book end with these eloquent lines, reprising imagery from the opening: "To the one who reads, I leave the fire. / To the quiet brightening behind me as I go, / I leave the quiet to come." Do yourself a favor and don't miss this one. It's a small fire on a lake of black ice.

Carol Niederlander is a St. Louis writer who has published work in Pleiades, Natural Bridge, *and* Delmar. *She taught English and chaired art at St. Louis Community College at Forest Park and is a long-time board member of* River Styx.

Fractal as Form

Andrew Kozma

American Fractal

Timothy Green

Red Hen Press
http://www.redhen.org
104 pages; paper, $18.95

Form is a corset.
It gives shape, but through distortion.

And, like a corset, while it brings forth an ideal form of beauty, it also can suffocate in the name of appearance.

Timothy Green's *American Fractal* takes on form in five rounds of ten poems each, and it's a struggle. The struggle isn't epic. For the most part it's decidedly suburban and small, exhibiting a worldview that makes the massive disasters, the overcoming passions, into small, easily unwrappable candy bars. I'm stealing that notion from the last lines of the book's final poem, "In the Parking Lot of Our Dreams." Here, Green's voice is distracted from the unexpected and mysterious change in his world where "painters are turning / everything brown":

> It's then I realize
> there's enough change
>
> left from the wash for a
> cup of coffee, maybe
> even a Milky way.

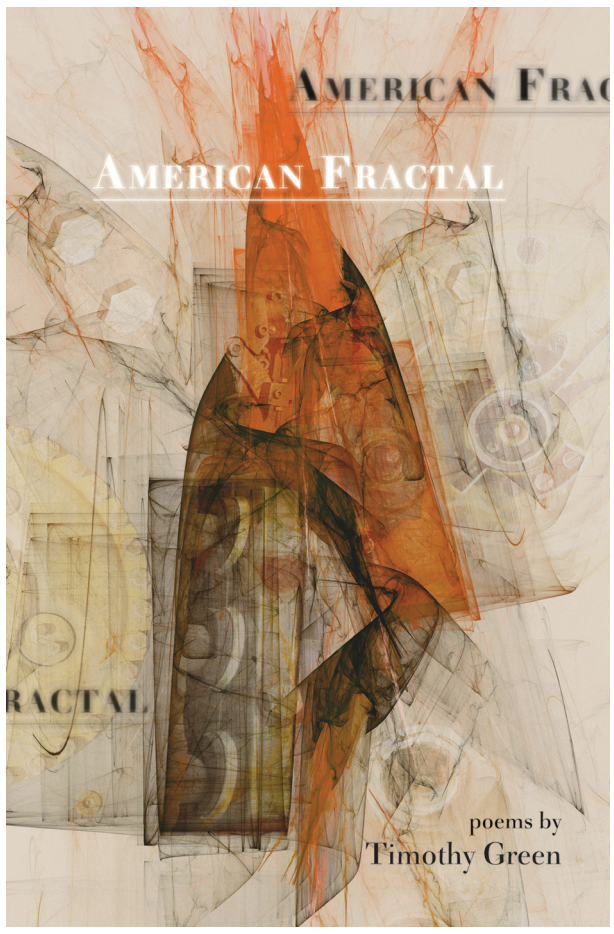
This happens repeatedly in his poems. A thread of thought or image, at a pivotal moment, is broken, distracted from itself. Any poetic truth is sidetracked by the inability of the characters in the poems, and sometimes the poems themselves, to carry through to the end.

Of course, this fits with the mode of a book declared by its title poem. There is a way to understand the world around you, but that investigation involves a need to let go of the easily containable: a fractal never stops repeating itself in ever-diminishing copies. The formula can be understood, but not fully grasped, just as with the concept of infinity, but instead of the infinite stretching out into the universe, forever larger, forever longer, the fractal is the breaking down into the smaller, the more minute, the forever fragmented.

Green is an intensely formal poet—not in tone, but in construction.

The title poem encloses a child's awakening to the frailty of his parents and the notion of family, as seen through the dissolving marriage of his mother's best friend, his own mother's mental retreat into herself, his father's retreat into bars and work. All this is expressed in a fractured narrative that pinpoints the boy's moment of realization between his bathroom's two mirrors, staring at the infinite regression of his image. Obvious moments justify the *American* in the title: the inclusion of *The Price is Right* and the parade of prizes, hopes pinned on the spin of a wheel. The fractal, however, comes not only through the regressions of image and the echoing of lines, but inherently through the form.

Green is an intensely formal poet—not in tone, but in construction. Look at that table of contents again: five groups of ten. A desire for symmetry, some revelatory order. He can write a perfect sonnet, works well within couplets, finds rhyme a help rather than a hindrance, and finds non-standard forms. None of these is more present than the form he uses for "American Fractal" and a handful of other poems: a fully justified, mostly unpunctuated line that uses gaps for pauses and line breaks.



> *distemper* the doctors in the waiting
> room more mysterious
>
> more clinical we had clinics now
> *post-partum depression*

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they said *bipolar disorder* they
said in their white robes

behind their stethoscopes & clipboards
their shoes so soft they

moved soundlessly down the long hall *the price is right* on a

television hanging from the ceiling I
sit down in the bathtub

Here the fractal is revealed in the constant breaking within a highly rigid visual. These poems have something powerful driving them, even if Green lets the lines end, often as not, on words with no power (*the*, *a*, *so*). The gaps don't always occur to divide thoughts—what would be two separate sentences might be jammed together. What the gaps do is provide a real rhythm to the voice that's not inherent in punctuation. The fifth line from the quote above mimics the soft shoes in the hall, the mental processes of the boy as the present and past are mingled together, and the boy's difficulty in grasping both what is happening to his mother *and* the doctor's inability to do anything about it.

My favorite lines in this form come from a later poem, "The Bending of Birches":

confessional one might say: I
knew a boy once who

hung himself in his mother's attic
that this boy so

quiet in school one day
became an empty desk

became a space to be filled &
maybe he still appears to

me in dreams can you say that much?...

Like the desk, the poem becomes a space to be filled, and here it is filled with that boy who inhabits the rest of the poem like a monument to a memory.

One side effect of the diminishing of the grand old stories, is that the same method makes more pedestrian—read: personal—stories vanish altogether. Here form takes on Timothy Green and wins, mostly in the third section. Samuel Butler provides the epigram for the section: "A hen is only an egg's way of making another egg." Easily, this could be twisted to "A poem is only a form's way of making another poem."

In this mini-grouping of ten poems, seven are failures. In many, the metaphor becomes the form and the driving force of the poem; this is true even when another more obvious form veils the metaphor, such as tercets, couplets, or a sonnet. The problem is that, in using metaphor as a form, Green has robbed himself of much freedom. If a traditional form—the arrangement of words and lines on the page—is a spur to creativity, using a metaphorical conceit as form means that the poet has nothing left to spur to, since the words are mostly dictated by the metaphor. In one poem, notably outside of this section, Green manages to harness metaphor *and* form to his ends in a poem called "Saddled" that is, expectedly, dominated by horse imagery and references. Here, perhaps because he also uses horse as a metaphor for love, or perhaps because he foregrounds the metaphors so unabashedly, the poem moves beyond words into mystery.

Mystery is missing in most of the third section's poems. That lack infects what I see to be Green's weaker poems. This absence of mystery is tied to a tendency for adding a final line or image that seems simply an explanation. I feel this stems from the poet's distrust in the strength of his poem—in that final moment, he gives in to the feeling that he has to carry his poem, in supplication, to the reader.

Obviously, I can be blamed here for second-guessing the poet's intent, but regardless of what Green meant and why these lines are there, I still feel strongly that most are unnecessary and slip mystery away. Here are two examples of the way this movement works. In "Pot Luck," the switch to the pedestrian in a poem full of images—each person brings an image in lieu of food to the table—undercuts the poem's drive, not only because it contradicts the strength of the line before it, but because, with that final line, the poem simply becomes "about" tension at a family dinner table:

where Dad used to sit, Mom drops

a mug-shot in the mashed potatoes,
a little careless now, a tired look in her

one good eye. No one says a thing.
My brother asks me to pass the peas.

"On the Phone My Mother" moves to abstraction in the final line to summarize what the reader will already intuit in the rest of the poem, the struggle to connect with a parent when that connection always fails:

And so the silence is full
of this thin
whistling sound.

Something escaping, always,
something holding on.

There are beautiful poems in this book. "The Body," "The Memory of Water," "Beach Scene," "2.9," "American Fractal," "Beating Balaam's Ass," "The Sense of Being Looked At," "Pluots and Apriums," and "The Urge to Break Things" are all worth reading. Many others will hold your interest and repay you with little tricks of language.

I want to end this review with two quotes from Green that exemplify both of his extremes. The first is the end of "How I'd Explain It," a poem about deer hunting.

The doe never bends toward

the apple core
whose scent drew her; she waits

in the warm clearing as if
she knows

what's coming.
And sometimes—

sometimes
I think maybe she does.

Green knows, as shown through many of his poems, that those last two stanzas aren't needed. We already know what the deer knows, and that it's not really the deer, but the man watching who makes himself feel better by thinking the deer is a knowing sacrifice. In "2.9," by contrast, Green leaves the poem, and us, in a moment of sudden confusion or epiphany, whatever exists in the countless small portions of the day when we find ourselves, eyes open, amazed. "And as you wonder—*Where?* / *Where?*—that little tremor / touches your sleeve, lets go."

Andrew Kozma received his MFA from the University of Florida and his PhD in English Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Houston. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Subtropics, Zoland, Smartish Pace, Dislocate, Forklift, Ohio, *and a non-fiction piece has appeared in* The Iowa Review. *His first book of poems,* City of Regret, *won the Zone 3 First Book Award.*

All of My Love

L. Timmel Duchamp

Crazy Love

Leslie What
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200 pages; paper, $13.95

Love, especially the extreme and obsessive variety, is one of the chief preoccupations of fiction. In its most popular manifestations, this boils down to a handful of stories endlessly tweaked, featuring the sexual predator and stalker, the couple so sexually obsessed they leave the bedroom only to eat, the despairing jilted lover, the possessive jilted lover who won't let go, the sexual fantasist. In real life, though, "crazy love" is, in the oddness of its particularity, often baffling to anyone who witnesses it. For Leslie What, whom former *Asimov's SF* editor Gardner Dozois dubbed "The Queen of Gonzo," such odd particularity provides a key for unlocking the mysteries of the ordinary heart afflicted with a love that onlookers typically categorize as "dysfunctional." In these seventeen stories, What demonstrates a gift for delving into heart-wrenching matters with a lightness of touch and tone that at first glance seems merely to skim the surface of the situations she describes.

Interestingly, the eleventh piece in *Crazy Love*, "Storytime," lays bare the difficulty of writing about complicated emotional situations that don't fit the conventions, about people who would be dismissed by many as simply "dysfunctional" or wrong and thus not worthy of being understood. The narrator of the story, who continually addresses the reader throughout, writes of a character whose daughter is "severely retarded":

> She sits at the kitchen table to write, but can think of only fantasy and lies. These lies, she supposes, are what others call fiction. There is no point in writing the truth: that she both loathes and loves her daughter. The poor woman refuses to admit what she does not want anyone to learn. No one wants to hear about it, anyway.

Earlier, the narrator described the "perfect son" of the "perfect couple" reading to his twelve-year-old

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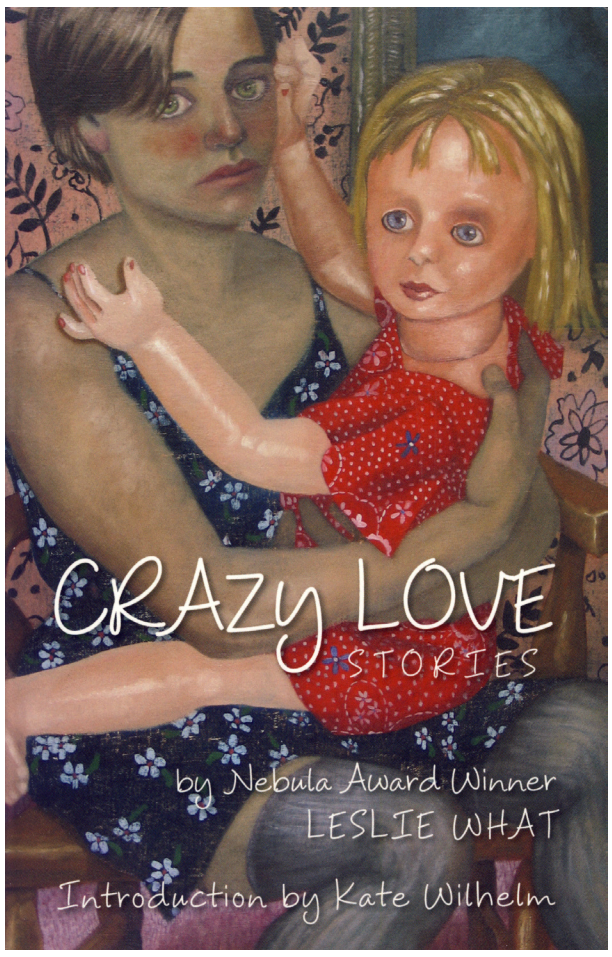

sister (also "perfect") during what the son calls "Storytime": "The son always reads happy stories that do not interfere with sleep." The narrator revises the story constantly, departing from the "happy story" she begins with, repeatedly retelling the tale to make it more honest, to clarify what keeps getting lost in the assumptions she keeps realizing are built into the narrative. She notes of her character,

> She loses control of her life as easily as a writer loses control of her story. We lie to protect our stories, telling only the good things, the things we know from experience others will want to hear. Because no one wants to learn about a poor woman letting terrible things happen to her helpless daughter. This does not show good character or strong conviction—qualities that, though greatly admired, are rare.

The narrator pleads the desire to understand her character (and thus herself) better. "You see, the inspiration for this story came from a similar circumstance, one where I suspected, yet said nothing." Near the end of "Storytime," she concludes that no one wants to hear "the same old story," that "leaving out the sad parts" is how people "get on with [their] lives."

In "Frankenfetish," a family exercises exactly that form of disavowal, excising the "sad parts" and "getting on with their lives." After a woman's death from cancer, her husband and daughter bond together over the dead woman's tumor. The father, who works in the "Refuse Services" of the hospital in which his wife died, rescued and now nourishes the tumor with his daughter. Together they feed it "amino acids" in a nightly ritual involving an eyedropper (an image that resonates queasily with the father adding "special vitamin drops" to the sugar cubes they eat for dessert). The narrator, fifth-grader Lola, dresses in her mother's purple sundress and wears her hair in a bun (which she believes makes her look "sophisticated") and, at dinner, asks her father about his day at work. Her little brother Wendell, who'd been his mother's pet, struggles to make a place for himself in their strange conspiracy, unable to cook and clean as well as his older sister, unable to identify the tumor with the loving mother he has lost. "Daddy knew how to keep a person alive after death," Lola says. "Not the whole person, because that was impossible and besides, it wasn't important." Of the tumors he has been keeping "alive," the narrator's father says, "These little critters never asked to be brought into the world, but once they're here, well, we've got some responsibility…. They have as much a right to life as any of us." And so Lola exults when the tumor "pulses," "She's alive!" and tells her father she's proud of him. "The tumor was growing stronger by the hour." They are "moving on" and "happy," she thinks as she goes to sleep with "Mama"—the jar containing her mother's tumor—clasped in her arms.

Leslie What demonstrates a gift for delving into heart-wrenching matters with a lightness of touch.

Pregnancy, wanted and unwanted, normal and bizarre, recurs repeatedly in these stories. Where there's sex, What reminds us, there's always the possibility of ramifications that men generally have the luxury of disavowing at will. In "The Changeling," one of the rare stories here in which the male partner is pleased about pregnancy, the white mother, anxious in racist ways about having the baby of her black partner, worries that the baby was trying to change her, "the way babies did, from the inside, in ways you couldn't see." Roni Sue's multiple pregnancy in "Babies," the narrative hints, may be not quite human; does her husband Marc associate her swollen belly with the cockroaches he wants to be rid of, cockroaches Roni Sue tries to protect? Every day she visits the Tulane Medical School display of fetuses in jars—"the baby exhibit," she calls it—one of which belongs to "the bugman," who sprays poison in Roni Sue's kitchen and on the dishes they use. The connections between the roaches, the bugmen, and Roni Sue's multiple pregnancy are murky and sinister. The doctor is appalled at what he sees on the ultrasound screen, but Roni Sue "would love them no matter how they turned out…. There would be lots of *them* soon enough, and only one of Marc." "All My Children" offers the reverse image of reproductive consequences: a successful, middle-aged surgeon finds himself under siege by the ten thousand children that have resulted from sperm donations he made for $50 when he was eighteen. Busy with his professional life, he's ignored his own children, who now witness the spectacle of his 10,000 *other* "children" confronting him on a live television spectacular called "Life Without Father." The privacy he's always taken for granted has vanished, and it is he whose morality is being questioned, whose life is being scrutinized.

In several stories, What uses fantasy tropes to literalize metaphors to illuminating effect. In "The Mutable Borders Of Love," the narrative asserts that love is a zero-sum game with winners and losers—literally, for in the world of the story, the losers literally die and become ghosts. If both partners fall in love and commit, they live. But a relationship that might lead to love is necessarily a life-and-death risk. In "I Remember Marta," James Speck cannot remember the many women with which he's had sex. His doctor says, "I'm seeing this type of thing more and more often" and says he suspects "this type of selective memory loss could be an STD." But James Speck's "selective memory loss" may lead to his losing his job, since he's slept with most of the women in his workplace. In other stories, guilt for a loved one's death leads to choices resulting in constant, relentless punishment; the characters say they prefer to be victims rather than "losers." Pain, joy, self-deception, guilt: these are the places "crazy love" takes us. What knows them well.

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