

PLEIADES

BOOK REVIEW

13.1



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unable to delete from her phone reveal the extent the failed relationship has had on her life: “‘I love you & your face.’ ‘I miss you. You’re the violin of my string quartet.’ ‘If you were a flower I’d bang a flower.’ ‘Everything is for you. Forever.’ ‘I love you. Sit on my face!’” She struggles to build a life absent of the affirmation and joy she once shared with her partner. As the book draws to a close, the narrator’s fragmented thoughts appear alongside song lyrics and letters to create a stunning overture. She revisits questions surrounding suicide as Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme” plays quietly in the background, the memory not yet faded, the conflict not yet resolved, the record, always, on repeat.

A book like *I Was Not Born* begs for multiple reads, if not for a more potent understanding of Cohen’s symbolism and energy, then for mere appreciation of the sonic qualities of her writing. Cross-genre projects like Cohen’s demonstrate the way writers seek to make sense of the world. Whether in prose or poetry, she drives with full force toward understanding the world in a way unique to her experience, yet familiar to the reader. *I Was Not Born* is the kind of book that gives as much as it explores, gives with a sense of humbleness and excess. In its most generous move, the book confronts for the reader a matter of great heaviness without fear, scattering brokenness into a rather airy understanding of life itself. Cohen does not promise to walk away from her experience unchanged, but perhaps she has dulled the ache for now, pulled through and on to something else.

—Erica Trabold

John Hampsey. *Kaufman’s Hill*. Bancroft Press, 2015.

In the opening chapter of his sublime new memoir, John Hampsey recounts a melancholic scene from his childhood involving a dead rat, a

sand wedge, and a pair of bullies who have made a bet at the local park. The bet, which calls for the narrator to swing a club at the dead rodent’s head, finds Frank Creely wagering against entitled misfit Georgie-Porgie, both of whom exhibit a startling lack of empathy toward the carcass and young John, their designated pawn. The chapter ends with no clear resolution; each party disagrees about whether the rat has been properly decapitated by Frank (who intervenes for the hesitant narrator), and the neighborhood boys leave the field. Our protagonist, however, remains behind, futilely searching at twilight for the remnants of the rat, longing to bury the creature which he just contemplated immolating.

Despite the gruesome nature of this opening act, Hampsey manages to strike a tone early in the memoir that is simultaneously wistful and poignant. Set in a middle-class Pittsburgh neighborhood during the 1960s, the bildungsroman initially appears to focus on one primary emotion: fear. The author alludes to many fears in the first chapter alone, including a fear of violence, conflict, the grotesque, the dead, intimidation, a nearby sewer tunnel, ennui, social ostracism, and even touch itself. These fears seem especially noteworthy given the subject matter of Hampsey’s previous publication, *Paranoia and Contentment*. In that philosophical text, the author examines the root meaning of the term paranoia, a Greek concept that did not originally possess a negative connotation. Rather, the word meant “beside (*para*) the mind (*noia*).” According to Hampsey, paranoia initially signaled an “unbound consciousness,” referencing a liminal state in which the individual could engage in self-reflexivity. After defining paranoia in this valuation-free context, the writer distinguishes between two modes of thought he identifies as paranoid and paranoidic. The former involves intellectual inquiry to expand our creative and visionary capabilities, while the latter represents a narrow-minded pursuit of contentment limited by fears and delusions. Hampsey addresses

the historical repercussions of adhering to a fear-based, paranoid culture before claiming we must embrace the paranoid, that “dreamy and expansive consciousness” which guides us in childhood before dissolving in all but the bravest minds.

Kaufman's Hill provides us a lens through which we may observe the author's most accomplished foray in to the paranoid, a journey that begins when the narrator befriends newcomer Taddy Keegan. We first meet Keegan in the third chapter of the memoir, shortly after young John has endured a beating from Frank Creely for refusing to fight his friend. The narrator and Taddy square off in an orchestrated confrontation (this time ordered by “Big Mori”) that ends with a slap to the face and a quick desertion by Hampsey, who fears retaliation from the amiable if intimidating Irish boy affecting a John Wayne-like persona. After a self-imposed period of exile from his peers, the narrator eventually befriends Keegan; the latter's self-confidence and idiosyncratic behavior win over the young boy.

Characters such as the Creelys, Georgie-Porgie, and Big Mori construct claustrophobic worlds to subjugate young boys like John, who often adopt paranoid mindsets to save face during preadolescence. Early in *Kaufman's Hill*, Taddy Keegan leads the narrator toward an alternative cosmos, one that surfaces during an excursion through the nearby sewer tunnel. The dark tunnel, we learn, intimidates the Creelys, who are “afraid of going in, and angry at the tunnel for being there.” Young Hampsey follows his new friend's lead after posing the following questions to himself: “[*What*] if Taddy Keegan makes it through to somewhere else? I thought. Would he come back to tell?” This intellectual curiosity compels the narrator to duck under the metal bars and enter the pitch-black tunnel. Once inside, he successfully navigates his way underground and intimates that he will emerge with a new consciousness, one we may associate with the paranoid.

From this point forward, young John appears

to elude the influence of the neighborhood bullies while adopting a more experimental mindset, engaging frequently with the iconoclastic Keegan. Taddy teaches the narrator how to smoke a toby, ride an inner tube down the creek, steal cigarettes, and jump in to rivers from dangerous heights. Young John also meets new friends and explores relationships with the opposite sex before examining his complex rapport with his father, a venerated yet repressed, enigmatic figure that the narrator earnestly longs to reveal. Hampsey the writer even disperses streams of consciousness throughout the text, subtly referencing his own prismatic efforts to achieve and recapture the paranoid mindset embodied by his younger self. By presenting such experiences in a creative, lyrical form, *Kaufman's Hill* offers the ultimate reconciliation of opposites: the succession of the paranoid over the paranoidic.

Then again, perhaps *Kaufman's Hill* is simply beautifully bottled obsolescence, a recollection of a past that is not entirely idyllic, though we yearn for its sanctity. The profundity of Hampsey's work can often be found in those occasionally mundane scenes plucked from the author's childhood, out of which emerge indelible images both painful and acute. In the chapter entitled “The Garden and the Creek,” the narrator reluctantly plays board games on a Friday night with a neighborhood outcast, plants a garden in his backyard, and observes Taddy's family watching a sitcom before detailing the emergency evacuation of Hampsey's school the day President Kennedy is assassinated. The author weaves together his narrative with such self-assuredness that by the end of the memoir we remember Hampsey's childhood as we do our own, as a collection of moments both magnanimous and bland, definitive and unforgettable, even when we originally experienced them otherwise. As a result, the elliptical conclusion of *Kaufman's Hill*—during which 14-year-old John meets a new friend to emulate and follow—fittingly punctuates Hampsey's voyage in to the paranoid.

The author collaborates with the past to provide a portal by which we, too, may enter the mystic blue. And thus his memoir becomes our Taddy Keegan.

—Matthew Hidinger

***Angels of the Americlypse: An Anthology of New Latin@ Writing*, edited by Carmen Giménez Smith and John Chávez. Counterpath 2014.**

This new anthology of Latina/o writing eschews most of the big names that might first come to a reader's mind; in fact there isn't a lot of writing here that could be labeled *mainstream*, and that is a good thing. As much as it serves to give voice to Latina/o writers of the 21st century, *Angels of the Americlypse* is also a remarkable collection of cutting edge, innovative writing. Many of the writers included here express a certain ambivalence towards ethnicity (as well as gender, sexuality, class), and that ambivalence often engenders de-centered and dynamic modes of discourse. In their introduction, editors Carmen Giménez Smith and John Chávez state that the purpose of their anthology is two-fold: "Through it, we collectively question the anxious need to patrol the borders of our identities. Through it, we collectively illuminate the blind-spots beyond these borders, the literary fringes to which much of our work is cast." To go with the writers they have selected, out beyond those borders, is exhilarating, though at times unsettling too, as good experimental work should be.

The anthology opens with seven poems by Rosa Alcalá, which serve as a good introduction to much of what will follow. Formally, Alcalá's poems range from prose poetry, to projective verse-style spatial experiments, to the more traditional poetics of "Paramour." In that poem, Alcalá imagines English as an uncaring and sometimes dangerous lover, whom the speaker seems powerless to refuse:

English texts me, slips in
as emoticons, goes to all
the mixers. English has rules
but accepts dates last minute. English makes
booty-calls. English makes me want it.

The speaker in "Paramour" exists both inside and outside the dominant culture, and her identity is in many ways a function of language, a language that is both hers and not hers. Like many of the poets and prose writers in *Angels of the Americlypse*, Alcalá tries to embrace a both/and rather than either/or relationship to language and, subsequently, identity. What this poem does as well is point out, particularly through line-break, the ways that English in particular is a kind of invasive linguistic species, "slipping in" and "go[ing] to all," it is a polyglot tongue, borrowing from many languages and in turn infecting those languages with neologisms and Americanisms of all kinds.

Many of the writers in this anthology give voice to ideologies of opposition, though that opposition never seems to fall into didacticism. Instead, they, like Alcalá, confront the very reductive idea of a monolithic and dominant American culture with a complexity that truly is reductivity's opposite. The six poems included here by Daniel Borzutzky each mobilize a poetics of protest against a culture founded on, and continually renewing itself in, violence, one that reduces the human body to a thing, a thing to be commodified, used, done to. Many of Borzutzky's poems seem to exist in a kind of border space between verse and prose, lines probing against the margins but never breaking or exploding them. There is a kind of ambivalence here, an uneasy co-existence that seems intentional, a recognition that, though the dominant culture may be resisted, called into question by the poet's voice, there is no breaking it, there is no victory against it—or, no easy one at any rate. In "The Book of Equality" Borzutzky mobilizes that extended line to show the ways that