

Cultural Daily


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Review: Bird Float, Tree Song: dis•articulated poems by Los Angeles poets

Joe Jiménez · Wednesday, April 20th, 2016

I heard once from the author Elaina Ellis that we are “poem-makers.” Making poems, yes, that speaks directly and with bright accent to the task of the collection *Bird Float, Tree Song: dis•articulated poems by Los Angeles poets*, edited by Terry Wolverton, a collaboration of poets exploring the exercises of “dis-articulation.”

By definition, the dis-articulationists’ task is “...to take apart a body, or rather a skeleton, to separate the joints.” Wolverton tells us, “I borrowed the term because I am taking apart bodies of writing—the passages of fevered writing— and separating them into their component parts of speech, nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.” Comprised of a sampling of exercises Wolverton completed with LA poets, the dis-articulation project demonstrates the process of engaging four writing prompts a partner gives, writing, then, with “fever,” taking the “fevered writing” and separating it into its parts (parts of speech), and then sharing these to allow newness to emerge in poem drafts.

 Accordingly, *Bird Float, Tree Song* proffers a set of models, exemplars, of how one might conduct the exercise of dis-articulation. We see how our peers do this. This is a sampling of process, sans exposition, really, but rife with the necessity of digging for how a poem came to be. There are tethers and hooks in the prompts, in the modeled fevered writing,” in the poems that are made. We see, in this collection, the beginning, the middle, the craft-result—which allows us to trace the “making” of poems—how it might be done. This is valuable to those of us guiding others in classrooms or guiding ourselves in the classrooms of self-learning, self-discovery, of resolving the poems we are making.

In the collection’s second poem, “Hover,” Wolverton’s speaker begins, “Years ago I stirred the future/ until skyline fell to dirt./ I whispered an outlaw language that only women heard./ I tasted the orange of the city/on the backs of their necks./ Every day we would bend and lock; / where was the place for wonder?” Notably, my own place of wonder takes me to the question: how did Wolverton make this? The pieces are there for study. From the original prompts, procured by Jessica Ceballos, “New weapons against superbugs; Mall closes after woman falls seven stories; More than 50 sperm whales, including mothers and calves, visited Orange County; and The future was such a long time ago,” Wolverton disassembles her fevered responses completed with Ceballos and builds “Years ago I stirred the future...”

Another example which sheds light on the dis-articulation process is Olga Garcia Echeverria’s “Wildfires,” a diptych which booms from the poem’s first assertion: “Bam! Just like that./ Another woman of color/ eradicated by the system.” I can look back to the fevers both Garcia Echeverria and Wolverton stir in one another and share—“hummingbirds” and “purple salvia” and “Then Bam!”—the mined words are there for both poem-makers to work. Perhaps the fevers of dis-

articulation are conduits for those fevers we carry within us, those ideas we most resolutely and wildly wield—offering vessels and kindling and whole continents on which to reclaim home for our syllables.

Finally, Douglas Kearney’s “The Livestock” led me to one last understanding of these exercises. A rumination on what we do with livestock and the capitalist fantasy that other lives live to service us, that “they want in our mouths, to be our coats/...doting as mothers sewn to cries,” Kearney’s text returns me to my place of wonder—how does this poem begin its meaning? how does Kearney make this magic? and what might I glean from the poem-maker’s diligence? There are striking images: “baboons hardened into clothes” and a final offering not of resolution but of possibility: “no no no no no—our love is nothing but goodbye./ and how we only want to love it all and so/ all of them.” In following the cues of the fever, I tread back to the four prompts Wolverton shared: “Hard Day of the Dead Dances on; Why Latinos Love Horror Films; Montage of Heck; Robot doctors and lawyers.” Here, I pause, because it becomes apparent to me that these dis-articulations indeed live with one another, both poem-makers in the collaboration sharing prompts, yes, fevered writing, yes, but also newness, for tracing Kearney’s ideas of baboons and livestock, I rediscover in Wolverton’s fever, a response to Kearney’s prompts “Vulgar yet weirdly graceful” and “The infantilization of people of color and women,” where Wolverton writes:

“The infantilization of people of color and women, and the women who are people of color are the most babied of all, but not babied in the Western post-industrial middle class model of doting and spoiling and commodifying, no, more like the pre-capitalist model of property, like livestock...”

The connect is visible if I put my thumb to the page and listen to the “doting,” to the “pre-capitalist model of property,” to the livestock. At this point, I realize clearly that the collection is not a guidebook or a how-to-do-this-like-us book, but a cartogram of possibilities, or what might be done with these tools, with our own hands, our fevers.

Dis-articulation speaks to the workhorse, to the experimentalist, to the hand that is stuck and wants to unstick in hopes that it, too, can make newness and clicking. *Bird Song*, *Tree Float* assembles for us multiple approaches to dis-articulation, an underscoring of what magic there is to completing exercises alongside, in collaboration with another, but also what might be accomplished if we pick and choose and make pieces of the exercise work for us, individually. To borrow, to find, to be given. These are exercises to help us resolve or to create new quandaries, new trouble. Indeed, these are exercises for poem-makers.

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