

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Whisper Gallery

Richard Oyama · Wednesday, January 13th, 2016

“what is sound but the flesh of time?” (“Viral Chatter”). That’s not an unimportant question, since time unfleshed is a ghost, an apparition, a hant; it’s the Web’s ahistoricity and placelessness. Which is where we all live now.

Forget everything you think you know about poetry or the classroom disinformation that has made you hate it.

Consider this: Poetry is immersive. Accountants don’t do risk assessment and statisticians don’t research demographic analyses of its audience. The best of it is consciously free, because it almost never makes real money. It’s a gift like those the Trobriand Islanders acquire and pass on.

And suppose you’re in the hands of a hyperalert intelligence like Nate Maxson who, in his recent volume *The Whisper Gallery*, detects the signs and augurs of our planetary dread. The title refers to a poem-sequence, but also the phenomenon of an acoustical space where sound echoes and reechoes as in a chamber, a catacombs, a “labyrinth.” Crazy old Pound said poets are the antennae of the race. Maxson has feelers out to here (reviewer spreading his hands kilometer-length). Maybe, dear reader, you should pay attention.

Exiled in New Mexico, Maxson isn’t a Southwest regionalist. His poetic voice exists in the interstices between the (im)material world and the almost-virtual: “down or up, it doesn’t make a huge difference” (“Viral Chatter”). He’s the ghost in the machine and knows it. This is poet-as-palmreader, part bunko artist, part Nostradamus.

Since he’s a poet, he doesn’t expect recompense. He doesn’t calculate weekend box office returns on “Dystopia Redux, the Sequel.” It isn’t sincerity I’m talking about that Maxson eschews anyway. Besides, like a lot of perfectly good words—take “rendition,” for example—that word has been evacuated of meaning by the Orwellian bowels of post-9/11 mendacity. So these aren’t poems as beautifully finished artifacts like a Grecian urn. No, they’re secret codes from the underground, the blips and beeps of Deep Web, the faint music of dread that insinuates itself in your Xanax-dulled, nerve-jangled ear. It’s a directional map to the point of no return. It’s a non-reversible jacket.

So Eliot’s “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” serves as the book’s epigraph—or epitaph. Maxson may not know his Adorno, but he surely knows that the last century was a graveyard.

It’s that bad. There’s no literary fiction on the *New York Times* bestseller list. E.L. James and Stephanie Meyer reboot their domination and/or teen vampiric fantasies from a different angle. Brick-and-mortar indie bookstores are closing at an alarming clip—and even those rarely stock small press books. The US is in thrall to Barnes & Nobles’ corporatist mind that has never heard of Gregory Corso, one of Maxson’s favorite poets, and it’s very unlikely you’ll find one of ex-jailbird Corso’s books in their Poetry section—if they have one. I don’t think I overstate when I say we, the hardcore readers, are reduced to the status of Fahrenheit 451’s misfits who committed

canonical books to memory in the dark forest. The woods are burning along with the Reichstag.

Let's see if a pop-cultural reference helps: *The Whisper Gallery* extends the vision of Dylan circa "Desolation Row." One of the poems is entitled "The Titanic Sails at Dawn." He's not talking about the billion-dollar extravaganza about hubris and a plumply nude Kate Winslet. Another of Maxson's influences is Thomas Pynchon and the novelist's investigation into hierarchies of power and paranoia as a normative state in America. He echoes *Gravity's Rainbow*: "something coming out of the sky."

Eliot's epigraph cues the reader. Don't expect a controlling master narrative whose male omniscience is bullshit. Woolf knew that. Maxson is too much a small d democrat/libertarian/anarchist for that. What I hear, the voice, issuing from these poems, is a disembodiment, a felt presence of something that knows it's lost in miniaturized cogs and gadgets, the ghost in the machine, unwhole: "to feel the missing piece despite its absence . . . the vestigial other . . . what has faded and yellowed was once a whole motion." ("The Pin-Test"). But since there's a fully conscious intelligence at work, that voice takes unwholeness as a *given*. If only that were true of the gun-toting maniacs that stalk the bloodied land.

At moments there's a longing for an apocalyptic event in which to merge and dissolve in amniotic fluid—"one big rainstorm to carry me away, reunite me with the water"—and a visionary clarity of transcendence and death: "between clouds and the eventual trench" ("Viral Chatter"). At other moments the voice sounds an implied threat and dis-illusion that we might just want to heed: "beware the wounded romantic" ("The Whisper Gallery (1)").

Like Dickinson, the poet is asking the Big Questions about the old verities: Death, Eternity, Time and Oblivion, but also modern crises like self-division and, preeminently, the soul-sickness of new technologies. He refers to the inorganic "digital transubstantiation" that seeks to abolish the clink and jangle of dailiness, the conjurations and spooks, in the name of the perfect El Lay surface. The voice has the air of D.H. Lawrence's "demon of the continent" come back to haunt the whiteman with an "Orestes-like frenzy." But he—or she—is also a Cassandra, a prophet unhonored in his own "homeland." We like to kill the messenger who delivers bad news.

Maxson is interrogating the nature of historical time itself, what Frank Conroy called "stop-time." The poet alludes to J. Robert Oppenheimer, one of the prime movers of The Bomb who "declared himself Destroyer, many armed Shiva." Did Shiva snap her fingers to music [Oppenheimer] could almost hear" on Ginsberg's "hydrogen jukebox?" ("The Pin-Test").

If you need influences, like novelists Pynchon and Don de Lillo, Maxson is a terrible agent of consciousness in our endgame. He makes the reader work more than a little bit that, once upon a modernist time, was something commendable, since complexity, difficulty and effort were values to be prized.

The long-breath'd lines aren't exactly Whitmanic/Ginsbergian, they lack American optimism, there's no refuge in Buddhism. Maxson once described Franz Wright's poems as "a slab." The poems in *The Whisper Gallery* aren't slabs so much as they're jerrybuilt structures built from run-together sentences and telegraphic flashes broken by commas, slashes and the right-margin wall as if the poet couldn't be bothered by full stops. It doesn't matter whether the poet has read Charles Olson or not; he's absorbed the Black Mountain credo that one perception immediately follows upon another. These are communiqués composed at white heat.

The lines crawl across the large-format page like the red ants in *Cien Años de Soledad* before the cataclysm wipes Macondo off the map as Melquiades scribed it. These poems weren't written; they were dictated by the poet much as Rilke transcribed the *Duino Elegies*, although it isn't an angel wrestling in this poet's doggish ear. As surely as empires rise, they also fall: "A crack appears in the machinery" is the first line of the first poem in this volume.

The meritocracy is bogus. Talent doesn't always out. Sometimes it withers on the vine. Excellent

writers don't always find their audience. Let's hope Nate Maxson does.

The dolphin repurposes into a shark. High water, everywhere. We'd best learn to swim among the broken rocks.

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