

THE ALTEREDSCALE REVIEW

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"Under the Sky of No Complaint" (Lavender Ink/Fell Swoop) by Richard Martin

by Jefferson Hansen

This sophisticated poetry book consists of five sections, four of which originally appeared as stand-alone chapbooks. Each uses specific formal devices—from sonnets to free verse to meter—while Martin’s thematic obsessions appear throughout—language, love, humor. Martin also makes liberal use of collage and parataxis, which puts him squarely in the Pound-Williams tradition, in spite of his occasional use of tradition.

In the first section, “Sideways,” Martin uses, for the most part, vaguely iambic lines and punctuation as he flits and digitizes from one thematic perch to another. And this linking of the organic—“perches”—with the technological—“digital”—is apt since Martin makes our greatest technology, language, into a languorous, comedic organism.

Language moves to stillness.
We have the details: old pond
In the ancestor’s neighborhood.
Your fear of barns and tall grass. (20)

These lines illustrate this section best. You can feel the vague iambic rhythm. He uses a lot of end-stop. Language as an entity quickly gives way to empirical particulars. Unlike high LANGUAGE poetry, where language is opened to reveal its complicity in social structure, Martin places language squarely in our thoughts, affections, and evolving desires.

In the second section, “Sound Nets,” Martin turns to 14-line sonnets. In his hands, the traditional form becomes funny, talky, and lacks punctuation:

Boat of blond strangers has too many opinions
Time to float Current of thought
less than Nile but not my exotic mother (62)

The third line quoted above provides a typical example of Martin’s humor. He yokes together disparateness in a manner that shocks, amuses, and throws us into reflection. “Current” clearly relates to “Nile,” but how does it relate to “thought”? How is such “current” related to the “mother,” and why is she, apparently, more “exotic” than the Nile? These questions provide the openings, the breathing, the possibilities of this poetry—not any answers.

Thank goodness.

In the section “Under the Sky of No Complaint” Martin uses few formal devices nor even hints at meter. But the title poem of the section, in two-line stanzas, hilariously riffs on the tensions between our “cell phone” world and Romanticism, the pull of the old and “*The School of Advanced Poetics*,” and the academicized AP writing course. The poem seems frustrated with

the boxes into which writing and thinking is put, the fetishizing of the new, the needless denigration of what might still be useful or fun from the past.

“Strip Meditation” consists of a series of numbered poems, most in regular stanzas:

In time we will
Overcome everything

If we are the immense universe
& not some egomaniacal

Splinter of light in the mind (119)

Martin is way too sophisticated to be uttering the cliché in the first two lines. I did a double-take: until I hit the ironizing of the next two lines. I laughed out loud. These switchbacks and double-takes are typical of this book.

The final section, “Skylark,” ends with the title poem. And it is magnificent. Divided into three numbered sections, it is further digitized by leaping from each stanza to the next in terms of image/thought/thematic nexus. We reflect not so much on the relationship of one line to another, as we do in much of the rest of the book, but on the relation of one stanza, as unit, to the next:

Under the constellations of heaven
There are plenty of options
Instead of forests we could have
More superhighways (for instance)

Witness the cellar of oranges
Climb lemon steps at the sun’s request
Squeeze the light in you
Into shapes of day (148)

The first stanza’s nexus—space, options, landscape—gives way to a whole different one—surrealism, fruit, instructions in the form of verbs. Here the openness, the breath, the possibility comes in the intertwinings and the gaps between stanzas.

This is a big-hearted book by a complex and assured poet. I have never before encountered someone who, while remaining committed to various formal investigations, combines a reflection on the nature of poetry and language to the use of digitized techniques to a variety of ends.