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LEAVING THE ATOCHA STATION by Ben Lerner

Coffee House Press, 2011

Reviewed by Nick Sturm

Ben Lerner's first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, takes its title from a John Ashbery poem of the same name. As Lerner's protagonist Adam Gordon, a young poet on a fellowship in Spain, elucidates, "The best Ashbery poems, I thought, although not in these words, describe what it's like to read an Ashbery poem; his poems refer to how their reference evanesces. And when you read about your reading in the time of your reading, mediacy is experienced immediately." Certainly, Ashbery's "Leaving the Atocha Station" functions in the way Gordon observes, beginning, "The arctic honey blabbed over the report causing darkness / And pulling us out of there experiencing it." Ashbery's ambiguous "it" in the second line functions as a simultaneously acute, oblique referent pointing towards the delightful, somewhat ominous, yet baffling first line, bringing our attention to the poem to our attention, making us (in)directly aware of our own confusions and expectations both inside and outside the poem's "there," its "darkness." Furthermore, it isn't clear whether "pulling us out of there," out of the non-edifying dark/poem, allows or prohibits experience, an ambiguity that Gordon's constant removal from any stable self comes to embody throughout the novel, a distancing that he describes as "seeing myself looking down at myself looking up." The anxiety born from this uncertainty and displacement—between self, other, and world, between truth and lie, and between languages—is what defines Gordon's experiences in Madrid (a time he dispassionately calls his "project"), an acknowledgment that language not only gives experience its content but also its form, "language becoming the experience it described," which, for Gordon, drug-addled, self deprecating, and brilliant, is "the texture of et cetera itself."

This is all to say that *Leaving the Atocha Station* is a novel that foregrounds aesthetics as ethics (or a failure of ethics) and, perhaps more interestingly, posits that experience itself is textual or, at the least, that language and experience are susceptible to the

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same issues: misunderstanding, mistranslation, uncertainty, exclusion, multiplicity, fragmentation, contradiction, fraudulence, and meaninglessness. And with Gordon's concerns about authenticity, both aesthetically and ethically, and his position between an English he makes a rule of not using and a Spanish he often misinterprets or fails to understand, this raises problems for his work as a poet, for his actions as a friend and lover, and for his position as a human being in a world in which the real, whether an act of love or mass violence, fails to resonate for him, is non-referential, a reflection of an indeterminate reflection of the world. Indeed, at the beginning of the novel, Gordon, mildly stoned in a museum, admits, "I had long worried that I was incapable of having a profound experience of art and I had trouble believing that anyone had, at least anyone I knew." Ontologically separated from the authentic, less disconnected than disassociated, Gordon goes on to describe his first encounter with Isabel, his soon-to-be lover, as less a moment of intimate connection than an accumulation of misunderstandings: "I formed several possible stories out of her speech, formed them at once, so it was less like I failed to understand than that I understood in chords, understood in a plurality of worlds. . . . This ability to dwell among referents, to let them interfere and separate like waves, to abandon the law of excluded middle while listening to Spanish—this was a breakthrough in my project, a change of phase." It is, paradoxically, in Gordon's inability to fully communicate in this second language that his relationship with Isabel finds its depth, its meaning:

I would say [in Spanish], Blue is an idea about distance, or Literature ends in that particular blue...and watch her mouth the phrase to herself, investing it with all possible resonances...imbuing my silences, the gaps out of which of my Spanish was primarily composed, with tremendous intellectual and aesthetic force. And I believe she imbued my body thus, finding every touch enhanced by ambiguity of intention, as if it too required translation, and so each touch branched out, became a variety of touches. Her experience of my body, I thought, was more her experience of her experience of my body, of its symphonic receptivity, ridiculous phrase, and my experience of my body was her experience once removed, which meant my body was dissolved, and that's all I'd ever really wanted from my body, as it was.

Here, Gordon's experience of art, self, other, and language mix into one aesthetic/ethical amalgam, suggesting the issues inherent in translation are ubiquitous, that

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the referential space of a poem, like all experience, contains the potential to speak to the confusion, multiplicity, and misunderstanding of individual experience by making explicit the emotional and intellectual distance between individuals. For Gordon, the potential of profound meaning or experience always trumps the actual meaning or experience, never closing that distance but verifying it, an encounter with the world that, while ripe with uncomfortable ramifications about the nature of the self and what it means to do anything genuinely, effectively transforms Gordon into a pronoun, moving through, as poet Adam Day has described it, an Ashberyian “anti-referential sensuousness” that, while perhaps not profound, has the texture or shape of profundity, as if some meaning or intention has suddenly slipped, not away, but utterly out of being, leaving one, as Gordon puts it, “saying yes to everything, affirming nothing.”

But later in the novel, the repercussions of “saying yes to everything, affirming nothing” become severely complicated when the 2004 Madrid train bombings throw Gordon into the midst of a political and cultural whirlwind in which intention, responsibility, meaning, and fragmentation are simultaneously clarified and blurred by the physicality of the violence and Gordon’s retreat from street protests in which his voice “failed to blend” to the safety of the news on the Internet. Eventually, as Gordon’s relationships are paradoxically strained by increasing fluency in Spanish, prohibiting the “ambiguity of intention” that once bolstered his and others perceptions of himself, he must confront his own tendency to “exacerbate the world’s contradictions,” admitting “[m]aybe only my fraudulence was fraudulent,” an earnestness that uses ironic detachment to at last reach a unironic realization of self, not any kind of post-irony, but the dissolution of the binary tension between irony and sincerity; in other words, the contemporary zeitgeist.

Lerner’s success in *Leaving the Atocha Station* is that Gordon’s story doesn’t make these issues completely explicit, but allows the texture and depth of his prose to propel the novel. Gordon, admittedly mirroring the author in some ways, shows Lerner openly dealing with his own anxieties about art and authenticity, speaking to a contemporary generation for whom the profound, the sincere, and the real are continually absorbed, processed, and redistributed (translated) by political and economic systems that abuse and commodify language and the individual. That Lerner explores the contradictions inherent in Gordon and his (un)reality while also espousing a critical and aesthetic argument for his own poetics proves Lerner is not a poet toying with the

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novel, but already a master of the form, manipulating it without artifice, moving with lyric and intellectual intensity through a story that, whether you sympathize with Adam Gordon or not, anyone making art in the 21st century must read.

THE PRIVATE LIVES OF TREES by Alejandro Zambra

Translated by Megan McDowell

Open Letter, 2010

Reviewed by Sessily Watt

This short book by Alejandro Zambra opens on a child's bedroom: Julián is telling a bedtime story about two trees to his stepdaughter, Gabriela. They are waiting for the girl's mother, Verónica, to return from a drawing class. The clean, straightforward prose, with a few touches of metafictional self-awareness, outlines Julián's relationship to the young girl, including the routines Julián, Gabriela, and Verónica have developed together and how Gabriela's father fits into this family. And then, four pages in, the rules: "When [Verónica] returns, the novel will end. But as long as she is not back, the book will continue. The book continues until she returns, or until Julián is sure that she won't return" (16). In other words, this is a novel about waiting.

Or, not really *about* waiting so much as a novel that inhabits the act of waiting. At first this waiting is without anxiety, grounded in the routine of the bedtime story and a soccer game on television. The novel moves backward in time, coloring in the relationship between Verónica and Gabriela's father. Julián picks up the novel he has written, the one he writes on Sundays, and the novel we are reading flashes back again, this time to the relationship between Julián and his previous girlfriend, and from that to his relationship with Verónica. As the night continues, and the comfort of routine disappears, the novel moves from the past to the future, to Gabriela's future. So, too, does the anxious mind move, though without such an elegant structure as this.

Neither does the anxious mind see itself as clearly as the narrator shows these characters, or depict itself as cleanly:

To keep calm, Julián thinks that literature and the world are full of women who don't come home, of women who die in brutal accidents, but at least in the world, in life, there are also women who, unforeseeably, have to take a

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friend to the hospital, or who have a flat tire in the middle of the avenue and nobody stops to help (45).

The narrative distance runs the risk of making this cleanliness antiseptic and chemical, and Julián's familiarity as a slightly schlubby writer character pushes him toward the unsympathetic, and yet neither of those risks ever materialize. Zambra, and Megan McDowell in her translation, is sure handed, polishing where polishing is needed. And so we slip into this evening with Julián, waiting for Verónica or morning, whichever will come first. We wait for the comfort of routine.

FAT GIRL, TERRESTRIAL by Kellie Wells

FC2, 2012

Reviewed by Matt Dube

If Henry James was right that novels are “great baggy monsters,” then Kellie Wells's *Fat Girl, Terrestrial* is Mechagodzilla, some rough beast souped up with all manner of innovative narrative tech: there are elements of other, recognizable narrative constructs here, like the family trauma narrative of traditional “women's fiction,” doubled in the threads of protagonist Wallis Grace Armstrong's struggle to craft a body worthy of her mother's love and in her claustrophobically close and then truncated relationship with her brother Obie, who disappears when she is twelve. Or maybe you'd prefer to look in on the plot gendered more masculine, that of Wallis's job reconstructing crime scenes, a la CSI (though Wells tells us, that forensic science's founder, Frances Glessner Lee, was all woman); Wallis in fact semi-specialized in building dioramas that reveal homicide where previously suicide was suspected. And anyhow, what happened to her brother, missing now some thirty years? And what about Wallis' murder of Hazard Planet, brother of the other giantess in Kingdom Come, KS? Oh, did I not tell you that Wallis is eight feet, eleven and a half inches tall and weighs four hundred and ninety pounds? You see, questions of excess in this novel are embodied, as it were, in Wallis's (and Hazard's sister, Vivica Planet's) bodies.

But, you protest, James meant Victorian novels—those lent out in three encyclopedic volumes by Mudie's library to his subscribers. Well, Wells has a touch of the Victorian, too: there's the curiosity cabinet quality of Chapter Twenty-Six,

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“Lady Maximus and the Bantam Show,” where we learn how Peter the Great collected freaks and unique specimens. But Wells’ prose also has an orotund tartness that least evokes a kind of Victorian japery. Take this sentence as a representative sample for your display case: “Note to self: come up with a wilier shtick, for the love of Pete, and quit being such a galumphing stumblebum!” (50). It’s true, the interruptive quality of such exclamations are contemporary, but the specificity and quaintness of the language—“shtick,” for the love of Pete, “stumblebum”—all point back to an earlier time, when we expected language to map different emotional territory. Wells’ diction is equally heightened and distinctive; here are a couple words, from many examples, that sent me to dictionary.com: “dandyprat” (114), “syzygy” (126), “hariolation” (235), and “jabbernowls” (243). And this is to say nothing of the novelist’s regular recourse to Germanic phrases and references; I live in the state next door to Wells’s Kingdom Come, KS, and it’s true Germans are common here, but the accents of some of these characters feel a little thick, not unlike that of Queen Victoria, herself a scion of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld.

Likewise, there are patches here that show the influence of Kate Bernheimer and the affiliated recent revival of folk tales, especially for female writers and feminist themes. I refer not only to the long section retelling, with significant variations, the tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin (in Chapter Twenty-Two, “Rabbit Catcher of Kingdom Come”) (a tale that then goes on to foreshadow one of the book’s most significant, if underdramatized sequences, the later disappearance of kids during Wallis’ childhood). There’s also something fairytale like in the stories Wallis tells her brother Obie, that form a kind of (auto)biography of God, stories that are too primal to be allegory, to be rationalized away or neatly slotted into some coherent, pedagogical scheme. They exceed that, these fragments, and chart a totally different course, or at least a counter-trajectory, for the good ship *Fat Girl*.

And what to do with those elements, like the close first person retelling of the Passion of Christ (Chapter Thirty, “Deliver My Darling from the Power of the Dog”) or Chapter Twenty-Seven, “The Soft-Footed Phantom Speaks,” where previously extant texts (at least the Gettysburg Address was identifiable by this Americanist, your humble reviewer) have been OULIPO-d, so that “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” becomes “This nation underneath God

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will have a flattened birth, a government for the people of people, the perishing people” (331). (The other texts, I think, come from the Bible, but don’t quote me on that.) Or there’s Chapter Eighteen, “The Curious Case of the Capacious Death Investigator,” whose diction and syntax are (comparably) restrained as we read case files of Wallis’s previous investigations, or Chapter Twenty-Eight, “Hazard, a Guess” which speaks from the point-of-view of Hazard Planet, the man Wallis accidentally killed when she sprayed him with pepper spray when he tried to mug her. Or maybe it’s just Wallis’s reconstruction of his point of view; it’s hard to say for sure, or to say why it matters, except that it’s another-additional piece of a novel overgrown with them.

I say overgrown, and no doubt some readers groan and think I want to trim this garden back, to manicure and manner it. It’s true that I don’t think all the elements in this novel resolve themselves; heck, very few of them do so conclusively. But I think that’s a tribute to the nature of this novel about gigantism, that it is founded on excess and to ask it to be something it is not is as ridiculous as asking twin giantesses Wallis and Vivica Planet, Gog and Magog, to stop attracting so much attention. To force it to confirm some critic’s procrustean bed would only serve to cripple a book that does fine on its own ungainly path.

BEAUTY IS A VERB: THE NEW POETRY OF DISABILITY

Edited by Jennifer Bartlett, Sheila Black, and Michael Northern

Cinco Puntos Press, 2011

Reviewed by Julia Bouwsma

In her preface to *Beauty is a Verb: the New Poetry to Disability*, edited by Jennifer Bartlett, Sheila Black, and Michael Northern, Jennifer Bartlett writes, “While *Beauty is a Verb* includes many views of disability, we hope to consistently consider the social model of disability. It is for this reason that we primarily chose poets who have a visible disability.” Such parameters may be met with hesitation for, as Kenny Fries aptly observes in a reprinted excerpt from his own disability anthology, *Staring Back: The Disability Experience from Inside Out*, “[A]t some point in our lives, each and every one of us, sooner or later, will be, whether for short term or long, in some way disabled.” However, any such concerns ultimately run contrary to the central message of this

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anthology. *Beauty is a Verb* presents a disability poetics centered on the notion of community, pushing for interdependence over the old stereotype of dependence. And there is no room for exclusion in such a model—there is only an invitation for growth and change. As contributor Jim Ferris writes in his essay “Keeping the Knives Sharp,” “Finding ways to do things differently is a hallmark of living with disability—and a hallmark of disability culture. Bodies are not absolute.” Such ingenuity consistently informs both the content and the structure of *Beauty is a Verb*.

While the editors have selected a strong mix of emerging and established voices for this anthology, it is their structural choices that make this a truly momentous collection and an active, evolving conversation about what it means to inhabit a disabled body. In particular, the striking editorial decision to set critical and craft essays alongside creative work creates profound resonances between contributors and is an arrangement that defies the marginalization of the body. The poems and surrounding discourse—like the intellectual and physical self—can no longer be separated. Instead, as Lisa Gill writes in her essay “Mapping Caesura: the Encompassing Body,” “My body and mind are twined together. I am twined to the land. Everything is ‘comorbid.’ Each environment sings with diagnoses.”

As the title suggests, *Beauty is a Verb* is all about motion, the journey to, as Michael Northern puts it, “transform disability poetry from marginalia into part of the American text.” This odyssey is divided into four sections, each building on the last in an evolving dialogue. “Early Voices” features poems by Larry Eigner, Tom Andrews, Vassar Miller, Robert Fagan, and Josephine Miles, all now deceased. In this section of origins, the experience of the disabled body surfaces through form before it is ever voiced directly. The poems of Larry Eigner come first, articulating themselves through the space of the page, often resembling the staggered motion of reaching limbs. In an excerpt from Tom Andrews’s *Codeine Diary*, Andrews’s hemophilia is revealed through repetition, omission, and circling, disjointed narrative: “I’m writing this from my bed at the University of Michigan Hospital. It is 3 a.m. It is the half-dark of hospitals at night. I have had an accident. I have been in an accident.” This circumlocution seems to recede incrementally with each new author: Vassar Miller’s “Dramatic Monologue in the Speaker’s Own Voice,” with its needle-pointed question, “Have you ever viewed me in this way?” leads finally to “the crazy anesthetic / Bloodless brain and open throat” of Josephine Miles’s later poems.

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In the second section, “The Disability Poetics Movement,” poets confront their own bodies and the words they have inherited for them, both spoken and unspoken. Finding language for the body—through the body—is a matter of sheer survival. Petra Kuppers demands, “let me speak with my liver.” Kenny Fries’ “Excavation,” depicts the search for an honest language with searing violence: “my skin. Peeling it back I reveal / the bones at birth I wasn’t given— / the place where no one speaks a word.” At the same time, is an almost celebratory destruction and reinvention of the old myths. Kathi Wolfe recreates a voice for Helen Keller “unsullied by ‘inspiration.’” Jim Ferris declares, “I sing for Cripples; I sing for you.” The strikingly direct second person appears with increasing frequency. Poets call upon readers to see and understand them as they need to see and understand themselves. Laura Hershey’s “Working Together” is a vivid portrait of interdependence, a model in which each party performs their necessary role:

Her job: what no one thinks of doing
except for self or child
My job: make her forget
help her remember
tell her she can

Likewise, Jillian Weise’s instruction in “The Amputee’s Guide to Sex”—“Think for two people. Know where your limbs / are at all times; know where your partner’s limbs are at all times”—moves past the portrayal of able and disabled bodies to suggest the implicit relationship between poet and reader.

The third section, “Lyricism of the Body,” is dedicated to poets whom Jennifer Bartlett describes as “heavily informed by the lyric poem,” who use “this lyricism to celebrate the non-normative.” This rather amorphous yet fascinating section presents lyric poems fundamentally molded by the disabled body, an altering lens that colors everything, including poetry. “[As] I’ve learned to accept this changed body, Alex Lemon writes in “And Now I See,” I’ve realized that visual changes have played a significant role in my poetic development. They’ve destabilized me, helped me embrace the unruliness of the world and accelerated the broadening of my imagination.” The practice of living inside the body becomes the practice of living inside the poem, as in Brian Tear’s “5 poems from The Empty Form Goes All the Way to Heaven”:

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pure process
like art illness is

mostly the mystery
of why one window
opens slowly

why one window
remains locked

Yet another narrative of interdependence develops with each selection. The disabled body—which simultaneously invites and requires a new approach to language—leads us, again and again, to new understandings of the oldest lyric practices.

In the fourth section, “Towards a New Language of Embodiment” the evolution of a new prospective becomes truly palpable. The influence of language poetry predominates—the rhythm of disassembly and reassembly as language becomes a mechanism to access the body, as in Norma Cole’s “Speech Production: Themes and Variations”:

Why do I like it under the trees in autumn when everything is half dead?
Why would I like the word moving like a cripple among the leaves and why
would I like to repeat the words without meaning?

Reader and writer fall together into the unknown. Language surges the page—often unruly, sometimes threatening in its strangeness or violence. Words are stripped of their detonation, as in David Wolach’s “3. (corporeal self-punishment)”:

1:34 knotted urethra song a song not
to be written, knot now & ~~the radiate. the~~
~~radiate.~~ The irradiated, why we don't
run, & is ex-ercise ~~proof~~ 1:37 left
side burns feels punched 1:38 is ex-
ercise proof of self hood?

The reader’s loss of control pushes him or her into a state of active reckoning, a condition which mirrors the disabled poet’s relationship with his/her own body, as

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in Danielle Pafunda's "In This Plate My Illness is a Wire that Can Easily Cut Meat and Bone":

Lately, my illness agitates
just beneath the skin layer.
In the dark it will dumb you. It will twitch
over the border and take your hand.

Such language works to re-center the power dynamic between reader and writer until they are operating on the edge together, taking risks together.

The brilliance of *Beauty is a Verb* is in the way it pushes us as readers. What is unknown, what is frightening, what it means to change and adapt—these are all things that the poets of disability know intimately. And it is a huge achievement that the editors of this collection have created a structure that pushes the reader through similar stages of discovery.

SWEET NOTHING by Nate Pritts
Lowbrow Press, 2011
Reviewed by Jeanine Deibel

American mediums are sopped in sweet nothings. Romantic gestures are reminiscent of our daily exchanges, and as they culminate on the page, they steal the spotlight, yet remain diffuse and weightless, devoid of palpable meaning once interrogated. When we read descriptions of beautiful sunbeams, of stars that light up the sky, of broken hearts that are bleeding, we intellectually recognize what they are supposed to mean; however, we have lost the ability to see or experience anything beyond the space that these words occupy. What does the nature of such inconsequential sayings imply about a speaker, or about a society that offers preferential treatment to codes of dead metaphor rather than to direct, specific methods of communication?

Nate Pritts's fifth full-length book of poetry, *Sweet Nothing*, explores our reliance on such phrasing as symptomatic of a deeper affliction. The slippage that occurs due to our common language, the ineffectual equivalent of a dull butter knife, results in disconnects within oneself, in addition to schisms between self and other: "I've wasted the day feeling / my way back into myself, back into you, & the distance between us

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which I / am trying to divide, trying to split, / & all this imaginary math is thwarting / my simple words, just words that can never reach what they're groping toward."

Pritts enacts this separation through a variety of means, including a reflective, frequently passive tone, metapoetics, and open-field forms. *Sweet Nothing* revolves around temporality, whether it's memory reproducing what's been lost as a two-dimensional copy or words failing to accurately convey the speaker's aims. A search for the signified operates as a central motif, "I ask the librarian for a thing that is real / & not just a book about it." Yet, it's evident early on that the speaker's efforts to adequately obtain and impart meaning are futile: "My hand drags across the Great Lakes, / across states, & it shakes, & O how inexplicable. / I said love when I know I meant predisposition. / . . . I meant there is no way / to express the complex architecture of / what you are to me - the you you are in words." The speaker not only lives in a world rife with constructs, but he also sees himself, at times, as controlled and composed by them, "& there are the two of us facing / each other, people made out of words with / real bodies, standing together & breathing."

Although this inversion of power is indicative of a contemporary crisis where individuals struggle to define themselves in a sea of projection, thus allowing an artificial system, such as language, to dictate the terms of life, the strongest moments in *Sweet Nothing* occur when the speaker keeps pressing to close the distance. The first set of Sky Poems are marvelous. Pritts reappropriates the generic lexicon of nature within projective verse to actively assert the speaker's agency, "I will tear one dandelion poof / from this hill // half gone already / place it on this page." These poems portray the condition of the speaker in a temporal state, by questioning the quotidian in compelling, contextual juxtapositions: "How quickly the sky / falls / into this / new sky // yesterday it / wasn't here / & now // all these clouds held loosely together / in the grip of this / field of breeze."

Other notable poems, "In Praise of No Reasons" and "Your Mind Is like an Ocean," continue to capture this divisive energy without settling for the inaccuracy of cliché: "She's typing assaults / for me to wake up to. / . . . I have limitations; / I know because, daily, the missives remind me." The speaker is implicated as part of the very confines that he finds himself placed within and that he is struggling against, "These words I've used / wrongly to make sense of the weather. Lost / on television, I need an intermission."