

**THE OPPOSITE OF WORK by Hugh Behm-Steinberg**

**Illustrated by Mary Behm-Steinberg**

**JackLeg Press, 2013**

**Reviewed by Jeanine Deibel**

Mysticism has landed. Behm-Steinberg's *The Opposite of Work* explores the labor of living two separate lives: one in the crownspace, "where you keep your / holiest of thoughts," and one in the body, that "beautifully unbearable body." The marriage of these divided spaces leaves us with a simultaneously quaint yet enchanted reality. The poems are also accompanied by a flipbook of outré images (illustrating the penultimate poem, "On Dreams"), adding further dimensionality to our interpretation of the text. Futility and fragility are far from laborious here, but rather serendipitous in their placement within a larger context: "This is how / you introduce / divinity to the work . . . merging / songbirds with people, / then forcing them upward / until all the trees / crown / as do people / just as they are born."

Stealth in its movements from the personal to the universal, this collection of projected verse offers the expected only to displace it—lifting us away from familiar reference points and into the unknown "like two hands / praying, / not shut, but / a city in which / one can move, it is endless." Nature symbolism, biblical and mythical allusions, as well as the woes of capitalism tease at the surface; yet, the use of fragmentation, and its subsequent associative pairings, allows for the construction of wholly original poems. The following lines from "Teeth" serve as a case in point, where dump trucks compound to emulate the concurrent relationship between death and creation:

a row, a forest of teeth,            you hear a rumble,            it's as loud as creation,  
but it's only a dump truck,        in an infinite line            of dump trucks  
shifting gears, backing up        roaring            with their loads of teeth,

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which they pour, all around you, in clouds of toothdust  
spilling out into the street.

As opposed to falling victim to samsara, or the cyclical nature of matter, this collection works to situate the material plane as a springboard for reaching elevated states. Conscious meanderings while in repose, “we’ll go to bed and continue this // in our sleep,” are experiential yet unbounded: “They want to know / who gets to / sleep in our bodies / when we’re not / using them.” Writing and other art forms also operate to conflate realities, “merge apples and / trees with / your hand drawing them, / both are covered in skin / and come to a point,” and project the self into an alternate space: “Wasps / framing your / imagination, / nests, paper, // or your / hand is / half a / wing, a / scissor.” Instances of small-scale ascension, such as the writing hand functioning as a wing, accrue and eventually open to larger transformations: “I feel new eyes / grow in the cold / space behind me / where I’m / going to wake / with my crow.”

The unique tension derived from this spatial interplay complements the playful intensity of the content while being mirrored by poetic form. The structure of each poem is center-justified and composed of a pulsating stream of text, where the white space serves more as a visual mode of pacing than as a breath caesura. This results in a sensate effect, words spiraling beyond their formal boundaries, just as the speaker himself exceeds conscious restraints: “I think / about curving, I think / I’m just curving. / I’m no / longer studying / limits.”

The speaker’s ability to transcend time and bodily constraints is also due to his multiplicitous nature. At times, he even stands for the collective: “I add my body / to all the other bodies, / as a stream, / as a crowd, / in it.” Instead of being typecast to a particular role or identity, the speaker slips into many selves or voices, what Behm-Steinberg calls “the mosaic *I*,” also known as Ellipticism. The poem, “Another Parable of the Law,” demonstrates the flexibility afforded through such a strategy as the speaker inhabits various positions on the socioeconomic ladder: “I’m going to be / illegal and then / I’m going to be heavy . . . and / then I’ll be / the landlord and I’ll / raise the rents.” These shifts allow for a wide-angle perspective on the dysfunctional workings of society while infusing humor and still being cognizant of individual stakes.

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*The Opposite of Work* consistently pushes in the direction of upward, intimate mobility, “to drag yourself / behind yourself / to find new / variations on the / theme of warmth,” despite the coldness of external realities, that are at times, put on display. Instead of floating in the ether, this collection offers and leaves us with a lingering, deep-set knowledge related to an extended state of consciousness, “a story, and a // space within the // story, a clearing, a // way that gets fixed // as you know, as you // become known,” where “we can sneak in, we can / become elliptical . . . elongate in our / bed . . . less like / sleeping, more like making / oneself / open.”

**FUN CAMP by Gabe Durham**  
**Publishing Genius Press, 2013**  
**Reviewed by Kelsie Hahn**

Summer camp creates a contradictory passage of time. So does any temporary, forcibly intimate stay at an unfamiliar place. Each moment is eternal, fresh, and detailed, but with each passing day it feels as though the time is slipping away before you can catch it. Gabe Durham’s novel *Fun Camp* captures this contradiction. As each new day of the week arises, announced in bold font like the chime of a bronze bell counting down the hours, you can’t believe how much of the week has already gone. You can’t believe how much you don’t want it to end.

*Fun Camp* is a series of messages from the campers, counselors, and assorted denizens of Fun Camp—a camp that is like and unlike the typical summer camp. It’s got the crafts and the water sports and the cheery cafeterias and the pranks and the messy bunk houses and the heart-to-heart talks, but all rendered in deft shorts from an array of dynamic speakers. The shorts vary in their mediums and audiences, whether a counselor’s speech to his campers, a Warm Fuzzy note passed to a crush, letters home to parents, suggestions from the suggestion box, or lists of camp rules.

With all their variety, the shorts share a meticulous craftsmanship and an underlying humor that is by turns silly and dark—and often both. This novel has strong echoes of George Saunders in its complete commitment to the ridiculous in its characters, from incredibly detailed camp policies; to bitter counselor Dave, who could

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“kill each of you with both arms bound;” to camp cook Grogg and the fascinating syntax of the monologues he inflicts on cornered campers. But the talent for varied voice and the headlong pace are distinctly Durham’s.

Durham has said this book is not about plot, but it is about shape. The rise and fall of the linear novel is sketched in broad strokes, certainly. *Fun Camp* picks up speed as it goes and dials up the emotions of its players as they experience change and growth and downfall. But it’s the tiny moments encapsulated by the shorts and the conversation between them that makes this novel work as an experience. This is not the story of a single character’s journey through a week of Fun Camp or a single understanding of what summer camp is. This is the story of an entire population that the reader delights in discovering.

This novel is shaped by the recurring voices that rotate in and out, allowing the reader to experience the same days and events from different perspectives. Meal time, Warm Fuzzies, and the Midnight Hike are anticipated and experienced differently by each speaker. This camp as a mix of tradition and innovation, the rituals that stay the same and are somehow always new, much like the act of storytelling itself. These characters struggle with the big questions of life, about relationships and legacies and adulthood and success, all in refreshing, funny prose, and in defiance of simple answers. From this mix, an exhilarating dialogue emerges.

One of my favorite recurring speakers is Billy, a camper who dutifully writes a letter to his mother each day he is at camp, sometimes more than one. Billy is one of the speakers exemplary of the deft tone Durham weaves throughout the novel, an absorbing mixture of funny and threatening. As Billy’s mind expands at camp, so too does his resentment against his mother for limiting his life by not teaching him enough knots, hiding the truth about the Vietnam War from him, and speaking only one language at home, driving him to ask, “What have you done?” Billy transforms from a boy homesick for his parents and his dog to a disillusioned son, a cynic, a philosopher, and a rebel, all of which is reflected by changes in his voice, his style, and even his signature. Here is an identity crisis in miniature that, like all summer camp crises, takes on huge significance.

The changes the characters undergo in the novel are, like the shorts themselves, multifaceted. This book is at once a coming-of-age story, a midlife crisis, an existential dilemma, a tale of self-discovery, a first-love story, a picaresque, and a

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grotesque. Everything is small and contained, yet hugely important. Ephemeral, yet endless. All the dualities of the summer camp.

Durham has created a world that is engrossing, contradictory, and real; a summer camp populated by story tellers. *Fun Camp* will have you coming back for more, longing to experience these heady days again.

**A note from the staff:** An excerpt from *Fun Camp* was published in *Puerto del Sol* issue 47.1, and an interview with Gabe Durham ran on *Puerto del Bloga*, the *Puerto del Sol* blog: <http://puertodelsol.org/wordpress/2012/05/author-spotlight-gabe-durham/>

**DUPLEX by Kathryn Davis**  
**Graywolf Press, 2013**  
**Reviewed by Sessily Watt**

Kathryn Davis is that rarest and most wonderful of creatures: a strange writer. Her strangeness comes more from the elements she chooses to combine than from any single element alone. Where else but in a Davis novel will you find a woman being haunted by a fictional Danish composer, the text interspersed with the narratives of the composer's operas (*The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf*)? Where else will a girl who can bring the dead back to life be set within the kaleidoscope of a New England town, as boring and wondrous as the every day (*The Thin Place*)?

Who else but Kathryn Davis would write a robot novel where the robots exist, tantalizingly, between metaphor and literal, another set of strange residents in a suburban neighborhood? Such is the strangeness in her latest book, *Duplex*, which, as well as robots, contains centaurs, aquanauts, and a sorcerer in its slim 194 pages. The robots are among the first hints of strangeness in the first chapter, which otherwise begins with a relatively mundane scene, described with Davis's careful lyricism: "It was a suburban street, one block long, the houses made of brick and built to last like the third little pig's." A suburban street, as comfortable as a nursery story and as liable to be threatened by passing wolves.

The wolf in *Duplex* is the sorcerer Body-without-Soul. Without a soul, the sorcerer cannot love, a lack whose undoing is also the undoing of Eddie and Mary, two

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young children who seem destined to be together. The swirling plot that tosses these three together and apart carries with it, as well, an elementary school teacher, a family of robots, and a child created from what appears to be a teddy bear. The highlights, though, are the interstitial chapters in which the neighborhood girls on the cusp of sexuality and maturity are told the legends of their lives by Janice, a girl described as “one of the older girls and all the little girls were in awe of her.” Janice’s stories have wonderfully evocative names—“The Rain of Beads,” “The Four Horsewomen,” “Descent of the Aquanauts”—the real meanings of which aren’t revealed until you are deep in the tales, too late to close your eyes or ears and look away. They are stories of the fears of young girls: sex, what it means to have a boyfriend, what it means to not have one, what gets left behind when you grow up. They are fears made all the more real through their unreality, the uncanny driving them deep into the brain to reverberate with memory and nightmare.

The fear of growing up is the fear that holds all the others, and this base fear is reflected in the novel’s odd movements through time. Characters are children and then, all of a sudden, adults. Space moves oddly, too, with the abruptness of a dream. At one point, Miss Vicks, the elementary school teacher, climbs on a horse that carries her away from the neighborhood toward a town she knows through rumor rather than fact. She comes to rest against a wall with what sounds like a beast breathing on the other side—a beast who she thinks of as Eddie, though he is fully human in his next appearance. These logic-defying movements and transitions are difficult to grasp on first read, especially if read with the expectation of the logical chronology and character development of contemporary realism. But they become breathtaking when read in the context of the girls’ stories and that nursery tale referenced in the novel’s first line. These are the movements through space and time of fear and anxiety made visceral as only a tale can make them. On first read, the book may appear as a mess of beautiful lines and missed connections. On second read, though, the layers will unfold and bloom, splashed here and there with the colors of robot logic and a sorcerer’s jealousy.