

RAIN TAXI

r e v i e w o f b o o k s

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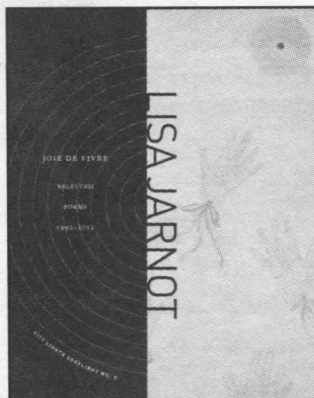
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and more!



JOIE DE VIVRE
 SELECTED POEMS, 1992–2012
 Lisa Jarnot
 City Lights Books (\$14.95)



by Ted Mathys

It is fitting that the humble preposition “of” propels the title poem in Lisa Jarnot’s sparkling new volume of selected poetry, *Joie de Vivre*. Jarnot celebrates the multidirectional potential of “of” in a churning prose list: “. . . of figures in the night, of the addition of numbers in dreams, of the addition of numbers in waking ten times three, of dots and spheres and the satisfaction of bright tourism . . .” This poem, one of Jarnot’s most recent, is characteristic of the style she has developed over the two decades this collection spans. It employs obsessive repetition and syntactical exuberance to chip away at the received hierarchies between parts of speech in a gesture reminiscent “of the fantasy of renovated words.” This fantasy—that through a deep engagement with form and song, bland words like “of” and “that” and “o” can be recuperated as easily as high diction, found phrases, political gobbledegook, or vernacular quips—is at the heart of Jarnot’s project. Her best poems privilege the clean slate of polyvalent words like “of,” places where speech flexes and folds its creases and hinges. If “Joie de Vivre” is her *ars poetica*, it is because the sneaky “of” in the French title connects joy with living—the joy, this book suggests, of living in language.

In surgical selections from four books and two chapbooks, Jarnot emerges as a unique force in post-language lyric poetry. Her work reaches back to the recombinant spontaneity of Gertrude Stein’s collage aesthetic and inflects it with William Carlos Williams’s rigorous attention to the poem as a self-contained machine whose rules are quite strict. She favors the phrase over the line as the foundational unit of poetry, and the drama in her poems is often rooted in the nuances of repetition, which she uses to establish readerly expectations that she then confounds. She has a fierce political streak and a weakness for Greek gods, both of which feed, rather than detract from, her formal inventiveness. And by lyric, I don’t mean she labors in self expression; rather, her poems surf along on the peculiarities of words and, just as often, prepositional phrases, amplifying the rhythmic friction and affective residue that emerges from her fidelity to sound and song.

The selections from her mixed-media debut *Some Other Kind of Mission* (Burning Deck, 1996) and *Ring of Fire* (Salt, 2003) are in some cases visual collages of text, and in others poetic collages that use anaphora as glue. Their playfulness denatures language, refiguring the contemporary subject along the way. The long sequence “Sea Lyrics,” for example, begins:

I am a partially submerged boat on the waterfront of
 Jack London Square on Sunday morning buying jam.

Grammatically, the phrase “I am” works in the first line as a sub-

ject-verb-complement (“I am a . . . boat”), but it also stretches into the second line as a verb phrase in the present progressive tense (“I am . . . buying”) and smuggles itself into the final word, “jam.” Jarnot creates ambiguity about whether the speaker is a boat, or buying jam, or a boat buying jam, suggesting that what matters is the excess potential of “I am,” which occupies all three at once. Freed to do as it pleases, “I am” repeats in every poem in the sequence, working alongside prepositional phrases that oversupply their complements to create a speaker who is diffused into the landscape and language: “In these tenements, inside this subterranean roadway,

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upon this stream gone underground, from the top of the hill and the door of the shoe store mid-town, I am dreaming dreams . . .” The “Sea Lyrics” end in almost rapturous irresolution, as “I am” can’t figure out where it is going or where it has gone, whether it is speaking or being spoken, so the phrase soldiers on into the darkness with Beckettian compulsion, making slight, hilarious alterations to its mission: “I am not sure where I am and I am traveling to edges made of rock in avocado night, I am traveling to the edges of the plane to where I am to cross the parking lot to stand upon the median of edges made of rock in avocado night.”

The use of “I am” in “Sea Lyrics” is evidence of one of Jarnot’s hallmark gestures in the first two books—using phrasal repetition to accomplish what meter might traditionally have done. Just as a poem might be generally iambic but contain reversed feet, hiccups, and substitutions that create friction, the excitement in these poems relies on setting up phrasal averages early on, and then twisting syntax, injecting new words that slowly metastasize, and delaying predication to make the phrases morph, molt, and revolt against themselves.

In *Black Dog Songs* (Flood Editions, 2003), Jarnot uses these formal techniques to political effect. This is a Bush-era book, at times seething and cynical, with paeans to Rumsfeld and Cheney, and a section titled “My Terrorist Notebook.” But the satire comes slant; though some poems veer thematically toward the ugliness of the media environment and state mobilization of public mourning after September 11 (“I would have had to blow up the World Trade Center to get anyone’s attention when I was a kid”), their playfulness and lack of didacticism find political import *via negativa*, sweeping the reader up into the pleasures of innocent thought and childlike speech. In “Because Poem,” for example, the repeated word “because” refuses to give answers to the implicit “why?” of the era that runs beneath it. Instead, “because” forges a community between words and objects that is, if not utopian, at least generous: “Because the tree and the root and the worm and the corn are all words. Because the words are all friends with the worm and the friend of the tree.”

In her most recent full-length collection, *Night Scenes* (Flood Editions, 2008), Jarnot torques archaic and rarified diction into vertiginous celestial songs. She also adds a surprising twist to the repeated phrase techniques by enacting them within traditional

metrical forms and other nonce forms. The language is wonderfully, self-consciously wrought and the turn to meter is pronounced, giving the feeling that the poems have arrived over a weird transmission wire that stretches from the late Middle Ages through a wormhole to contemporary Brooklyn. "Sinning Skel Misclape" begins:

O sinning skel misclape thy lock
 from frenzied felbred feefs
 and longitudes of long tongued fuels
 unpebble-dashed deceased.

This is ballad meter, alternating between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, with rhyming second and fourth lines. Yet Jarnot never feels like a New Formalist telling a quaint story; in her hands the poem's rowdy pulse is found equally in antique-sounding phrases like "skel misclape," contemporary terms like "news flash," and nonsensical constructions like "unpebble-dashed." Unlike her avant-garde forbears who explicitly rejected what Charles Olson called the "inherited line," Jarnot uses it to her advantage. Formal meter and radical constraints in *Night Scenes* help reveal essential architectural relationships in language. It's as though we're watching autopsy after autopsy, forgetting who or what is being cut open and focusing instead on the jaw-dropping complexities of what is being exposed with these tools.

This is also why it's a shame that *Night Scenes* gets short shrift in *Joie de Vivre*. Some of the most riotous experiments in the book are not included in the selected, like "Vulpes Zurda Sonnet," which tumbles around the word "fennec" (the name for a big-eared nocturnal fox species of the Saharan desert) and "Zero On-

set," a stretched sonnet in rhyming couplets of iambic heptameter in which every word begins with a vowel. I would have preferred a shorter selection from the first two books—which are given three times as much space as the third and fourth—in order to leave room for more of *Night Scenes's* accomplished songs.

Joie de Vivre concludes with selections from the chapbook *Amedillin Cooperative Nosegay* (The Song Cave, 2011). This single, long poem wends in and out of lineation, braiding together three-word phrases like "glazed economic disturbance" and "feverish hippo zion." Jarnot has written on the Poetry Foundation blog that in the midst of the labors of writing a biography of Robert Duncan and caring for her young child, she would each day "seek out or stumble upon a three word phrase that I like and I write it down in my notebook" ("Alternating Currents," Harriet Blog). As the poem progresses, the mosaic mutates from punchy adjective-noun phrases like "empty macho rhetoric" and "fallen giraffe incident" to koan-like tercets such as "leap over a / large rock splendored / with april moss"; couplets of three-word lines stacked in threes; and self-reflexive maneuvers in which the form of three-ness opens up individual words, as in the elegiac passage "'D' in 'Death' / under the space between / 'will' and 'remember.'"

Amedillin Cooperative Nosegay is a virtuosic ending to this terrific collection, illuminating Jarnot's unique poetics and philosophy of language. Borne of an off-handed constraint pushed to its limit case, the form allows Jarnot to turn the abstract concept "three" into a governing principle which percolates up through her lines, syntax, and grammar, picking apart words and spilling over boundaries while singing a strange new song. In this way, Jarnot's poetry suggests that language may be, to use the most memorable instantiation of her three-word constraint, "all one word." ♦

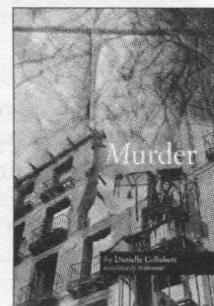
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MURDER by Danielle Collobert; Translated by Nathanaël

"One does not die alone, one is killed, by routine, by impossibility, following their inspiration. If all this time, I have spoken of murder, sometimes half camouflaged, it's because of that, that way of killing."

Murder is Danielle Collobert's first novel. Originally published in 1964 by Éditions Gallimard while Collobert was living as a political exile in Italy, this prose work was written against the backdrop of the Algerian War. Uncompromising in its exposure of the calculated cruelty of the quotidian, *Murder's* accusations have photographic precision, inculcating instants of habitual violence.

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