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*Barbara Henning's Present Tense*

I first encountered Barbara Henning's poetry in 1985, when she'd left Detroit for New York City. A series of her prose poems, each a vignette, was featured in the journal *Poetry New York*. All the action in these poems took place in the present tense—perhaps more to the point, in the present. If there was a past, or future, it was implicit only. In steeping myself in the poetry Henning has published lately, those early poems came to mind. Her poetry is, ever more, the poetry of the now.

Her later poems, the work of someone whose poetic command has taken over everything else, are cast in the present tense, yet they're of another order altogether. I can see how Henning got to here, from Detroit to New York, of more relevance from her younger self who'd arrived at a way to be artful, to a mature and seasoned poet who knows her metier as well as it can be known and who seems to understand herself. I don't mean to be romanticizing either Henning's life or career. I offer this teleology in case it helps to grasp what she's now accomplished as a poet, in addition to being a writer of fiction.

I don't know which came first for her, the fiction or the poetry, or when she first began to write prose poems or poems in verse. Her books of the last decade contain, variously, prose fiction—which at times strikes me as poetic—and poetry in prose or in more formal, prosodic, arrangement. Indeed I think it's important to set her prose and verse poetry side by side—but now for an unusual purpose, since the publication of *Digigram* last year. The work in this book is not prose and it's not verse.\*

What makes a poet gravitate toward a certain way of having what's inside her come into a form and then public view? In her work we get, in whichever form, all Henning all the time; and it's in the present tense. I don't mean some version of an eternal present—quite the opposite, Henning's writing *is* the present. Yes, her poems disclose a life in process, some of its details quite personal and some equally impersonal. In fact, how her poem's voice slides from one thing to the other, at times circling back and other times not, is a formal pleasure all its own, for example in "At Sunrise." The poem's steady line length and rhythm hold her juxtapositions as one:

Instead of meditating, I mop  
the floors and hallways.  
To prevent downloading free  
music, Dutch cable companies  
obtain a court order to block  
access to the pirate bay.  
In fancy gyms across the city,  
people steal from each other,  
yuppie-on-yuppie crime  
while musicians and night  
workers seek the quiet dim  
of dark apartments. At sunset,  
I switch on the parking lights  
[etc.]  
(from *A Day Like Today*, 2015)\*

Henning's narratives are masterpieces of contiguity in which how one thing is tangential to another by accident (the two don't belong together but for her arrangement of them) makes either seem at first discordant. The prosody undergirds it all. The attitude of this poems'

speaker is mostly an undetected force. On occasion the attitude is revealed as an *ars poetica*—such as in the final lines of “At Montauk”:

As I hand Martine HD’s *Vision and Meditation*, I say, I don’t think I actually read this book today, but I did look at each word. We laugh *to look askance* the mind and the meditative moment may never visit each other. Is it this? It is that? Well, it just is.  
(from *A Swift Passage*, 2013)

Here’s the ending of “Out of the Elevator”:

[. . .]  
impossible-to-follow strings  
of *this* unfathomable reason  
and *that* memory connecting  
one image with another.  
(from *A Day Like Today*)

Henning doesn’t close off her poems, even as she gets in her parting shot.

Does the writer, like a home intruder, break-and-enter her life? What might *home* look like to an intruder? Where is everything and why is it where it is—in the living room, kitchen, bedroom. Is there something worth taking? An intruder may want to leave something out of place. Another intruder means to get away without a sign of having been there. Does Henning want us to see her craft?

That Henning’s poems reside in the now is not all that obvious, actually. This is not to say there is no past or future, but just that it happens at once—and in the present tense. Here’s the vivid, finally riveting, “Midnight in Detroit” (from the early eighties):

Lorraine walks down Cass Avenue in her high heels. Snow covers the parked cars, tops of the street lights and the Labor Archive building. She kicks the snow with her exposed toe, holds her keys in her fist and looks over her shoulder. Two men blunder around the corner. “Hey man they is slobs. I mean S-L-O-B-S. I don’t care if they is red, yellow or green. Those girls is slobs.” Their voices close inside a snow covered Ford and Lorraine sighs. She loosens her fist, shakes out her long red hair, and slips in the side door of the Twilight Bar.

This cameo is one of a series titled “Detroit Ghost Poems.” Is the witness in the poem the “ghost”? We’re in a present that’s unmoving. Another of the poems in this series, “Circles,” hints at the depth in her later work—which can be sensed, ironically, in the casual surface of this poem. Accommodated by descriptive narrative, the poem shows that something is possible below a veneer:

The girl is lost in this suburban apartment with wall-to-wall windows. Her hair is tangled and dark circles surround her transparent eyes. A see-through girl, much too tired to pack. Most everything is in boxes and the valium is almost gone now. Can’t sleep, she can’t sleep and so she sits in the middle of the vacuous, blue carpet and says good-bye, good-bye to the brown-haired one who is so translucent he doesn’t even bother to appear. And outside the snow keeps falling and people appear in the window from one side, disappear on the other.

Henning’s persona, in these earlier poems, is merely *looking*, beseeching us to see. Henning’s reader has never been the voyeur. In her recent poems, her vulnerability is palpable yet taken for granted as being simply the heart of life. It’s a life whose vitality is felt in the rendering of, say, the poet’s marvelous streetscapes. And this is the thing: the poem lets you know that, for all their allure, they’re not where the action is.

Henning is a flaneur weaving in and out of her own life. Her sleight of hand is the flow of adjacencies and how she doesn't let the poem's narrative create finality. She shows us the neighborhood in brief strokes, its vibrancy, leaving it there in its completely gritty glamour, for you to take inside her apartment with her where you'll find yourself in her bedroom, only to leave off from her, there. This is a signature of hers. There's something to love. (In this respect I can't help recalling Paul Blackburn's poetry, not just in his game-changing volume *The Cities*, 1967, but straight through to the posthumous *The Journals*, 1975).

Life is impossible but it goes on. Henning's peculiar capacity for the present tense is what's in it for her—not that she minds you having your own fun inside her poem. This, I can't help thinking, is quite possibly her signal quality that makes its own contribution to New York School poetics. It also establishes Henning as singular among her peers and ancestors—something that need not be thought of within the context of this poetics or, for that matter, within the history of the St. Mark's Poetry Project (founded by Blackburn) where Henning has been a mainstay all these decades.

I can see how the young Henning finds her tense before she ever arrives in the East Village. She brought a poetics with her, still to be discerned in later work—at least she'd brought with her a way to hold a scene at arm's length. As fine as that early work is, however, what jumps out at me in the late work is her finesse. Henning pulls it off time and again. It's a way of writing, of thinking and being, which fit a lifestyle she's valorized.

All this said, I must now turn to *Digigram*. I want contextualize it within the two collections leading up to it: *A Swift Passage* (2013) and *A Day Like Today* (2015). The poems in *Digigram* don't end; they don't start either. They don't, in any particular or obvious way, connect with each other, even as they're diaristic (which is the case for some of the other relatively recent poems). Each entry in *Digigram* begins with a dash and lower-case word. The dash is the only punctuation in the entire book. "A Lot of Things" begins like this:

—a red and white striped shirt—goes round and round—slipping back—then reappearing—first on a model—then my daughter—then passed to me—my favorite—to brighten—one’s own path—Buddha said—one must light—the path of others—in the filthy waters—after Hurricane Harvey—a young man—repairs a house—an accidental wound—[etc.].

(“A Lot of Things”)

Times are multiple and conflated in this poem. The titled messages in *Digigram*, are rhetorically written and presumably “sent” to herself. (Of course they’re sent to us, but are we ever confident enough to assume we’re the addressee? This is something at the core of each piece’s magical effect.) The “digigrams” are neither “notes to self” nor “Dear Diary” entries. What they are are records of a day in Henning’s life—arguably, what she’s decided to make the facts of it.

The entries in *Digigram*—finally of a piece with the poems in the two prior collections—are foretold in her early eighties prose poems. In hindsight we can see where this artist would head. In large, Henning arrived at a subtle present that allows her to look back. The early poems evoked a world. In these recent books narration invokes the world.

The effect of this narration rises up at first unbeknownst to the reader, like some odorless, colorless gas seeping under the door of Henning’s apartment. The difference between the 1985 Henning and the 2020 Henning has to do with her poem’s self-awareness, so too the narrator’s—how both poem and narrator understand they’re inhabiting the world. It’s the world of the poem’s poetics. The agency of each is possible because of that. The mature Henning knows this.

Henning’s formal versifying is precursor to the “digigram.” It doesn’t prevent seeing her achievement in poetry as something outside the perimeter of New York School poetics—but she’s found her own way, and I think it hasn’t been given its due. O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings” stands in contrast to the seemingly unguarded access to Henning’s feelings. What

O'Hara gave us was ultimately an artful ardor dressed in urban insouciance. In Henning we get that too but it's been turned inside out—her feelings are as one with her poem's activity *as* a poem. Take, for instance, "From Every Angle," one of her "digigrams." The poem recounts Henning's uprooting of herself from her dear East Village to move to Brooklyn:

—melted sand—then sheets float—in molten tin—  
silvered—a mirror image—nervous—elbow tweaked—loss  
tingling—through out—away I go—on Easter Sunday—by  
car and truck—goodbye—dear elms and scholar trees—  
Mourad—Mogador—Commodities—Veselka—Sally—  
Cliff—The Poetry Project—my neighbors—life on 7<sup>th</sup>  
Street—you're not moving—are you?—pushed—into the  
subway—into the boroughs—think the opposite—that  
great yoga sutra—tonight—I'll be sleeping—in the same  
bed—yes?—from every angle—exactly the same—my  
body, my books—on 12<sup>th</sup> Street—in Brooklyn—head  
pointing south—as usual—sound asleep—under the same  
sheets and blankets—

Aside from the dashes (they're not even punctuation) the poem seems unstructured but for its heading toward Henning falling asleep in Brooklyn after an emotional cataloging of what she's leaving, the personal and public mixed together. *Digigram* is ultimately poetry, inspired by the dadaist Elsa Von Freytag-Lorenhaven who, Henning writes, "took William Carlos Williams to task," according to a "Process Note" in the book's back pages.

Essentially, there's an arc—from the personal, inside her Manhattan apartment, to the trees and buildings, the stores and restaurants, the Poetry Project vista, then a bit of conversation, to the fleeting solace of her yoga practice, which blends with her new apartment yet with her familiar, intimate, bed clothes. Maybe you don't notice these "parts" of the total poem. I came

back to thinking about the *Digigram* poems like this, though, after spending time with Henning's two prior collections.

Taking nothing away from these other recent books, one thing I love about her digigrams is how pure they are, with their delicate shifts of voice and attention (the *digigram* premise helps make this possible and calls attention to it). A poem like "So Much Has Happened" (from *A Day Like Today*), which creates the present in a way distinct from the entries in *Digigram*, has a structure that's repeated in other poems in the book:

### So Much Has Happened

Tonight we go to a film  
by D'Suisa on Obama.  
Passengers on buses  
rumbling down Fifth  
Avenue were yelling,  
What an asshole!  
I couldn't sit through it.  
Shut up! I muttered.  
We no longer expect  
to hear the truth  
so blatant falsehoods  
are possible. Later  
my love is lying  
beside me. It's after  
midnight when he says,  
Liver stagnation  
that's your problem



but sometimes you're  
really funny.

Line length and poem length are consistent throughout this book. Henning is working within a loosely, pre-set, form of her own. There are no stanza breaks. The moves she makes are, after a while, predictable and marvelous. I was eager, once I saw her plan, to see it in place in poems about very different things.

These poems' structure is not unlike that of the sonnet. In "So Much Has Happened" the line "Tonight we go to a film" takes us on down to "Shut up! I muttered" (l. 8); this is the poem's first section, just as the sonnet's first section is usually broken down to an octave or quatrains. The first line sets up a premise that runs down to the eighth line, but the lines in the middle of this "octave" could be part of either the first couplet ("Tonight we go to a film / by D'Suisa on Obama") or part of the subsequent raucous bus ride heading back downtown with others, some of whom also were in the theatre and are outraged at the execrable work of art the film's turned out to be ("What an asshole" D'Suisa is but the fellow passengers are making the evening even worse than his film was: "Shut up! I muttered").

Approaching the poem's midpoint, the Henning persona may be talking to us, or to her lover who's accompanied her, or both: "We no longer expect / to hear the truth." They make it back home, now to lie together. The poem ends in sweet goofiness ("Liver stagnation / that's your problem") and maybe the problem of inverted intimacy with an other ("but sometimes you're / really funny").

Henning has some actual sonnets in *A Swift Passage* (these poems' titles indicate consecutive days in May 2011, from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 22<sup>nd</sup>). I'm not absolutely sure there isn't some thematic or didactic progression in them, but I'll advise not to go hunting for one. The first of these poems begins with "The locust trees are under constant revision" and the last of these sonnets ends:

“and we’re going to be together for a very long time.” In between is the most delicious inner dialogue one could wish for. It’s *Samsara* all the way!

I couldn’t avoid comparison of Henning’s sonnets with those of Bernadette Mayer (1989) and, years before, Ted Berrigan (1964). Whatever Mayer’s or Berrigan’s overall aims were, their “sonnet” poems, *de facto*, for all their brilliance and effect on avant-garde poetics generally, undo the sonnet form’s expectation. Henning, rather, embraces it—yet loosely enough so you don’t notice right off that she’s actually writing sonnets, regardless of the title of this series:

14

X

14

X

14

*for Dumisani Kambi-Shamba*

Her sonnets move according to their in-built rhetorical premises yet it’s difficult not to see this series as preconceived, as really a work of proceduralism. There are fourteen sonnets in the sequence. That the sonnets’ titles indicate the day on which they were begun and presumably finished only adds to their proceduralist quality. This, however, says more for a way of living than of writing.\*\* Again, Henning has achieved something that’s her own, something of considerable stature.

Here’s “May 21, 2011”:

There is a lightness in the sky and the rain has stopped.  
So have all our dreams of wrong turns. I’m as distressed  
as you are, but things were spinning too rapidly and  
someone is using all of the washers in the basement.

When I opened the door from the airport, I could smell  
and hear a stomach virus, lost in a maze of narrow streets  
as a rickshaw driver helped me look for oatmeal. Drumming,  
relentless drumming, vibrating trees and people, vibrating  
virus. Stay home and lose myself in Conrad's distraught  
and dark heart. Three naps later reformat a long document  
with jpgs. Memories that I can't remember recording.  
Even though it's drizzling, I can hear the birds. Hungry  
but it's not wise to eat after eight p.m. and chocolate is always  
nice as I gear up for midnight writing and reading.

The first quatrain ends right where it's supposed to ("someone is using all the washers in the basement"). The second quatrain runs over the eighth line a bit ("relentless drumming, vibrating trees and people, vibrating / virus"). Then Henning's finally settled in at home (the third quatrain ending with "Even though it's drizzling, I can hear the birds"). The couplet is a marvelous *envoi* ("Hungry / but it's not wise to eat after eight P.M. and chocolate is always / nice as I gear up for midnight writing and reading?"). It's good to be home. I love her domesticity.

Other of her sonnets in this sequence more elegantly disrupt the form's inherent design than Berrigan's or Mayer's. "May 19, 2011," if you're paying attention, feels like loosely strung pantoums (the same statement repeated but quite different, then again, and again):

I'm resting my head on HD's *Helen of Egypt*.  
The cantaloupe was not quite ripe enough.  
The SUV with Pennsylvania plates took one  
and a half spaces. Are you new in the building?  
Well, sort of, a visitor for two weeks, blonde hair,  
black sunglasses, and he looks like a young

Todd Colby. Maca, maca, maca, buffered C and chocolate,  
First Avenue to the L to the Q to DeKalb Avenue.  
A woman with two little girls and a child in a stroller  
Apologizes. It stops raining and I'm in the classroom.  
The young people write about their relationships  
and their pain. My cell phone jingles. Salsa dancing  
in Spanish Harlem, Do you want me to come over?  
What now? Spooning my body into his, yours, ours.

I find Henning's later poems completely absorbing. Her early Detroit poems remind me of Hopper's paintings, the Ashcan school. Her recent poems remind me of the great Giorgio Morandi's work—his paintings of the same bottles on the same table, in much the same palate. Henning is our Zen poet *par excellence*.

\* Henning's work discussed here is: "Detroit Ghost Poems," *Poetry New York* (1985, later to be published by United Artists, in 1988, as *Smoking in the Twilight Bar*); *A Swift Passage* (Quale Press, 2013); *A Day Like Today* (Negative Capability Press, 2015); and *Digigram* (United Artists Books, 2020).

\*\* I replicate Henning's note, at the back of *A Swift Passage*, on 14 x 14 x 14: "One May day, I was talking with Martine Bellen about possible poetic projects and writing constraints. I suggested working with the sonnet form—write one line an hour for fourteen hours for fourteen days. Then I noticed a 4 x 6 index card on my desk, and there were exactly 14 lines on each card, perfect for my project. So I carried a stack of cards around with me for fourteen days, collecting."