

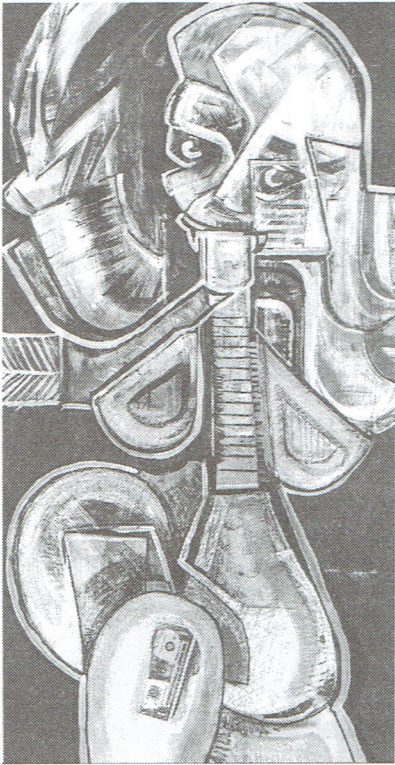


rain taxi

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Susan Lewis, Gary Snyder, Woody Guthrie, Stendhal, and more

review of books

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Susan Lewis's SUBLIMATIONS

by
Burt
Kimmelman

It's fair to say that Susan Lewis has established a presence in contemporary American poetry, bringing to the table a distinguished and necessary conversation by way of a poetry distinctly her own. The editor-in-chief of *Posit: A Journal of Literature and Art* (now celebrating its thirtieth issue), she often foregrounds what, for any poet, can only be the key question of form itself. Her poems merge private and public language, dissolving the all-too-common illusion that prose and poetry share something other than the use of words.

Lewis is especially fond of the prose poem, which she enlists to call attention to this intrinsic paradox. All her poems, though, whether prose or verse, make room for poetry to happen. Over the course of nine collections published since 2008, her work has consistently embodied a persona whose vulnerability endows a comeliness that, in its fragility, must perish—though its brilliant visage remains haunting. Brilliance seems beside the point, however, in Lewis's poems; they hold darkness closely, even as the sun confers its light upon us.

In all kinds of weather, Lewis remains on the lookout for rescue. "Apprehend this glistening," she advises in "All In,"

Which seems close enough,
Closed to further speculation

Unless it offers something opening
To something else —

You might call it love or
Being left by

The world & its constituents,
The quorum needed to

Raise any question,
You might mean

Dominance & submission,
That fine old two-step,

That tried & true-step,
That solid song & dance

In the ironically titled poem "Beloved," Lewis goes Plath one better (Plath's 1960 poem, "The Eye-Mote," featured a bed as the scene of marital discord: "What I want back," Plath writes, "is what I was / Before the bed . . . Fixed me in this parenthesis"). The Confessionalist bed becomes a jail cell from which Lewis addresses her former lover, her jailer:

I want to thank you for the cage you made. As you know, it fits my narrow outlook to a T, better than the one I made myself. That one, you may recall, replaced my original home. Those were the days! Remember? Back then we were always fed & watered, & could sometimes touch fingers through the bars. Forgive me for wondering why you continue to concern yourself with my well-being. I would have thought, with those instinctively kinetic & incessantly expanding offspring, you'd have your hands full enough with (only the best) locks & bars & other paraphernalia of affection & concern.

Where Plath has us gazing upon the bed, Lewis has placed us inside a cage. She's struck a truce between the knowledge of love and the lover's disenchantment. Within the stand-off, Lewis finds her place at the heart of a profoundly human dilemma in which none other than beauty resides, and it's thrilling beyond even belief. This condition of life is anatomized in her monumental poem "In Praise of Mortality," which first appeared in *At Times Your Lines* (Argotist ebooks, 2012). Beauty here is "cruel and opaque. That which I pretend / cannot pretend. Tripping off the tongue of the heart of the matter." Beauty is also ephemeral: "Time is licking us for lunch," Lewis observes, easing into the poem's rhetorical turn in which she addresses her beloved Other:

you, sweet snack, snapped off at the stem, tape your wounds & struggle to bridge the glistening gap. The caressing wind whisking the brilliant minutes. Sun birthing & burying, arming us for this minstrel fate.

Her more recent poetry collections particularly attain a finely wrought complexity, just when you'd think what's necessary for beauty's entrance would be simplicity. "In Praise of Mortality," an older work, has been sharpened in her most recent book, *Zoom* (The Word Works, 2018), but poems throughout her oeuvre can be dazzling (a favored conceit of hers). Whether she's the ugly duckling—a poet whose work may become too dazzling to see straight on—or a poet whose work bathes us in its embracing light remains to be seen. Poets look to the sun for various purposes, and to luxuriate in its light can be integral to how their poems cohere (Dickinson: "I'll tell you how the Sun rose— / A Ribbon at a time"), as well as how beauty's apprehension works within human affairs.

Lewis's inherently musical statements, especially in *Zoom* and its immediate predecessor, *Heisenberg's Salon* (BlazeVOX, 2017) are growing in range and freedom, as if she's getting closer to some culminating synthesis. The clarity of her vivid imagery, held within the nets of her phrasing, is promised from the start. Throughout her work, various



arrangements on the page—take, for instance, “Puny & dangling, dabbling with the rabble, rat-a-tat tapping our twinkle toes on Judy Garland’s pill-popped pate” (from “State of the Union [I]”)—let her joyfully pun and rhyme with such gusto that, the fleeting moment materialized, the poem races on to the next “radiant gist” (to borrow Williams’s insightful phrase).

Here’s how the light makes the day possible in one of Lewis’s little tales, “The First Time”:

The car backed into the closest space & cut the engine, fan belt sighing in the sun. With a tinge of melancholy, she paused at the restaurant door. So this is how things will be, she thought. Still, she told herself, what bond didn’t have its limitations? The smile she offered the waiter was sparked not by his limpid blue eyes but the anticipation of leading her new companion to the fuel pump for the first time, & inserting the breathlessly awaited curve of the glistening nozzle.

In another of Lewis’s marvelously disturbing accounts, rich in *double entendre*, she’s poised “like a flower, inclined towards the bright improbable” (from “For Times Like Now”). The phallic nozzle shines in the certain sunlight; the vaginal flower bends toward the unexpected.

And in this appropriately titled meditation, which encompasses a specific moment, she attends what’s before her while addressing her reliably anonymous interlocutor:

First the Gleam & Glitter

of something dazzling yet murky as magic, a new idea or a new view. Unreal to you but never to me. In which one of us is wrong, blind because unwilling, unwilling because afraid. One slippery reality mistaken for another. A beautiful boy with long legs & the possibility of emergence. This might mean intoxication or disorderly words, pigment or angle of light, clouds or a

girl whose eyes smile no matter who looks into them. This might be a beauty to be earned. By which I mean a lesser horror withstood. Deny & ignore or return to square one, try again or never in this arid limbo, this craven how-to, this picking apart, this *aha* of comprehension, this one-way tunneling to the hope of any other . . .

“First the Gleam & Glitter” is, to say the least, a complicated love poem. In it, we find people seeing past one another. Their blindness is the consequence of another who nonetheless recognizes they’re alone. It’s as if the sun has passed on.

There’s a pathos in looking away from what’s just too bright. And there’s “No Ode, in which chance, god’s more powerful heir, paints & repaints the inexhaustible canvas of the sky” (from “No Ode”). Lewis is not a gambler. She watches herself:

What I Need to Be Doing

is what I need to be doing. This is what. Or the sun will move away & die. As indeed it must. As indeed we all. Now & later. Or abandon ignorance. Entropy engaged, diving to the dark of heartness (or revisit, to the swell of strings). Bowled over, loathe to swallow as a near miss of manifest density.

Whether or not she’s beset by the illusion of central position, here, Lewis knows she can’t have it all; no one gets to have all of it. She wants it, nevertheless. Her poems are magnificent arias that should promise—they do in their refulgence—a life lived whole. She wisely chooses, albeit cautiously, to love the “near miss.” Otherwise, we’d be struck dead by Sartrean boredom.

Lewis seems incapable of slowing down, riveted by the life askew. She won’t let herself off the hook: “False consciousness adorns our sparkling smiles like spinach, like bling, like a koala clinging to his fix, but that certainly is no excuse” (from “Like the Philosopher Said”) In “A New Leaf,” she acknowledges her prevarications: “You’ll never find my lies until they quit.” On the other hand, she’s no quitter. In her poem “Acceptance,” she adopts the rhetoric of the honoree at a testimonial dinner:

I’d like to thank the sun for bestowing benefits & battle scars. I’d like to thank all of you who pretended to care. I’m sorry I’ve forgotten most of you who haven’t. You no doubt recall the bad behavior of my limited resources. So much squandered, so much thrown overboard in the face of another emergent crisis. Now for the long-awaited minimal event. Now for my laundry list of fears, hung out to dry. I’d like to remember everyone I should help or hurt. I’d like to remember the loved ones I should love. No doubt you regret offering me this miniscule prize, which has regrettably expired. Perhaps you’d like to ask an eternal question. Under that rock is a real puzzler. Unless even marriage is too general for your tastes. Perhaps you’d

rather Google your own pleasure. Tomorrow we'll tweet our potatoes & meat. Don't fret: we'll still end up stewing in our own juices for the duration.

At its best, Lewis's writing recalls Dickinson: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." For Lewis, though, there's no salvation, and perhaps no truth:

In Praise of Lying

to yourself or others. Lying down & lying in, lie in wait until you pounce. Starched & bothered. Let this one go as unduly insightful or any kind of threat. Like mythology, like fairy tales, like hired guns selling you on what you'll never know. Comfortable as couches, couched in pretty promises. Crouching, set to pounce or animate the ones you jilt, waiting slack-jawed. Or breathe, more or less than enough. Tense & lunge. Or feed them promises & codicils, take them for another ride, run them ragged. Address another bar of evidence. Smile into the grinning air. Temporalize until they strike. Buzz off 'til something vital tapers off or snaps.

I think also of William Bronk, who could be so relentless, exhausting. One difference between Lewis and Bronk, however, is that in Lewis's work the world can be menacing in a way not fully comprehensible (see also Robert Gober's uncanny sculptures of incongruously detached, recontextualized objects, including parts of human limbs). To Lewis, the sun and its light can be "obdurate," "inconstant." Leaves

in her work "jostle for the sun's brandished meal" (from "Today the Leaves"). Both Bronk and Lewis give no quarter.

Still, in a Genet-like turnabout, the sun is revealed as a needed, welcome salve, and Lewis discloses her kindness. Here's "After Months (I)":

if not years, she was ready for him to open his eyes. But they were sealed with a network of glistening filaments which had chiseled his cheekbones to the edge of tears. She had no choice but to stash him beyond the reach of their predatory milieu. Although it was a challenge to concentrate on structural integrity with his endless humming & the beatific arc of his inexplicable dive, she admitted that even ideology requires amusement. Perhaps you'd like a peephole, she offered. But by then he had tilted his chin to the sun's warming rays & could almost decode what it was urging him to do.

Susan Lewis is a singular, powerful, haunting voice in our time. Her poems are tours-de-force, but she means what she says, and what she's telling us is, "Look out!" We live in traumatic times, but we might remember the word trauma is cognate with Traum, the German word for dream. It really doesn't matter if German psychoanalysis intentionally or inadvertently stamped our society with the disturbing implication of unavoidable psychic pain, or if we only come to realize how the truth of the luminous dream is something we ignore at our peril. Lewis's poems succeed in looking at this truth. ■

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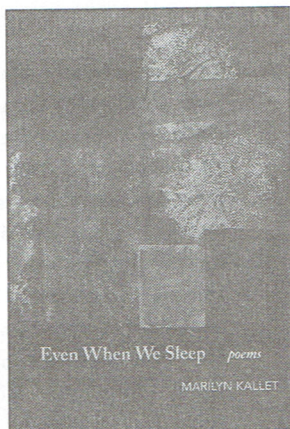
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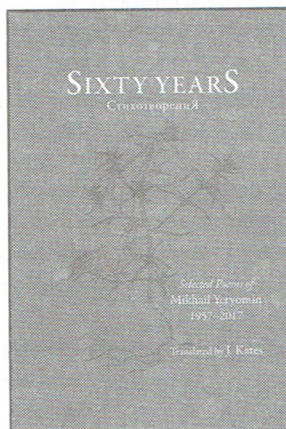
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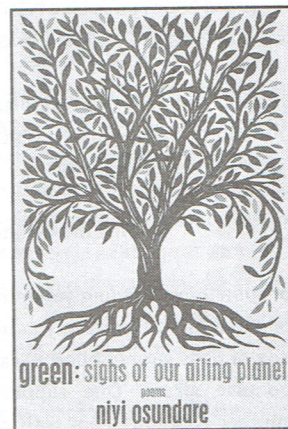
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