

WIN THESE POSTERS AND OTHER UNRELATED PRIZES INSIDE

Norma Cole
 Omnidawn
<http://www.omnidawn.com>
 104 pages; paper, \$15.95

Norma Cole's new book of poems is a fact book. Two long sequences—"14000 Facts" and "More Facts"—comprise the bulk of what's here. The poems are angular, explosive. Their crystalline syntax offers nothing short of an encounter with the remarkable world. But to clarify what's at stake in even the poet's own efforts at observation, Cole offers the opening poem, "Facetime," as cautionary envoi:

Santa from a tank, sun over
 The minarets
 Signs of identity
 Soundtrack—by and by

When the morning comes
 Heartfelt thanks

Even if American crusaders for democracy abroad startle at the fact that not everyone says *thanks for the tanks*, Cole's poem doesn't startle, but it sets out regardless. The inquiry that embarks blithely on a fact-finding mission conceals a threat that Cole works to lay bare throughout this book. Despite being fundamentally shared, events are multiple, refracted across cultures and continents, and mediated by observation itself—so that to seek out fact in a militarized world means not only sifting through the remains but knowing that one's efforts are likely implicated in the destruction.

In the aftermath of a (jolly) tank invasion, there's this dance:

One knee bent, the other
 Straight out behind, as if

You turn suddenly
 Deep into a pirouette
 But instead stay still
 Then fold to the ground

Arms, legs folded as fact

Lightness is crucial in this work that strives to hold disparate facts aloft. The fallen body, "folded as fact," also lifts off in an abstraction of body. The dance

"you" do leaps nimbly across lines, but it's also a *danse macabre* (i.e., your last). I linger on this first poem because it exemplifies the locomotion of Cole's book: *at every turn the poems turn*, double, double back, pirouette then fold, often lighting on travel or exploration or thematizing a kind of itinerancy. *Win* navigates, divagates.

Throughout, Cole complicates our sense of how to establish a context for understanding the world, how to assemble a sketch of what happened, posing that, above all, our findings needn't presume to be final. In "More Facts," she clarifies: "illusions // questions / are facts." In "14000 Facts," she adds translation to that list, which in her rendering *multiplies* a text, rather simply relocating it. Cole points to two different translations of a phrase from *Song of Solomon* 2:4: "He mistook 'and his banner over me / was love' for 'set love in order in me.'" Rather than test whether we recognize which phrase is a translation from the vulgate, these lines simply stress the mistake of conflating one phrase with another. But this is an observation, not a corrective: misunderstanding, mistake is a fact.

The book's title resists grouping all of the contents under one heading in order to reassert relation itself, highlighting the interrelatedness of seemingly discrete parts of a world. Cole's is a prosody of groups, multitudes. Though I've called the first poem an envoi, it's also a piece in a set, one or two facts among many.

Cole complicates our sense of how to establish a context for understanding the world.

Part of what Cole curates in "Facetime" is arrangements of words as sets of sounds or textures—as part of a sonic progression, moving alongside whatever's taking shape in the syntactic or semantic meaning, and hovering just outside etymology. The path from "tank" to "Heartfelt thanks" is a traversal of sets announced from the very first word ("Santa"). Likewise, the move from "fact" to "maps" serves as this book's manifest: one can't simply catalogue without encountering the innumerable world, since a catalogue itself is dynamic, an encounter with "Things of time and space."

The book deploys several formal strategies for navigating that encounter. In the first long sequence, "14000 Facts," Cole explores the line as concretized, adopting segmentivity itself as an organizing principle. Just a few poems in, the poet offers a succinct manifesto on the sculptural nature of poetic lines as perceptive units:

(Not the other way round)

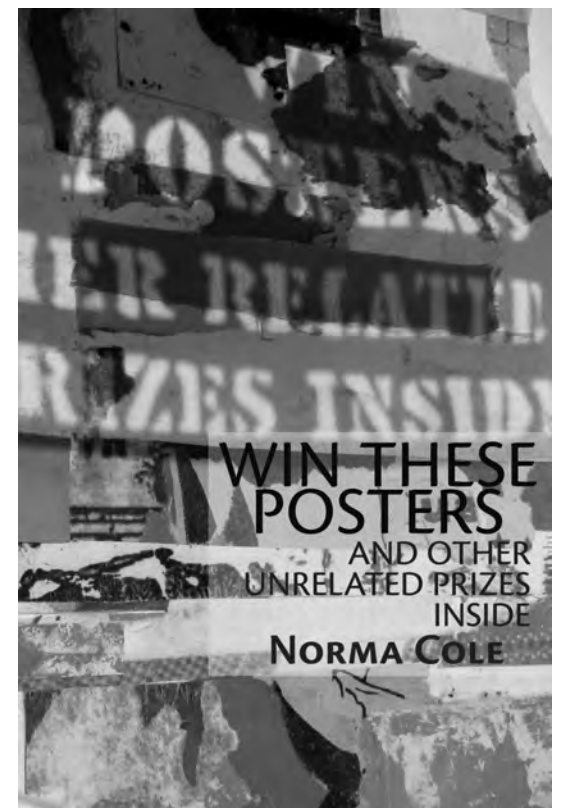
thought shards
 lined up

little ships
 lit up

Then later in the same sequence, these "little ships" *measure time*, thus serving as a stand-in for musical measure:

Slow walking, play
 of evening, the silver
 ships measuring time
 Venus, a sliver
 of time
 beyond words

To move from "silver ships" (as measure) to "a sliver



of time beyond words" is to locate sound as a material slippage. Attached to words are "beyond words" (i.e., sounds *in excess* of words, *from the beyond*, *for the beyond*). Though the poet doesn't presume to see clearly, she does at least hazard an attempt to line up the little ships of perception.

If the procession of basically discrete poems in "14000 Facts" develops segmentivity itself as a perceptive strategy, "More Facts" relies on narrativity and propulsion, despite its visual similarity to the first sequence. The poems occupy as little page space as the ones in "14000 Facts," but phrases often continue past the page break in twists of syntax and sense that send the reader reeling, rereading. One illustration of this *poetics of vertigo* (to borrow the title from Cole's 1998 George Oppen Memorial Lecture) appears as part of two ostensibly separate poems:

waiting at a bus stop

waving at a little
 boy in a floppy orange
 hat running

[page break]

towards soldiers

The turn across the page break is a jolting image of contemporary life hurdling into a war zone. Alongside this sped-up narrative, sound itself speeds up, spills over:

just
 the sight
 before
 the eyes

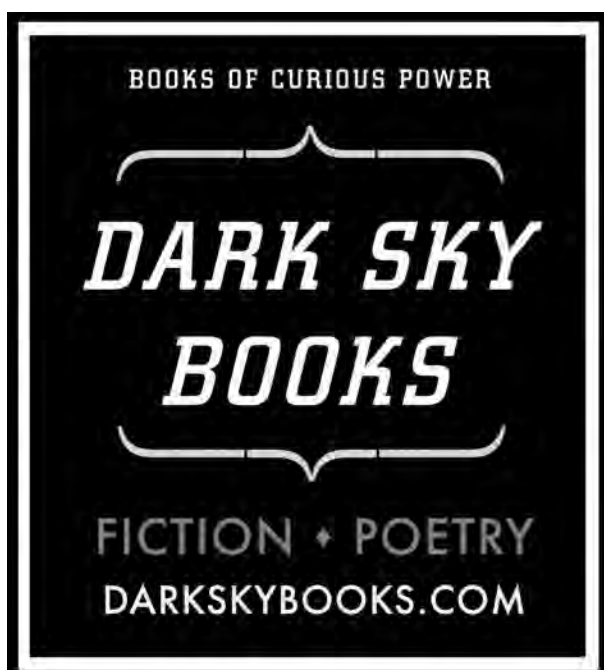
money
 [page break]

monkey
 donkey

hanging on
 to sound
 Milwaukee

Confronting words as physical shapes produces a lexical drift in these lines, so that what builds is an accumulation of sound. What follows is a plea: "tell

————— Martin continued on next page



me about / the driftless region.” We can retrace our steps from “tell me” back through “Milwaukee” and the sound set that precedes it, but the poem turns here (stops on a dime) to consider how to proceed where there’s no discernable path. So there’s lexical drift, which is dizzying, but then there’s *driftless* (a “driftless region” being a geography where there’s little or no evidence of glacial drift). In “the driftless region,” bearing threatens to be entirely lost, evidence occluded. So there’s a heartening humanism in the next turn (across another page break) from “compass” to “compassion.”

Cole’s book closes with a turn to more liminal perceptive realms in “If I’m Asleep,” which opens

with a cloudy dream dialogue where the separation between the speaker and “the other” is barely discernable, as if spoken “with our general mind.” In prose, scattered notes, lists and lines, the poem confronts, finally, the barely legible world. Cole offers Carroll Pickett, a former death house minister at a Texas prison, as someone who can attest to a clarity beyond words: “you can hear the difference between pain and just air.” These poems inhabit a world where illegibilities do not necessarily limit understanding or engagement (*our* world).

“Existing in the moment,” reads a quote from Peter Sloterdijk inserted between the last two poems in *Win These Posters and Other Unrelated Prizes*

Inside, “means having survived oneself up to that point.” I would argue that the formal strategies traversed in Cole’s book are attempts to arrive at such a state, which Lebanese writer Jalal Toufic might call “dying before dying”—the state wherein one is capable of “piercing sight.”

C. J. Martin is the author of *Two Books* (2011). Other reviews of his can be found in *Jacket2* and *On: Contemporary Practice*. He teaches at Texas State University—San Marcos.

REALITIES RECORDED

THE INNOCENT PARTY

Aimee Parkison

BOA Editions, Ltd.

<http://www.boaeditions.org>

182 pages; paper, \$14.00

The angels of Aimee Parkison’s *The Innocent Party* are of the substantial, practical variety. In “Paints and Papers,” the first story in the collection, angels watch over a group of id-driven, imbibing “children” frolicking on a beach. The celestial beings dig in the sand and dispose of old wine bottles. One gets the sense that, under the purview of Parkison’s teeming, thick language, they could not float up to heaven even if they wanted to. And wings abound: in other stories, insects—locusts, spotted hoppers, damselflies—are forever banging against the sides of jars.

In *The Innocent Party*, frustration manifests itself physically. Minor incidents are compounded and compounded until they are dreadful and ugly. “Locked Doors” is narrated by a man whose sister is surprised by her first period. (The incident occurs as a memory.) The family’s reaction falls outside

of what’s approved by family psychologists. The father states his intention to burn the girl’s bloodied dress; the mother slaps her daughter full across the face. Then comes the true disfunction. The sister is schizophrenic, and suffers from seizures and alcoholism. Her father faithfully attends her strip-shows, and her brother engages her in an incestuous relationship (it’s emotionally consummated, if not physically).

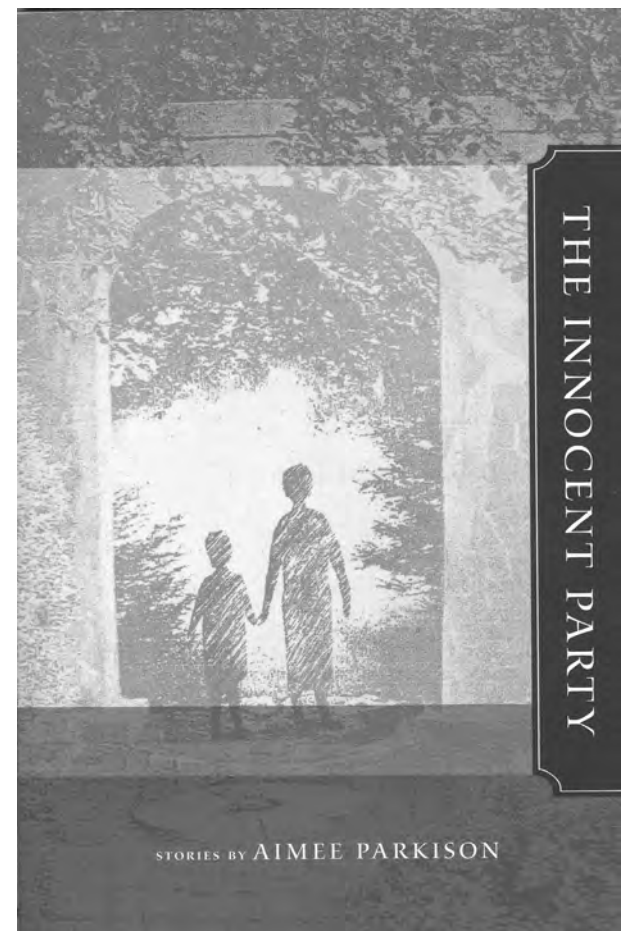
“Locked Doors” is a linguistic dog pile. It’s so intense, so plodding in its intensity, that it’s reminiscent of a bloodhound on a scent. And in this collection, there is always the scent of blood to be found. In the story, the brother is a violent ex-convict employed as a night janitor, but in the role of narrator, he speaks in heavy-handed authorial tones: “The clouds above her far-away house loomed darkened gold in the greenish haze of trash fires.... Her long hair looked lavender like an evening lake in orange light descending.” One can’t help but think—if we’re being immersed in a world of a tortured ex-convict, then yank us around with sloppy and difficult language! Why filter this dirty, onerous world through glossy phrasing?

In Parkison’s collection, there is always the scent of blood to be found.

Onerousness—the farcical breed of it—is at the forefront of “Allison’s Idea,” a story in which five women murder their way through a series of pets. The first to die are the plants: As one of the characters puts it, “They bored us so much they let them die.” The fish are next: “Rachel thought the fish were stupid—always still, never dancing.” As the pets are picked off one by one, the story is darkly comical. Then the women adopt two children who have been billed as “dog-children.” As soon as the children are adopted, their fate is sealed by the fates of their predecessors: we as the readers know that blood is coming. When the male “dog-child” sinks his teeth into the narrator’s arm, it’s written as an inevitability.

The text is littered with beautifully written moments, such as the one in which a young girl declares she wants to be named Loggerhead Shrike because “Loggerhead was the name of a girl who no one would ever want to rub the wrong way.” The narrators have time to dwell on delicate moments and turn them into linguistic performances because these narrators sit on the periphery of their own worlds. They’re the skillfully verbose Greek chorus as evil and darkness rampage around them—a posture that the title, *The Innocent Party*, alludes to.

But does playing the role of the bystander allow one to cling to a claim of innocence? In “Chains,” a



pregnant woman regards (or, perhaps better stated, she is an onlooker to) her murderer of a father; her *regarding* composes the near-entirety of the story. The narrator’s passivity is so blatant that the invocation of a doll as a metaphorical device that the father “nurtures” is largely unnecessary: “Meg watched in silence. The way he caressed the doll with tenderness and pure, undisguised joy—wonder, even—made Meg shiver...[i]t hurt her that her father seemed to love the doll more in spite of its stains.” “Warnings” spotlights a woman who, at far too young an age, becomes involved with an older police officer. The policeman’s family, we’re told, used to “[make] a living breaking horses.” If this work were a police procedural, these women would be playing the role of both reporter and victims. The women strewn about the pages are almost always painfully thin, and in that sense, they’re the inverse of the angels portrayed in the opening. They float through the collection, leaving no fingerprints—only death and destruction in their wake.

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