

Shared Regalia: Chapbooks from Mlinko, Barber, and Beckett

Jack Kimball

The Children's Museum

Ange Mlinko

Prefontaine Press 2007

Non Eligible Respondent

Stefani Barber

Taxt 2006

Steps: A Notebook

Tom Beckett

Meritage 2007

With small press publishing resorting more and more to the pumped-up, slick-on-the-cheap formulae of print on demand, chapbooks look more important than ever as basic frames for a writer's work and process. Brief text enveloped by a distinguishable production style is somehow tastier, more inviting as a preserve between poet and publisher, often turned out with an experimental, homemade touch.

The production features to Ange Mlinko's *The Children's Museum* are a shocker of nondigital rusticity, handstiched, off-white Butcher paper, handstamped cover, type appearing to be handset in Méridien for the poems and Agincourt for titles, both fonts retro-crafted a few decades ago, according to the back legend, Méridien considered "sharp, graceful, arresting, and sensuous." For starter copy on the eight poems enclosed, we could begin there. The title poem is caught up in "just river-silvering," "odor of silt," and "pressurized... disequilibrium." Toddler in tow, the poet is as if "convalescing... perusing the

countryside," which is "like going to Paris... a beeline to Versailles or St. Cloud," but also a "first phase in New York," and, as well, "pointing in different directions" in her backyard as recognizable as the "charm of tennis prose... in which legs of chairs / suspended in the tangle" in order to grace "a sentence that wraps / its back in a negative embrace." Arresting, yes, but the sentence never comes to a full stop, "looking for a mnemonic," rhyming air with air, Grenada with timber, fledged with hedge. A sharpness and an intimacy told through language taking itself unseriously -- "(Orange, schmorange / pigeons, eons)"; then again, language goes on to question itself -- "The word 'empty' mistaken for 'tempting'" or to "mistake the word 'evidence' for 'violence'." Everything goes into the day and the life of the peruser and silverer and it adds up to more than sensuality, a "Jamming vocabularies like blueberries," a "hoping...with more myopia than yoga that my contortions / ... get ... closer to the source text."

In *Non Eligible Respondent* Stefani Barber slips out of research to fall into a lover's embrace to "effect communion" via phone and observation, listening to and noting what is not said in an open-air journalese, observing the observed, psychically body-snatching, in other words, yet still "in love with the day, hoping for a callback." Hoping, again, a brawny feminist topos repeatedly infused with the trenchant and the impersonal, "female informant, hesitant at same point as before." Here's research that finds playboy candidates in their usual fucked states, as in this neat anomaly, "male informant, before I can explain study he is convinced of being respondent... likes

Bob Marley, but no drugs allowed." Looking at what's there -- "the only one way of knowing" -- is foregrounded in the first and last sections of an 18-page compendium of diary prose, lists, and verse that's free enough to "speak lower register." There are pioneer, Robinson Jeffers-like glimpses of "the wind from the porch," beach, sea, scored with more urgent and more sense-driven "memory that hangs above" the stark "*filth of saturation / driving the spiral.*" Middle sections, time-dated entries identified as "from *non eligible respondent,*" carry off the narrative conceit of contextualizing data compiled -- "she is a moon child"; "he has a low voice" -- as well as the vital extra data that posterize the bolt of emotion from the compiler caught in the mirror of her own game: "a table by the window, watching people as if something more than glass separates."

With regard to production values, the poetry in *Non Eligible Respondent* plays prominently against the no-nonsense, xeroxical, stapled white page. The chapbook's cover is a deep teal 'standard' stock, unmarked, save a tiny stamped Taxt logo on the back. The format couldn't be more neominimalist, nor more collegial toward the text, an 'effect of communion.' A counterminimalist design ethos eggs on *Steps: A Notebook* by Tom Beckett. It's one in a set of Tiny Books from Meritage Press. Publisher Eileen Tabios accompanies her poet as graphic alter ego, supplies drawings and indeed handwrites his text, a duo then stepping onto their small stage in shared regalia to participate in what I might describe unsneeringly as an intense art dealership. The poems come inside a little page-turner, tiny even in

chap terms, a 1.5-inch square thumbnail sketchbook with a cover jacket in multicolored (Navajo? Tibetan?) fabric. The poems come forward, sideways, and upside down in one or two words per line, mostly three lines or fewer to the page. They address the ambiguities of their being composed, seeming parenthetical, always germane, or as one page smack in the middle of the text inveighs: "In / the moment / (be right there)." The poems constitute a bisexuality of suave quotations, sketches, and facts on writing, both as text and process, positing that writing verse is like composing a music made of temporary flaws ("smudged work of Arias") or like writing on a blackboard, "Looking / at blackboards / how many Ways?" Skepticism -- "Advancement / is a kind / of ____" -- abounds. If poetry is prayer, to paraphrase, prayer is programming in thought that's overexposed and torn. To get beyond the conundrum of prayer, programming, etc., the dealers work on each other and together. Tom's Eileen accommodates the torn thought idea on a ripped page and settles prayer down with a vapor of slants, blank lines, and empty boxes that enforce a silence. Eileen's Tom returns, though, with a new quiet-breaker, "A / poetry of questions / (one answer)." To clarify, he qualifies, "When / I was / a young man." Next page, "When / I was / a little girl."