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Essays/Reviews

Adam Fieled

The Decay of Spirituality in Poetry

Artists that live in the western world in this day and age are often forced to confront dominant strains of materialism, greed, and capitalistic interest. To an extent, poets get the worse end of this bargain— unable to make a living from their work, forced to support themselves by means that might be distasteful to them, surrounded by influences that anathematize the values they hope to embody. Yet poets, like everyone else, are themselves dominated by social interests which make the interests of those around them difficult to avoid. We must live in society; not only that, but because we must subsist through means that are not (for the most part) generated by our work, we must participate, to a greater or lesser extent, in the materialism, greed, and capitalistic interests that run rampant through the majority of the population of the respective societies we inhabit. The chameleonic tendency of poets (and of artists in general) has been widely noticed; unfortunately, many poets take on stripes that sully the spiritual essence of the duties they perform when they compose. We cannot shut the world out, but by letting it in we corrupt ourselves; this has always been true of poets and other artists to some extent, but it is especially so in 2010. Even as the Internet has revitalized certain aspects of poetic practice, the forces of greed have grown more extreme as recession has swept Europe and the States, making resources scarce and even minor material gains hard-won. It is not surprising, then, that strains of materialism prevalent in western societies have infiltrated poets' texts. What are these strains, and how do they operate?

The theories of Karl Marx have exerted a powerful influence on the few preceding generations of experimental poets, but it is a more ambiguous influence than has been generally noticed. Because Marx espouses the replacement of capitalistic materialism with another kind of materialism (the material domination of the working classes), what we have in Marx is a kind of meta-materialism, that feeds on itself, with anything transcendental presumed guilty until proven innocent. Poets that subscribe to Marxist tenets have political agendas; poetry becomes an agent to fight capitalism. But this poetry still has its intellectual roots in a materialism that is more or less complete. That there might be other aspects to reality than the material; that consciousness is vaster than merely material perceptions can encompass; that the transcendentalism that would ascribe to the visible world an incomplete-at-best importance; these schemas, often dismissed as Romantic and thus regressive, are denied outright. What is, is— poetry that seeks to affirm this wants to embody text as a sole agent, a kind of material, that can, of its own essence, create worthwhile, substantial, memorable poems. It would be precipitate to assert that there is no spirituality whatsoever in the poetry of the American Language poets, for example: but that this spirituality is one that denies that "spirit" is, in all its ontological nebulousness, an important agent in poetic practice, would be difficult to deny. Poets with Marxist leanings bridle at words like "soul" and "spirit"; they perceive these words as tokens of delusion, demonstrations of an inability to face the concrete realities of the world and thus to have contemporary efficacy. Looking beyond Marx, some generations of experimental poets have also sought to embody the relationship to language initiated by the Deconstructionists of the late twentieth century. This

consummated relationship is, I feel, less a success (and I do believe the Marxist poets understand Marx) than a misunderstanding.

There is, I believe, a spiritual essence inherent in Deconstructionist philosophy that is often ignored. The Deconstructionists, with, among others, Jacques Derrida, leading the pack, saw in language a kind of dissolution of subjectivity, a movement subjects could make from unitary realities to realms that encompassed more than subjectivity alone could hold. It would be amiss to ascribe any kind of transcendental aim to Deconstructionism, especially where subjectivity is concerned; and there exists a chance that Deconstructionists might have been even less comfortable with words like "soul" and "spirit" than Marxists were. But that language itself is an arbitrary system leading to an infinite regress, balanced with the realization that words are tactile objects that are capable of containing, in their infinite admixtures, entire worlds; can, potentially, lead to a relationship with language that has a more than invisible connection to realms of subjectivity and transcendental engagement than is commonly supposed. The notion of Romantic Deconstructionism is absurd; but that Deconstructionism does not necessarily negate all forms of transcendental engagement has been misunderstood by experimental poets, who seek to evacuate all hints of anything transcendental from their texts, seemingly forgetting that poetry and philosophy serve very different functions, and fulfill very different ends. To be short: just as there is a lexicon that serious philosophers have a right to use (and this formulation is, admittedly, rather over-determined), there is a lexicon that poets have a right to use, and the inheritance of words like "soul" and "spirit" from our forefathers is a worthwhile one. Certain poets have used Deconstruction as a pretext to shun a serious, responsible engagement with the history of poetry; beneath their decimating gazes, centuries have been emptied of worth and meaning, and little fads of disjuncture and paratactic repetition have taken root as valuable. Without calling for a precise return to the Romantic, poetry needs to derive what spiritual seeds there are from Deconstructionism (and they are considerable, though they may have been unintended as traces), not to evade the serious tools that poets toil with to create meaning: narrative, the body, human relationships, and the levels that trace all of these things, horizontally and vertically.

I do not presume to demonstrate that poets do or do not have "souls." What I will say is that the metaphysical is part of our inheritance that needs to be reengaged. It is not only an efficacious way of connecting ourselves to our forefathers; it is an efficacious way of doing something more urgent, and more necessary: through these investigations, we can begin the work of separating ourselves from the debacles of capitalism, now that it is has subsumed so much of the western world. There is a level on which we are shying away from a direct engagement with the materialism of our respective societies by doing this; but that our narratives may draw from both levels, from an engagement that is also a disengagement simultaneously, has not yet been explored to a great extent. I foresee a return to spirituality that is not merely (or entirely) a rejection of Marxist and Deconstructionist thought, but a hybrid that uses all of these elements to make larger mosaics; poems that read like the great literary narratives that have sustained literary communities for centuries, from Dante to Goethe, from the British Romantics to James Joyce

and T.S. Eliot. This, that I envision, is not a return but a movement outward into something more expansive, more developed, and more encompassing than anything that was created by an English-language poet in the second half of the twentieth century.

Nicole Zdeb

Review of Aase Berg's *With Deer* (translated by Johannes Göransson, Black Ocean, 20099)

Bonnier Books published *With Deer* in 1996 in Sweden, where it met with critical success. In 2009, Black Ocean published Johannes Göransson's English translation. Göransson is a fellow Swede which may help account for his intuitive grasp of the language's texture and his nuanced translation.

With Deer has mostly prose poems, many of them less than a page. It divides into six sections. The book itself has an eye-catching design--a hunter's orange cover with pointy and delicate antlers below the title. Antlers suspended in space suggesting a stag.

The tight poems move; they *volte*; there are many small shocks before the end arrives. Short, but not terse. The texture created by the movement line to line creates spaciousness for the reader. Section 1, "In the Guinea Pig Cave," begins with 'Still." In six sentences, a world is created:

> His fingers search the bottom of the tarn for the water lily's black vein. Still the love beast breathes. Still he suckles the fox sore on my weak wrist. In the distance, the wind is slowly dying: the night of nights is coming. But still the fetus lily rests untouched. And still his fingers search the bottom of the tarn for the water lily's black vein.

Male and female, animalic nature ('the love beast breathes'), generation and birth ('fetus lily'), sickness ('fox sore')—these are threads in almost every poem. This thematic continuity creates a sense of completeness rather than boredom, which would likely be the result if the poems went about weaving the same pattern each time, saying the same things in the same way. They don't. They have different temperatures; they employ different modes of address; and the narrator speaks in cadences.

In "Still," the narrator is in absentia, resolved perhaps into the tarn, present by the associative property of telling. The narrator of "In the Guinea Pig Cave" speaks directly and calmly, with what feels a bit like Dickenson's 'formal feeling:' "My sister puked calmly and indifferently: it ran slowly out of her slack mouth without her moving a single nerve." The agony of the passive spectator comes through in the incredible restraint; the pseudo-clinical eye that records sickness as the abject; a person becomes the slave of their diseased body.

Stories, or something akin to them, emerge: someone bearing witness to a cancer-like sickness, perhaps a sister, perhaps the narrator's own, and partnering with a man and having a child. There's sex, decay, fear of impending doom—"the night of nights is coming," the indignity and violence of sickness. These arcs emerge, but, as befits an arc, they emerge slantingly.

There's never authorial exposure. The veil remains; the author peeks, when she wants to. The poems are controlled fields, some thanatological, some mythical, most undefined and eccentric.

The strongest mythic element in these poems is transformation: out of something beast comes something human, or vice versa:

> She lies with her legs bent across the rock at an awkward angle, and
> something moves, pokes out of her opened mouth like a stump of fat, or a
> tongue or an intestine. It grows longer and slimier and thick as a sturgeon—it
> is a venomous moray with its sharp horrible eyes.

Berg doesn't want to spare the reader any discomfort. This isn't a poetry of the intermediary, the mystic, or suburbia. It has teeth. The teeth have been filed sharp. In some poems, each line is a sweep of a blade. The line has movement and bright music, but it isn't singing to you. It is eviscerating.

Alexandra Mattraw

Review of Andrew Zawacki's *Petals of Zero Petals of One* (Talisman House, 2009)

"But I was never real Georgia/ but the hell if I know what is." Certainly, in his third book, *Petals of Zero Petals of One*, Andrew Zawacki takes on the problem of "I," of "what is," and of how to find beauty in the ever eroding landscape of the technotronic, globalized "we." The book, divided into three long poems, seems to evolve from an endless, inconclusive argument the poet has with himself: Where do we find identity and meaning in a virtual world where nature itself is simulated? While his questions are of course nothing new to the postmodern ear, the innovative music and dissonance of his language can be exhilarating. Not surprisingly, Zawacki cites Louis Zukofsky in "Georgia" and has been compared to the Objectivist who ostensibly views a poem's "sound" as its own worthy "sense."

In all three poems, Zawacki's heavily enjambed and rarely punctuated lines refuse linear translation. His dislocating imagery paints an ethereal, even terrifying otherworld. Crowned by an epigraph by Jack Spicer, readers can surmise a key for the thematics and poetics of the work: "The wires in the rose are beautiful." Zawacki seeks beauty in the programmed, "the chromed," the simulcast," "the nickel plated leaves," the world that is now forever interrupted by what makes it. Spicer's "poet as radio" theory of the muse also shines through many of the passages that feel like overheard static. Though some will find Zawacki's penchant for repetition and word play indulgent, the concentration the poems demand always rewards readers with a feast of song.

In the marathon-opening tirade that is "Georgia," arguably the most stunning gem of the book, "I" rages from a post-apocalyptic shadow world. "I" is you, me, the poet, and the post 9/11, Great Recession citizen who is tired of competing with the ones and zeros of the logarithm state: "simulacra Georgia/ everything's dirty and doubled Georgia . . . everything is breakable Georgia." Here, nature has been removed. Embittered by pixeled light that make perception devious and meaning tenuous, the speaker struggles to locate a stable reality and speak of his suffering ("the question of is is is it Georgia"). Yet even speech is broken: "Syllables virused by syllables Georgia." The paralysis and shadow of the poem are rooted in works like Eliot's "The Hollow Men," and in fact, Zawacki slips into some of Eliot's purgatory motifs: "I'm a scarecrow Georgia," "my voice shot Georgia," "I walk wolfstep into the shadow," and "me/ and you/ and the hollow between."

The poem's anger is only magnified by its double spaced, single lines and its lack of stabilizing stanzas. All lines lack periods with the exception of the heavy-handed punches of the repeated "Georgia" address. The alacrity of this echoing accusation pummels us with compelling force. I can't help but hear "Georgia" as a sister poem to the repeated taunts of Ginsberg's similarly sarcastic "America": "America. . .Go fuck yourself with your Atom bomb." Such political

disgust finds comradery in Zawacki's letter to the Georgian state where he lives and teaches: "You're a bitch Georgia," "and fuck you anyway."

Yet who is this Georgia really? She is America, industry, capitalism, God, and Beckett's "Godot" who never arrives: "I call out Georgia/ because that you/ because that you are whatever." Nonetheless, the poem, like the rest of the book, is still concerned with salvaging beauty that can only be found in disaster's aftermath: "I love every last noise on the violet fields…I listen Georgia/ to the racket the clatter…the anvil's hymnal." Indeed, it's the traceable dissonance such a visceral world makes that allows it to retain meaning.

In the book's central poem, "Arrow's Shadow," Zawacki focuses more on the potential of language itself through an electro-lens that views nature with a kind of techno-dialect. This poem's panoramic if stuttering gaze can feel obscure, as we are not given the personal "I" of "Georgia" or a subject that is as clear. Instead, the dislocating lines unfold more as oft-sheered pieces of music, laden with word play, repetition, consonance and assonance, hyphenated breaks, and more vertigo inducing enjambment:

cascara and liquid ambar sputter

a pirate copied patois
in sequences of non sequitur
and inter-
rupted inter-
rupting shortwave intimacy

This series refuses direct parsing. The form continually alienates the reader as the eye is forced to readjust itself with every new right justified line while it tries to make sense of the word-shards on the page. Here is the poet at play. Zawacki flexes his linguistic muscles and fiddles like a precocious child flaunting a Rubic's cube: every word is turned around like a toy broken down into something else before we even have a chance to digest what it is: "the ana'/gram and gram/-mar of mar-/ gins and mar-/ igolds." Not everyone enjoys watching a Mensa at play though, and some readers may grow exhausted with this arguable indulgence. Or, we might see this as a faithful testimony to all we have authority over: slippery words that are impossible to hold on to for long.

Nonetheless, "Arrow's Shadow" can be read as an elegy to the demise of our natural world. Nature emerges often, but it is as if a Romanticist has been caught inside an iphone and can only echo back the pictures he found there in cryptic codes. Here, the "heart is an ideogram," there

are “compact disks in the cherry tree,” and we get the feeling the poem, not only the world, is “a dyslexic, low caliber dusk.” Still, the yearning of this static feedback urges readers to push on.

But who is the archer of “Arrow’s Shadow”? Perhaps, Zawacki himself: “The archer unsheathes a rapture, nocks a scripture.” We might see the arrow as the words and poems themselves: “A syntax lax in the draw…to pure event, a marrow.” An ambitious archer, indeed. The words that are shot out continually reinterpret themselves in an ironic vortex where there is no core, but “periph-/eries are the centers of things.” And so this section reads as a kind of poetics with which to understand the other two poems that bookend it. The point? To make a poem that “ruches our eyes with its arc, like a fright train of bl-/ack and blu-/ue and a fuckload of beautiful noise.” To make music of course.

Zawacki closes the book with its shortest and most personal poem series. He stabilizes the narrative voice with a return to standard left justified lines of matching lengths. With its more intimate “I” and “you,” this section immediately draws us in with tenderness: “if let me have/ my life it’s what I have/ if most/ be fair in love & war but we/ were never.” Moments of raw honesty in a broken domestic scene make this a good anchor poem for the more abstract experimentation of the other two pieces. Yet Zawacki never offers full closure to his questions. Such “if” subordinate clauses in the preceding passage hang repeatedly throughout the series but are never answered by a “then,” mirroring the struggle to find a stable “is” in “Georgia.” Spotted with several emotionally weighted “I” confessions, this series perhaps does the most to convey Zawacki’s reflections about himself as person and poet. We can even read the “you” here as the poet who addresses himself as one who has become inevitably shattered through the process of composition: “Panning the river of where/ he went for signs of where I/ went.” “I” can be read as the emissary of Spicer’s poetics—the poet who must lose his ego in order to act as satellite for the muse’s radio transmissions. But what is the cost of ego-letting for poetic vision? “Storm Lustral: Unevensong” argues it is the poet’s inner core—the author himself. Rimbaud’s “J’est un autre” feels tangible here, but perhaps more in Barthes’ sense that language writes the author and not the other way around: “although every/ written must/ other its author.” Still, the mourning of this loss is a universal ache in our economically depressed world, ever eager to replace human intimacy for “talcum code.”

Fresh and luscious imagery strike often in “Unevensong”: the sky is “varicose,” and in the distance,

> A tractor rasping its talon
> along the dune
> & dawn lifting saffron

blanched to floss silk
off the sound.

Such thick visuals allow us to swim in a postmodern painting where we can literally caress the colors of Zawacki's song.

In all of these poems, Zawacki has a wonderful way of critiquing what's missing in our 2010 simulacrum while filling it in with plenty of his own. His fractured forms, bent images, word play, and slippery grammar make his zerologue brighten as uneven but as true lyric. Perhaps this is a "tale of the splinter" ("Unevensong") but we get the feeling that is the point. Words have no other place to go but inside our technojargon playroom where at least their new combinations look and sound beautiful:

here, in the romper room, the red-
light district of the lyric
the rose and the UV rays it
reads are out-

sourced, hyper-
linked, filtered through the
autobahns of abra-
cadabra

These might be petals of zero, but their song gleams visibly in "an absence that/ render[s] it seen."

Erica Lewis

Review of Joshua Marie Wilkinson's *Selenography* (images by Tim Rutili, Sidebrow, 2010)

From the first moment you open *Selenography*, Josha Marie Wilkinson and Tim Rutili's text and image hybrid, there is a burst of muted and mutating color – blues swirling into greens and yellows, cracks of light seeping through. It all looks and feels like some sort of chemical reaction, one of those swirling LSD-inspired projections made popular at 1960s rock concerts, or, as the title (from the Greek, meaning the study of the surface and physical features of the moon) alludes to, craters and eruptions on the moon. The work is indeed a study of surfaces, a textual and visual journey through one stream of conscious landscape after another. In creating these various landscapes, however, there seems to be little direct interplay between Rutili's photos and Wilkinson's text (all of Joshua Marie Wilkinson's text is located on the left page and all of Tim Rutili's Polaroids are located opposite on the right page). Both text and image are so challenging, so complete on their own, that what they do or do not have to do with each other almost doesn't matter. Almost.

The text interacts with the photos as more of a suggestion than a caption, or the text reacts as captions to a suggested/suggestive world within the photographs. Either way, the poems barely touch the surfaces they suggest or create; they create a new topography in a prose-like mapping of artifacts. The Poloroids are subdued and otherworldy. Many are of isolated images, items or scenes devoid of human action or interference, which allows each respective image to maintain its own insular sense of isolation or identity. It's a bit creepy, in fact - there is a Southern Gothic feel to all of this, as if the images were lifted right out of a backwoods song from Neko Case's "Fox Confessor Brings the Flood." But still, there *is* the question of the relationship between the text and the image placed in proximity to it. Wilkinson acknowledges this and gives his own version of an answer in "My Cautious Lantern," the first of five sections in *Selenography,* when he writes "I know my / photograph doesn't match/the scene." If he isn't self-conscious about it, then why should we be?

There are sketches of several stories being told in *Selenography*. Wilkinson's abbreviated prose pieces act as little narratives, or as he states "storybooks collecting our / ends." Rutili's Polaroids look as if they were taken on a cross country road trip. Together, the fragmented prose as caption and non caption, along with the isolated images of the photos, present something of a ghost story, as evidenced in lines from "My Cautious Lantern" (that hatchet comes with a / boy who wields / it); (voices get locked / in the threads & felled light / uncovers you), the second section, entitled "Wolf Dust" (ghosts in the red / liquor / we are / reared / in the / sheepish sounds), and the third section, "Phantoms in the Telegraph Ink"(phantoms in / the moss phantoms / in the train cars dressed); (phantoms full of / saliva); (phantoms in the telegraph /

ink). Some of the adjoining photos in these sections give a further sense of something haunted, unveiling a ghostly presence in their blurred composition, juxtaposition of dark and light/black and white, and apparent fingerprint smudges. There is a fleeting human presence here, but mostly we are left to wonder exactly where the stories are going, and who, or what, is telling them.

There is also a profound sense of dislocation and exposure, and a fair amount of attention paid to light and its absence. The first section is all about light and seeing, although the photos in the section, for the most part, are dark. As you move through the book, the text and photos reveal something more about finding your way in the dark, how light is unreasonable, how it is kept going, or how it goes out. In the third section, "Phantoms in the Telegraph Ink," there are references to the life force of illumination (the / lighthouse / is / alive) and how light and dark are recorded (our sleep should collect / here from / reeling film), how light and dark affect everything - observation and the fleeting, what we can and cannot capture.

The fourth section, "A Collating Light," promises, at least from the title, to bring things together, to shed some light on the fragments, but is this illumination a brighter something moving forward (a whole future marked with snow / & collating light) or a transition into something darker? The first photo of this section is of a hulking, black, statue of a gorilla, the sort one might find at a carnival or as part of a theme park, affixed to cement stump – seeing this image, one can't help but think about moving into the heart of some sort of darkness or into some sort of urban jungle, and how the things we leave behind, the things we surround ourselves with even, watch over us (things keep watch / on / other things). There is something almost taxidermic about these poems and images in the use of artifacts and animals (owls, birds, dogs, gorillas, rabbits, horses). It is also as if everything has been a preface of sorts until this section (first / the doorway then / the story), assuring eventual exposure. But even all of the exposure doesn't keep (this movie's missing / one reel / & I / like the sounds in the projection booth), with the layers Wilkinson builds around the artifacts, revealing that we can't ever really escape where we're from or know where we're going.

While there are many references to light and dark throughout *Selenography*, it isn't until the final section, "No Clumsy Moon to Chalk Up the Doorway," with its references to night and sleep, that we get a better sense of who is telling the story/stories, or who and what we have been observing - characters as artifacts and vice-versa, and all as "ghosted choristers:"

this spinning black set negates us
names us revokes

our calls
made

in the yard the light is a foil &

it stomps
us out like a wick until our
eavesdropping is what
stuns us
awake

In the end, it is the minutae, the little things, the artifacts strewn throughout, that we use to guide us through the work. We understand that we have only been getting a glimpse of things through a "keyhole," accompanied by a photo flash against the dark, and like the "distance between us / & the light of our projected / photographs," there are really "no followable paths."

My reaction to *Selenography* was more visceral than anything else, and as a reader, I wanted to take the separation of image and text even further. I wanted to see all of the text together without the images and all of the photos together without the text. I wanted the text and images to each tell their own story without overlapping or wondering whether or not there was any overlap. I was drawn to both image and text as separate entities, never entirely comfortable with the idea of viewing them together. And I think that is the point –to enter and re-enter this work, each time from a new point of entry. To study the surfaces of each and discover what all of the pieces mean separately, together, and once removed. *Selenography* is long, strange trip, but one worth taking.

Kate Colby and Kate Schapira

Interview: On the Origin of Kate Schapira's TOWN

In 2009 Kate Schapira sent an email to a hundred-odd friends asking for contributions of details pertaining to an imaginary town she planned to create. She received 63 responses, all of which she incorporated into TOWN, her first full-length book of poetry, which was published by Factory School in early 2010. In the following conversation with poet, friend, and "town councilor" Kate Colby, Schapira discusses TOWN's origins, in addition to its problems with memory, identity, technology and tawdry cocktails.

Kate Colby: What first struck me about your town was its iconic "everytown" quality that made me think of things like *Spoon River Anthology* and *The Music Man* and the stylized artifice of the town in *The Truman Show*. But there's also a more contemporary, filtered, dark-corners quality to it that reminded me of certain depictions of place by Marguerite Duras and Jean Rhys. In addition to being stereotypically hokey (e.g., "Mrs. Lila Corning, the head of the Auxiliary"), the denizens also tend to be mannered and mysterious (they literally consume paper currency, for example).

And then there's the mythological quality to the specificity and exoticizing of detail that, along with the everytown-ness, made me think of *Invisible Cities*. And that *Invisible Cities* is built upon a deception and illusion also relates to *The Truman Show* and investigations of currency and economics that run through your book.

There is a specter of teen suicide that reminded me of the urban legends and suburban grotesque horror movies of the '70s and '80s, shades of *Metropolis* in the factory workers...In his interview with you, William Walsh also compares TOWN to *Spoon River*, as well as to *Our Town* and *Winesburg, Ohio*. You have called up the whole history of the depiction of towns. But while you talk to Walsh about wanting to explore the psychological infrastructure of towns – specifically, how real communities resolve or absorb contradiction – what are your thoughts on the artistic history of town-ness and how it figures in the work?

Kate Schapira: A contributor actually referenced *Our Town* directly – something like, "In this town, Emily married Simon Stimson, the organist and town drunk, instead of sweet, bland George Gibbs."

Of the things that you mentioned, *Invisible Cities* is maybe the one whose influence I was most aware of – the features that Calvino furnishes each city with (which are, as you point out, often the things that a traveler would notice as "different"); the customs that he explains, often without comment; and especially the extrapolation. That's the idea of town-from-the-outside – local color, created by remoteness and insularity. Something that town-from-the-inside and town-from-the-outside share is the idea of town as "authentic".

Samuel R. Delany's novel *Dhalgren* is about a city in anarchic dissolution, and the ways the people living there respond to it, how their actions always have an effect but not the one they intend – the people who intend to do harm don't, the people who want to fix things don't... This is another one that I was consciously thinking about as I worked with my contributors' material. It asks a lot of questions – about community, about whether what anyone does (within a community) matters in the way we usually think of mattering (i.e., making things more the way we want them to be), and is there another way to matter – that I think TOWN asks too. Dhalgren and TOWN also both have sexual and violent elements, which are at odds with the literary sense of town as the peaceful, equable place where no one has sex and no one harms anyone (à la *Pleasantville*, the movie) – unless someone/something comes in from outside.

The horror-movie aspects are a bit further back in its DNA: the idea that there's a "normal" town, or a normal-ness in town, from which things begin to diverge. I definitely had in my mind a trope that shows up in both fictional and real communities, which is that everything was normal and fine up to the point that [x] happened – in fact, that's one of the main horror narratives. It's scary because of the thing (sometimes with a capital T) that comes from outside town; people in town are reacting to that thing, or corrupted by it (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or anything with alien invasions, a Stephen King book called *The Tommyknockers*...). I'm not sure I was thinking about those things though – it's more like I can see them now that I look.

Looking back over what I just said, I feel like I'm seeing a lot of science fiction rather than "realistic" fiction or nonfiction or poetry. I don't know if that's because the more plain, uninterruptedly normative narratives of town are so far back in the DNA that I don't know where they came from. As early as *Winesburg, Ohio*, the disruption and dissension are taking place, although they're located in characters who are dissatisfied with or damaged by the town's insistent normal- or normative-ness.

I never saw *The Truman Show*. But it seems like the challenge of making a town that wasn't really a town would be making it just real enough to escape scrutiny. The depiction isn't loving or self-sufficient; there's no joy of making; its purpose is to fool him, right? But nobody involved

does any more than the minimum. It's the consumable town that just has to last long enough for you to get it home. I don't know; do you think my town has some of that in it?

KC: Well, Truman believes in the town because he has never had any kind of access to anything else. Do I see that in your citizens? Yes, definitely. There's an automation to their behavior and an insularity to their experience. But there's also a kind of objectless yearning to their rituals, a yearning which Truman develops only after 30-odd years of unquestioned, uninvestigated tedium, somehow.

Your citizens sing once a day – "trembly and tremulous" (shades of Whoville?) – but not songs. Songs aren't allowed. They chew and swallow their money with the rigor of the big-box consumer. The energy is in the consumption, not the acquisition. There isn't a lot of "stuff" in this town, actually. It's all movement and ritual. We get only occasional jolts of tactile, sensory information. Those watermelon margaritas feel awfully sweet and sour and garish for this story, but they belong there, too. Your town is sometimes insipid for lack of satisfied love.

Then the videophone (the X, the Bodysnatcher) arrives, and things change. We'll get to that later. But when you ask if your town has some of *The Truman Show* in it, I'm not sure from whose perspective you mean. Is there love of creation? On your part? I get a sense of the intermittently interested watchmaker. There's certainly no meddling angel of *It's a Wonderful Life* (yet another town that came to mind), but rather of your nose pressed against the terrarium in between other obligations. Things feel complex, not random, but not in an entirely organic way. Are chaos and complexity mutually exclusive or variations on the same concept? I can't remember the nuances.

In any case, you've invited and employed ostensibly irreconcilable constraints here – at least aesthetically incongruous ones – so there are capricious forces at work that save town from the saturated monotony of Seaside, Florida or Stepford or the city in *A Wrinkle in Time* where the children bounce their balls in tandem because they are under the control of an evil, loveless brain called IT.

You are not an evil, loveless brain, Kate. In fact, you are an especially invested member of many communities here in Providence, as well as in other places, both physical and virtual. I want to know more about your question, "Is there another way to matter?" Can you say more about how that plays out in TOWN?

KS: I didn't realize until you pointed it out that no one in town ever leaves. People and things arrive (and arrive and arrive and arrive), but no one even leaves-and-comes-back. Maybe that's why the yearning is there. I wonder if the people in town are satisfied when they become animal-people, toward the end. (Incidentally, I retro-recognized in that another set of literary towns, which are the human and human-alien towns in the *Xenogenesis* trilogy by Octavia Butler.)

It's also potentially interesting that the only overt and quasi-public sex in town is teenage sex, which is often sex at its most sweet and sour and insipid and garish. I think there are moments of connection and warmth in town, but they often also feel defiant and/or are taking place at, for example, a public hanging, or a public service announcement. See more about that below.

I love the image of the nose pressed against the terrarium. I didn't get to choose a lot of the components and inhabitants of the terrarium, but I was responsible for adding what they needed to be able to coexist. I think the comparison is complicated (or maybe made possible – you don't terrarium full-fledged people) by the fact that I didn't have very many characters. I'm glad that I am not an evil, loveless brain; I think I love the town in TOWN more than its people, though, which is the opposite of how I think my real-life community participation works.

A lot of my investment in community in real life comes from questions of what individuals and communities do for each other / owe each other / give each other, and in TOWN, a lot of times, that participation seems (as you pointed out) ritualized, mannered, largely unquestioned – very role-based. I think a lot of the ways people talk about community action and "making a difference" are also role-based – I, This Kind Of Person, am going to help These Kinds Of People. Looking back at it, it seems like all the large-scale moves (proclamations, ordinances, industries) in TOWN are impersonal, and it's maybe because of this that their effects on individual people are unexpected and even alarming. Some of the town's decisions lead to changes in it, and to some things beyond their control as well. To take the example of the most obvious change – their physical transformation, which seems to come hand in hand, or hand in hoof, with a cultural one – I think it's unclear why and how the transformations start to happen and who or what is responsible, but the element of individual participation comes in when people either resist these changes (acting like nothing is happening) or try to make the beasts' sounds and act like what's happening is, in fact, happening. That is, are they generous or fearful? But being generous doesn't necessarily protect you from what happens, or even guarantee that you will enjoy the results of your generosity. Maybe TOWN is part of the process of me learning that in my real life.

That sounds like I think only what I do (or what any person does) – and in what spirit – matters, and not the extrapolated or hoped-for results of our actions. I don't mean that at all. I think some

of the kind of mattering I'm talking about is in the relationship between the girl ghost and the last witness. At the end, they acknowledge each other, and although I don't say this, I feel like this is the time when they're both on their way out of town – that is, the world.

KC: It seems we're having a hard time talking about "town" outside of its pop-cultural depictions, which highlights how wishful and utopian the idea of local (i.e., actual and non-global) insularity and interdependence can be.

I confess that I didn't get that they all became beasts in the end. I got the encroachment of beastliness, but missed the actual transformation. Was the transformation voluntary or involuntary or both or neither?

It makes me think of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, which is funny, since you and I were talking about Theater of the Absurd in an entirely different context just the other day. While Rhinoceros makes a pretty direct and transparent political statement, there is something of the absurd in TOWN – the apparently meaningless circularity and repetition of their rituals, the weird props with which people attempt to relate to one another (again, the watermelon margaritas). Is that a fair comparison?

KS: Well, you asked about TOWN's literary and cultural genealogy, so I feel like we just kept going down that path. But I think another reason why that's happening is that TOWN and the people in town privilege feeling and reaction over, say, logic and analysis and consideration, and that's something that pop culture and its offspring do, too.

Insularity of the kind that takes place in town is definitely wishful and utopian, but the closer something is to us, the more real it is, and I think that's something that often gets ignored or mishandled in efforts to consider things globally or on a large scale. I talked about this with poet Shanxing Wang in *Mantis* a while ago, and he made powerful points: that tyranny can be local / familial (and I think this happens in TOWN) as well as global or colonizing, and that recognizing worldwide patterns and interrelations is vital to surviving them – as well as potentially altering them, if you're into that. Which I am. But as one human, I feel my actions diluting, weakening, when I try to imagine applying them to many, many humans, remote from me, and I feel them turning into their roles or positions rather than themselves.

Speaking of which, it's okay with me that you didn't get that they all become beast-humans (which is really what I was imagining – a creature that partakes of both, and is not quite the same as the beasts when they entered town. There's another interview with me and two TOWN councilors at Trace Brimhall's blog, where Adam Veal, who contributed the beasts, talks about what he was imagining). I think the transformation is more or less involuntary. My mental model, actually, was evolution and environmentally inspired genetic mutation – a non-lethal version of living in a carcinogenic place – literalizing geneticist Richard Goldschmidt's "Hopeful Monster", which is apparently a lot less likely to happen in real life than he thought it was, but does sometimes happen). What is voluntary is how fast it happens and whether the humans throw themselves into it or resist it. The beasts seem to have less agency in that respect, which now that I think about it is maybe a flaw in this narrative thread – nature as inevitable force is not really a more exciting way to look at it than nature as something humans impose on. But they are also very calm and peaceful – they change the town, but not violently, although there is some suffering involved in the transitions.

KC: I just jumped over to the Brimhall blog and have to object to being credited as a collaborator on TOWN. I remember shooting off some uncontextualized nonsense to you. You made poetry out of it.

In any case, you call it collaboration and someone else referred to the contributions as source material, but, as I earlier suggested, they seem more like arbitrary formal constraints to me. They determine the physical parameters of town as much as any sonnet or mathematical sequence would, albeit on a different plane...which ties back in with the absurd, Calvino, OULIPO, etc. I hope I'm not being too reductive with these associations, but town also has a seductively coy, pataphysical, Old World overtone for me that's largely imparted by the ritualism and sense of tradition with faded or forgotten or fantastical antecedents. And yet, town is American, yes?

KS: If anything, I was afraid of giving too little credit to people whose work I included and transformed. I agree that all the contributions function as constraints on the project – and they are unquestioned because I committed to using all of them. So, in a way, the way I wrote TOWN is analogous to the largely unquestioned ritualism and the townspeople's conformity – not exactly with rules, but with their roles or "places" in the town – and sense of tradition you mention. The obedient process of assembling the town shows, is manifest, in ways that I didn't directly dictate or expect.

Town is American, yeah. Mostly because that's where I am and where I grew up (although not all the contributors live here or were raised here). Also,"town" as opposed to "village" or "city" or "suburb" has a U.S. feel to me, which may be wrong. The ways in which town is complacent,

vaguely participatory, neglectful of its public space, all feel American to me as well, but I haven't lived anywhere else long-term and that may be common. I wonder if the Old World feel is coming from its more pageanty aspects – performing and stressing its history in a codified, recognizable form? I think we do that in the U.S. as well. But many of our pageants – I'm thinking of the Italian-American festivals on Federal Hill, or the Dominican Festival in and around Broad Street and Roger Williams Park, here in Providence – treat some sort of Old World as their source or root. "We happen to be here, but we're FROM there." Whereas in TOWN, town is where they're from. Most of them. The one specifically noted set of incomers – the owners of the Delhi Express and their children – get stamped with their race and their immigrant (to town) status as soon as they enter town, and TOWN. That's an example of something I wish I'd done more with and thought more critically about, by the way.

KC: To shift the conversation a bit, I want to ask about the skewed sense of time and the role of memory in the book. Memory seems to – or is said to – play an important role, but its antecedents feel pretty dead and unrequiting. Often they aren't specified – possibly not known? We just have these weird, perfunctory rituals and blank monuments. While change and futurity are betokened by the arrival of the videophone, that realized future ends up being equally deadening and dead-end-ing. But everything and everyone in town seems hung up on the past or suspended from the future. Nothing feels terribly present.

So, which is more dangerously self-reflexive: collective, civic nostalgia or the technologically mediated social conditions of the futuristic present? Are the false "hoods" of municipal self-identity more insidious than the idea of "rioting by videophone"?

Those are mostly rhetorical questions, but...thoughts?

KS: People often talk about the future and the past as if they were places, but their place-ness is imaginary – a convenience. And town is an imaginary place and, in a sense, also a convenience – a terrarium? – in which to set these feelings, ideas, people and rules and see what they do to each other. I think some of the uses of future and past in town are, like the traditions, a shorthand or rhetoric, a way to evoke certain feelings of nostalgia or community. So memory as a unifying factor is sort of a decoy – a social convenience or fake consensus – but so is the idea of "where we come from" (in the sense of the past, or tradition) and "where we're going" or "we're going nowhere" or even "dead end" (in the sense of the future).

But something we haven't talked about a lot yet is the role of contradictions in the town and especially in memory. There is some dissent about whether the monuments even exist, whether there was a violent criminal at large, whether the railroad ever went through town. It's not always clear where people live or how they died. The ghosts of buildings and people reveal this – a ghost is simultaneously present and absent, possible and impossible. What I hope is that the clear contradictions and impossibilities will make that absoluteness, that routine and ritual, that stubborn official version, feel more crumbly and mutable.

But also, the town's ability to extrapolate cause and effect may be a little impaired or atrophied, perhaps because of the absoluteness and rootlessness of those rituals and the, "This is going to change everything!" industrial gung-ho-ness, which makes me think that they may have done this before – each new industry is the one that's going to "save" town, but they don't really believe it (and I don't really believe it, either).

KC: But the videophone is an exception in that it does change everything, doesn't it? It literally alters reality – "the trains have tiny cars" because of it. Everything in town seems to turn upon its introduction. Am I making too much of it? And/or is it really a stand-in for the internet? You say, "The town will believe anything in a picture," and pictures tend to be a lot more truthful than Wikipedia. But then you also say of town, "Value furnishes all our images," so these videos / pictures / images are both taken and perceived through cloudy or maybe warped lenses.

Tell me about the videophone. It's such a funny and naive characterization of dehumanizing technology – like something from a Richie Rich cartoon. And yet, it belongs here, perhaps because these townies are pretty naively visionary, as you point out – as we all are, without the benefit of foresight, of course. The staleness of the technology also underscores that.

KS: It's true, it does alter reality. The trains do have tiny cars because of it, and it seems to produce some weird dissociative disorders in people, and there's some suggestion that the chemicals involved in making it or leaching from it are contributing to the mutations and interspecies blurring – I was thinking of the "cell phones cause brain tumors" urban legend and also of the genuine problem of what to do with computer waste products. I guess what I meant is that it doesn't alter reality in the intended or expected or controlled way.

Is it the internet? Kinda, maybe, but that also seems stale in an alarmist, old-fashioned way – "Oh, the internet is dehumanizing us." On the other hand, town is old-fashioned in many ways, and at least some of its people would claim that with pride – the kind of old-fashioned that's the

implicit opposite of newfangled. On the other other hand, there does seem to be a naive pride and even delight in the technology itself – the "new toy" enthusiasm with which many people respond to various kinds of technology. There's an obedient quality to their hope and anticipation – it's new, it's exciting, it'll change everything! It'll destroy/revolutionize the publishing industry (or communication, or finding a pizza place, or whatever)! The words and tone in which we discuss that kind of technology (both marketers and marketees) are often gee-whiz and alarmist at the same time – I think there's a turn-of-the-last-century, Barnum-ish, snake-oil miracle cure quality to the ways we talk about it positively and negatively, and that seemed to fit in with the town's reaction to it and to its mental time frame.

The person who contributed the videophone also told me that the field of psychoanalysis was booming in town, so in some ways I had that connection made for me. The role I think the videophone took on – in addition to what I said above – has to do with attempts to connect, but to connect easily and safely.

KC: One final comment I want to make about TOWN and all of your work is that in spite of how much thought and conceptual rigor goes into it, what remains in the foreground is the language and the precise, but light-handed way you use it. Do you think of the individual sections of the book as poems? They certainly work that way for me. The part
about the corduroy factory stands out:

> Mothers and fathers work
> at the corduroy factory.
> Cotton fluff like flocking on them.
> They're their children's toys, the
> mothers and fathers, and mothers
> and mothers and fathers, and fathers
> and fathers and mothers. Fluff settles
> on everything, thickens everything,
> brown and maroon, "Creamate" in
>
> company coffee thickening the break
> room. Working accordingly
> and respectively, they don't
> keep any of it, except in their lungs
> it lies in heaps the colors of bruises:
> maroon, dark brown, tan, olive
> green, cloudy blue, lavender.

Fathers, some of whom are mothers,
drive from their homes, drive back

to their homes under ghosts of future
trees and grown children, their
colors made redundant by
darkness and sodium vapor. The factory
exists as a ghost of motes in
air, paralleled, particulate,
collapsing, illuminated. The fire
of 1984 erected in the winter months
with thirteen father and mother

survivors spun out. Cotton lint went
up like snow. The factory's gone

and there, drifting in and out of sun.
Everything—people, patterns—went
along where only fire is made
becoming what it is and isn't
about the ghosts in the factory
when they move themselves busily,
sent up, still flecked and working.

I often think about what it is that binds me to my favorite poets' work. One wouldn't want to be able to pin it down, of course, but there's a formal identification for me along the lines of, “Hey, I hear it that way, too.” It's in the composition and dare I say the breath rate and depth and the sound of it. It's as though everyone's tuned into the world at different frequencies, but sometimes you find someone's listening at the same one that you are and you can really see ear-to-ear with them. I know nothing about physics and sound dynamics, but I repeatedly think of the film of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge collapse that you had to watch in science class. Feats of suspension, frequencies matching, structures collapsing...it's too much, but something like that.

Not to say that your work has niche appeal; it's just plain lovely writing. I look forward to seeing more of your work in print.

KS: I definitely think of the individual sections as poems, each with its own impulse, order, and sound within it, as well as the resonances they create between/among them.

I like “seeing ear-to-ear.” I think that's right. When something you read, or something you hear, sets you humming because it's at your frequency or at a corresponding one – a harmonic? Is that a thing? I don't really know anything about that either – and then you go write, or at least you want to. I love it when work does this for me (as yours does) and I would love for my poems to do it for other people.

In setting up the project I sort of said, “I'll tune to whatever you all give me;” earlier in the interview, you said that you felt you gave me whatever and I made poetry out of it. I think both of these things are happening – I'm responding, at my “frequency”, to the words and images that people gave me – what they called out in me. But I also had to adjust my “frequency” (a bit more for some than for others) in order to respond, and throughout the project I can feel it sounding more and less like me (but always a little like me).

Thanks for these great questions – they've made me think hard while simultaneously having a ball (something your work does as well).