

Wind as Music - E-Review for *Music for the Black Room* – poems by Sarah Maclay

Reviewed by Mariana Dietl

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A long, lingering wind breathes through *Music for the Black Room*, Sarah Maclay's third collection of poetry—a breeze like the one that gradually emerges at the beginning of the fall, without our notice, before the seasons change and the weather turns cold. Not a bothersome or intruding wind, it is charged with sensuality and the touch of silk. This wind *is* the music for the *Black Room*: the poet's voice, a bare and intimate voice, almost uncomfortable in its frankness, in its raw lucidity:

Semiautomatic

Coming out of sleep
I hear the shots again—

sixteen, fast, followed by another round—
and for a second
they could be

the amplified hooves of horses
hitting the pavement
at a sudden, quick clip,

like when I mistook barking dogs
for your voice on the answering machine,
dropped the hose, midstream, on the lawn
and ran into the kitchen
to find no message coming in.

Sirens, from all directions.

It was not horses.

For an hour, helicopters
prowling like loud klieg lights.

Barking dogs.

Maclay breathes air into an otherwise enclosed, dark, sealed space. That is her magic. As in many of her splendid metaphors and images, she gets away with the impossible: making two

contradictory or opposing sensations seem the most natural and obvious companions: “It beckons to you like a fence. . . /... The ground grows numb with your steps” (from “Snow Clouds, Late October”). Disconnected realities are connected by sensations, as when “The cinnamon has opened like a smooth, red canoe. My back uncurls, loose as a bark in the still pool of cider” (from “Coming To”) or as in:

Aspen

A tree of green butterflies:
all the wings flicking
unceasingly, random.
The music of wind
made visible, felt.

In the creek,
water a fluttering pulse

of light,
a quiver of flickering
crossing the pebbles,

a mirror of leaves
in its own stirring,
its own unavoidable, welcome
response

as when you address my body
with your specific,
your tender, articulate
tongue.

My favorite way to read Maclay’s poetry –and this applies to her three collections— is to read each poem twice. The first time, I let go, as if I were dreaming, covered in silk sheets, as if I were carried by a breeze. I read the poem steadily, fast, absorbing its rhythm, chasing its wind, feeling its intensity in a very primal, instinctive manner. And then I read it again. This time slowly, inhaling deeply every word, every pause, every silence, savoring them in my mouth, gently, calmly. And only then I’m ready to move on to the next one.

By allowing wind to blow through her black room as if it were a door-less beach house, Maclay infuses rocks with sensuality, the forbidden with innocence, instilling grace and sincerity in the obscure and hidden. And just as we are used to encountering impossible situations in dreams which make total sense to us, the author carries us through her poetry as if we were sailing on a dream (hers or ours, it doesn’t really matter), her steady rhythm transporting us like feathers, like echoes, like whispers, like full-blown waves. And we, as readers, as dreamers, want to follow her, we trust her.

The Moment of Anything

So if it means the cape you wear
flies out into the night—bat wings
flapping silently until the sky is covered
in black silk

or if a mummy cloth of fog
crawls through the room
until the curtains, even the furniture
and goblets are second or third generation
photocopies of themselves, achieving
a kind of disappearing flatness;

if I can look in a mirror and see
the carved wood wall behind me—
see, that is, right through myself—

and if the scrim of the past lifts
in this moment of nothing, moment of anything,
naked, even, of flesh and bone,
a tabula rasa so rasa
that even the tablet is missing...

well, I don't much travel with the dead,
but in your case, just for the night,
I'll make an exception.

The collection is divided into six sections with enigmatic titles such as “Shadow,” “Ice,” “Blue Trumpets,” “A Mirror,” “Neon” and “Ash,” together with a final poem at the end. The poems are fluid; they move and glide like a stream of water. And as water, they evolve as they go, they alter, they give sudden turns, they swerve, to end in surprising and inevitable destinations. Although there is a constant feeling of unpredictability and movement in her poems, Maclay's well-rounded endings make us feel that there was no other possible outcome, that everything led to where it had to go, where it had to end. We get the sense that this is the way life is supposed to be.

The poems of the first section, “Shadow,” are elusive, fidgety and nearly imperceptible, not easy to see. Like shadows. Most take place in rural areas, areas unspoiled by walls, by humanity, by weariness, by darkness, by black rooms.

The Alfalfa

I drape my legs around the neck
of the horse, run my fingers across
the eyelids, down to the velvety warmth

of the nose, bareback, both of us quiet
as we conspire
to let the morning sleep.

High in the walnut tree, a rabbit—yes,
perched like an eagle—gazes at me,
its tall brown ears
fringed in a whiskery gray

—while a pheasant
sits on a lower branch, preening
like a cat.

And on the side of the road, tourists pull over,
crawling into the barrow pits filled
with alfalfa, swooning over its scent
and gathering it in armfuls
they hold to the chest

as they would gather flowers
as they would gather lovers
into their arms.

And you are the horse.
And you are the rabbit.
You are the pheasant
and you, the alfalfa.

There is an innocent wisdom in these poems, a feeling that the voice expressing them has had to learn the hard way, through errors and mishaps and then even more failures and mistakes. They are humane poems, as is all of Maclay's poetry.

Another sense I get from reading the poems in the first section is that the author seems to be in the place she wants to be. Unlike the poems of the following sections, the first ten poems have the fresh and sensual air of early morning dew, of a cool breeze that makes you shiver but doesn't make you cold, of the smell of hay and serenity. They are sensorial, dreamlike, entrancing. You want to be where the poet is, you want to breathe the same air she breathes, lie down on the same grass and let its thick straws pinch through your sweater while you watch the clean sky, just like they do to her.

These poems feel like they've originated from someone who has been transported there (either physically or in fantasy) after a long, bewildering and crazy ride through 'civilization.' They seem to represent the author's coming back home, reconnecting with her origins, with who she really is. The confusion of the past is over, and now she knows how to enjoy life, how to enjoy the moment, how to savor and graze in it.

This is the voice of someone who's been around and has finally found her place, with nature, with life, with spirituality, with being. In fact, these first poems brought back to me one of the best films I have ever seen, Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011), which to me wasn't so much a movie as a long and extraordinary, lyrical and spiritual journey.

The second section, "Ice," has a slightly different undertone. Here the wind is harsher; it brings disenchantment, like a dream gone awry; the lonely spirituality of "Shadow" seems to have become sour. And yet, the wind keeps blowing, so there is hope, there is still transformation to be seen. The scenery has shifted to the city now, mostly LA, and like its buildings the poems seem to reflect its rougher edges. The snow and the leaves have become rancid and dirty; they are no longer enchanting, as in the previous section:

The sky is terse. December. Wiry grass
pokes through our sweaters. I am about to betray you,

though I don't know it, as we lie here in MacArthur Park
and talk about the dead. Later, when you return, your clothes,

even your skin will smell of chimney smoke and cooking grease
and sweat – a life I can't imagine. Sown into this room.

(from "The Man Who Went to Esteli")

And yet, as mentioned, there is still a glimmer of hope, of desire; innocence is lost but a new wisdom is gained in these poems, and the hope will unfold subsequently in the remaining sections of the collection.

I see her soften and the fear I have carried
melts as silently as ice in the orange-tinged
glass as if there were never meant to be any effort
and it is easy, it is simple and it is almost not sad
to have to accept the sea change in this light
as I prepare to walk through the next few months
like a mirror reflecting everyone I see
in a blank, flat shine.

(from "The Contents May Have Shifted While in Flight")

I found "Blue Trumpets," the next section, to be the most 'carnal' section, the one that directly addresses relationships (although the entire collection does), trumped desires and the ensuing hope and disappointment:

Those fires we tended separately at night,
are they out? Or only deeply buried
like that amber in your eye

behind about a mile of fear
and that thick silence
I can never penetrate?

As you can see, I'm doing okay,
in my skinny limbs and rags.

I don't even know if we're still in uniform.

(from "Missing in Action")

It has been a long ride, as later sections show: "In those rhythmic / bursts, the constant tug, the flat / sand you stepped into now conforms / exactly to your foot. Seconds later, / all that will be washed away" (from "Uterus"); "when the earth is a boy's wild hair / waiting to be combed" (from "Home").

There is a general sense of wonderment in the sixty-five poems that make up *Music for the Black Room*, like waking up on an early morning and realizing that you are free to explore an exotic continent or roam about on your own for an entire day. I was surprised when I found out that these poems had been written over more than two decades, since they seem to go so flawlessly together, as if written specifically for this book, in the order they were placed, not even a comma out of place.

If this book were a musical album, it would have been sung by Mazzy Star/Hope Sandoval. I think they share the same subtlety, the same melancholy, the same strong and soft and intimate and beautiful voice. Beyond comparisons, it is a beautiful book, both inside and out. Rocky Schenck (cover image), and Richard Mathews, who designed the book, have done a fantastic job with the cover art. It really illustrates, I think, the tone of the poems.

In this collection, the leaves are just starting to fall—a very slow, discreet, intimate process, a changing and evolving process, unavoidable and cyclical, which inevitably brings transformation, renewal and disenchantment, hope and dejection. It is a melancholy wind that drives these poems, a wind of time, of time passing, of time gone or almost gone—a wind that carries, captures and retains time. Finally, there is a need to transcend in these poems, and a feeling of transcending the shadows and echoes of existence, of lingering and remaining and establishing a permanent presence—like wind.