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Boundary lines, shifting forms, and revisions

Sian Vate *end motion / manifest*
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Zoe Dzunko *Selfless*
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There are many influences exerted on the 'self' in Zoe Dzunko's collection, *Selfless*. The internal and the external, the inner and the outer, push and pull at each other. There is much talk of skin, hair, mirrors, the passage of female adolescence, and themes of hunger, cosmetics, guilt, domesticity, and a self- and societal- gaze repeat. It makes me think of the body as a situation, a site of desire and projection and constructed identity. However the collection is also intensely occupied with 'thingness' through both the object-hood of the figure that is sexualised and the subject-hood of the self who feels and lists desires. It is a hypnotic read, held together by a lucid, clear and strong voice, but isn't exactly comfortable. Throughout, Dzunko describes a 'girl' and her 'clichéd' adjectives ("brilliant girl", "real girl", "fake girl", "gentle girl", "pink bodied female", "a girl faceless", "sweet shy girl or sweet exuberant girl") explore traditions of expectation, gender and genre:

Until they told me *you are*
A little girl I did not exist
I had legs for running you did not
Notice that I had them. (14)

Naming and gendered language as definitional for states of becoming are important here.

In 1993, the men

of today filled the world in the shape of boys.
I too, skirted the inevitable: virago, fishwife, bimbo (22)

Through what lens are these appellations inevitable? Under scrutiny in specific poems are routines of domesticity, what is learnt, conditioned, and inherited:

Painting my mouth into the shape of fuck me,
like a pantomime of complicity. From what
did I learn to want to fill this space in your life,
pour myself in as something to bake and share (22)

Film, snapchat filters, sex videos, and *Daily Mail* online commentary enter the frame in the poem 'Line Camera', as does self-tan and cosmetic surgery in the poem 'Boterismo', which makes reference to Columbian artist Fernando Botero, well known for the plump and distorted figures he paints that border on the grotesque. Dzunko's work does something of the same, amplifying the cliché and the hyper-feminine with sincerity and recalling the world of selfies and the Kardashians. The aesthetic interplay between the real and the image are furthered in 'Price (High to Low)':

Yesterday, another woman kindly glued false parts onto real

parts of me too lazy to grow themselves, and I felt like a real
doll when it happened, propped up and still – eyelids opening

and closing into traps (12).

The poems are similarly set within an explicit binary and dichotomy of masculine and feminine: "We will speak / without shame and he will witness / rotted out fruit. An overworked curl / a mirror with a compact to its face" (34). The burden of gendered language and a classical vision of sexual opposition are carried in these poems. This vision plays with its performative vanity and doesn't look away. The poems perform the confessional lyric in an intimate register, unapologetic and deconstructive in their gaze and in what they reveal.

Reading Dzunko, one is immersed in a world that has the atmosphere of archetype and myth, a world that recalls the lucid, appropriative work of Angela Carter and of Alice Notley, whose lines contribute to the epigraph:

Gold crumbles from my
cheeks where I sit within walls like neon green
snakeskin
Scaley. Feel it – This is what a "self" is like.

Dzunko's language is rich, the register dark and intimate and the collection is filled with Latinate words that contribute to the decadent and voluminous feel of the text, such as the poems' titles, 'Indolic', 'Solecism', 'Pudendum', 'Apologist', 'Apostate'. It's an explication/exposition of self and selves, and Dzunko commits herself entirely to the call.

Published in Brooklyn by The Atlas Review, *Selfless* is a striking collection, coupled with psychological resonance, it comes from the mind of someone well versed, articulate and aware of the terrain she is exploring. In an interview with Natalie Eilbert at TAR press (2016), Dzunko explicates the collection as biography, or, more accurately as ‘self-authored prosopography’, a catalogue of appearances and patterns. This is an interesting choice of classification, it is as if Dzunko is cataloguing the collective biography of her many selves over time, analysing at a distance, but fully embodying the process. On the writing process Dzunko describes it as an exhumation or interment, saying several poems arose from a ‘germinal space’, a notion that chimes with the semiotic *chora* described by Kristeva. This space is pre-body, and is also pre-language, before language is learned, naming occurs, and the symbolic order is entered into, before a division and separation of self and other, when expression is whole. She writes, “I am never myself” (24).

Dzunko’s main concern is the body and personal history, stating: “I don’t want to be anything with a history” (8) (note ‘thing’ not ‘one’ or ‘body’), and “My fantasy, to no longer exist / under these terms” (32). It is as if the self wants to throw off historicity and start anew. But how? The stance Dzunko takes is somewhat ambiguous at times within the assembled poems, composed primarily in the form of rolling monostrophes or couplets, there is an ambivalence and tension within the collection and as a reader I’m sometimes unsure where agency lies.

The act of recording is political and on this level, I’m reminded while reading of Anne Carson’s essay ‘Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity’ (2000). Carson examines women’s oppression and the public and private sphere in Ancient Greece, explicating how contact, whether physical, emotional, moral, or imaginary, is “crisis”. She explores how women have been contained and that “to isolate and insulate the female, from society and from itself, was demonstrably the strategy informing many of the notions, conventions and rituals that surrounded female life in the ancient world” (131). She traces this notion back to ancient thinkers and examines how it plays out in myth, for example men are considered ‘bounded’ and women ‘unbounded’, and capable of blurring their own, and others, boundaries. More often than not, this serves to repress and contain women’s sexuality (i.e. in the feminine symbols of reproduction being appropriated by masculine powers). What is arresting in Dzunko’s work is the candour and intensity of the gaze that she focuses on herself within this bind, her own experiences and contradictions, and how this is traced in a personal social history.

Dzunko explains in the interview with Eilbert: “The overarching sentiment of the poems might be contained in the notion: “I’m playing by your rules/ why am I playing by your rules?” This is the dialectic at the heart of *Selfless*. It examines complicity and the institutional walls around its form, and uses lavish language to reveal, obfuscate, and dig to the roots, examining its own reflection at each turn.

Cracks and fractures of surfaces, self, and memory are explored in both these chapbooks from two Melbourne-based writers and Sian Vate’s *end motion / manifest* immerses readers in a surreal world and associative memory-dreamscape. Meaning and language are not fixed and there is little familiar terrain for the reader to settle upon; everything is thrown up and comingled, demonstrative from the outset in the opening poem ‘melbs’:

pelt harbour / more of the ice-same. ‘memories’ make a ‘memory seem trifle / seem tripped’. ‘i don’t understand why we’re’ memories make a memory bank extension

no? 'i' no 'you' want 'all my memories' up. who knew there was a cave under the
citolink so we walked through it / no ran / & i ran back

The poems are dense and delight in sound, punning, misreadings and mispronunciations. They are presented in square blocks of text and create states of unknowingness. Everything is circular and slanted. 'melbs' appears to riff on the phrase 'take a trip down memory lane' playfully opening up its poetic potential and distorting sense ("memories make a right-lane extended: don't trip"). They have a distinctly urban feel, making reference to trams, trains, suburbs and pubs. While *Selfless* traverses a psychological and interior landscape, *end motion / manifest* evokes and blurs place in a refreshing and ludic manner:

you don't know coburg's secrets cos coburg doesn't know / they're like the things
that kids know / trifle

Written in vernacular and neologisms, 'trifle' could hold meanings of 'triple', 'trifle' and even 'riff', which is what Vate is doing with language. She uses forward slashes repeatedly throughout her work. Typically reserved as line break markers when transposing poetry to prose, the punctuation disrupts conventional poetic sentence structure and often acts to backtrack and to propose a revision to the previous line ("they're playing our favourite song: no / mine & you're here"). They act as medial caesuras gesturing towards a pause, while also hurrying onwards. The movement means readers are propelled forward as much as they are then made to backtrack, a movement furthered through the repetition of lines and imagery that recall previous poems – for instance rocks, pebbles and crystals make shifting surreal appearances in several poems – weaving a sense of dream logic and unexpectedness throughout the collection. Often, due to the fragmentation, it is difficult to tell where poems end and where they begin. For example, the first page presents a block of prose text. One seems to reach the end on a line that finishes three quarters along the page on a terminal point. However, turning the page it continues:

or is it worth talking about – you step down from it and into it and as you retreat
from it it balloons out around you –

This line then forms the first line of the poem 'or' several pages along. Moments like this add jolts to the reading experience and disrupt readerly expectation, accentuating the loop effect. The 'it' here could be referring to the 'trifle' memory that expands as it is thought about later in time, post-event, a subjective descriptor of the neurological processes of memory i.e. how, when we think back to a moment, we reinvent it. The doubling adds to the labyrinthine and compositional game at hand (another layer: games are also referred to frequently, "twosies", "two up at the pub", "round of cards") and adds to the sensation of memories of times and places collapsing in on themselves.

There is a lot of readerly delight to be found in *end motion / manifest*, a collection composed like a criss-crossing, interweaving imagistic maze. It's the kind of collection where you have to like reading and not knowing. However, the more you read, the more you decode and the logic opens up and folds in on itself again.

The addition of revisions creates a naturalism and conversational tone, capturing the mind's twists and turns, while the lack of capitalisation adds intimacy and tenderness ("you're

laughing cos you won't tho. i say just do it don't tease"). Equally there is a level of nostalgia and sadness in the poems that lay out a memory and loop back over it, as in 'tablecraft':

So much light screaming in through the train carriage windows and my sunglasses
saying 'please' babe I'm bleached now but also this retreat. Reaching backwards into
the creek. Arms stretched ahead into the sky like weak mixer.

These poems benefit from being read aloud to let the cadence and unexpected internal rhymes and rhythms come to light. Slang abounds, as does the creation or combination of words that have only associative meaning ("pelt harbour", "junish crackerjack", "clooked by the cops", "khleppy backstreet humming", "triffle", "bready obscurantism"). The linguistic play simultaneously creates mystery and works to accurately capture experience. As above, 'light screaming in' can be seen to replace 'light streaming in', a wordplay that evokes being out in summer with a hangover when the light is glaring, piercing and being pelted with memories.

Sound and music are consistent themes throughout the collection ("open a music box to hear the same tune playing backwards or – creaking this time with handlebars"). A play between sound and sense abounds, adding to this surrealist almost hip-hop world. The poem '(thanks)' takes its cue from rap artist M.I.A's cover of Spectral Display's song 'Muscle' (in Vate's poem, the lyric "it takes a muscle to fall in love" changes to "IT TAKES SOME MUSCLE TO ADJUNCT"). Similar to the M.I.A album 'MAYA' where song titles are typed in majuscules, the majority of the poem is typed in capital letters and ends, "KICKING MATERIAL INTO MATERIAL ACTION. IT TAKES SOME ACTION TO MATERIAL. IT TAKES SOME MUSCLE TO ACTION. IT TAKES ALL MATERIAL".

Meaning is never settled, but nor do we want it to be. There are many poetic images that arise, that give birth to multiple interpretations and hold several meanings at once in a paronomasiacal play of multivalency. In the final poem 'atlantic' the elements combine:

everything is capable of folding over quietly in a hand: sink dish / rates bill / radio. i
got a dish in the hand and they're playing our favourite song

There appears to be a shift of tempo and this poem has a more settled feeling from breaks, fractures, "false-dry" cemeteries and distorted streetscapes:

everything dies as though built for a poem. this time is conclusive and jealous. we
sketched different histories over the same tree & the look of the tree makes me cry.
head west or stay here / dance to Springsteen the tea's boiling over

The collection travels through the urban mindscape starting with the 'ice-same', traversing a crackly middle, and ending with water boiling. Transformation and change occur quite differently in Dzunko's poetry. Both limn their subject matter intently and draw the reader into unexpected discoveries along the way.

In both of these chapbooks the subject is slippery and subject to revisions. There are shifts and metamorphoses of thoughts, memories, bodies, and recurring motifs. Each poet

returns over and over to certain themes, similar to the process of a recurring dream that attempts to work out a clouded, disguised problematic. There appears to be resolve and a sense of resolution in Vate's work: the closing line of dancing to Springsteen as water is boiling over marking a break into fluidity. The closing image, too, provides a different space for contemplation: a watercolour of an open landscape offering a change from the previous two watercolours of houses, the first rambling and derelict, and the second, an ordered apartment replete with windows and grids.

Works Cited

- Carson, Anne, "Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity." *Men in the Off Hours*, Random House, New York, 2000, pp. 130-158.
- Eilbert, Natalie. "A Conversation with Zoe Dzunko." *The Atlas Review*, July 2016. Web <http://theatlasreview.com/selfless-a-preview/>.