

BOOKS IN BRIEF: The Heart, Yes
John Rosenwald

Katharine Rauk, *Basil* (Aspinwall, PA: Black Lawrence Press, 2011, 37 pp, \$9 paper)

Jay Leeming, *Miracle Atlas* (Rochester, NY: Big Pencil Press, 2011, 83 pp, \$15.95 paper)

Abbot Cutler, *Say Dance, Say Night* (Northfield, MA: Slate Roof Press, 2013, 30 pp, \$13 paper)

It is June in Maine. I have just returned from the Annual Conference on the Great Mother and the New Father, originally organized by Robert Bly, at which my artistic family has gathered for nearly four decades, regularly in recent years at Camp Kieve on the shore of Damariscotta Lake. For just over a week we recreate traditional stories (this year “Eros and Psyche”), sing at 6:30 each morning, make masks, dance, talk, mock ourselves and each other, and hear/write/recite/discuss poetry. The Great Mother Conference (GMC as we call it) provides for me an annual feast of aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual energy. Although I often urge poets who attend the conference to send poems to the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, and although we occasionally have published them, I rarely bring into my work as editor explicit mention or consideration of conference matters.

Here, however, I shall. Without suggesting that conference poets, influenced by each other or by Robert Bly, speak with a unified voice, I wish to draw attention to recent books by three long-time conference participants: one still quite young, one now middle-aged, one nearly as ancient as I am. Each of them in recent years has not only participated in our community but also had some responsibility for its functioning: Katharine Rauk as shepherd of poetry readings, Jay Leeming as Convenor or day-by-day organizer, Abbot Cutler as a Greyhair, one of those who have eventual responsibility for the entire conference. Given our relationships I cannot address them formally; instead I will call them by their given names.

Begin with youth: What makes Katie Rauk remarkable as a poet includes her word magic, her ability to make music in the midst of straightforward description and narrative:

For him
she hummed, trimmed
lamps in the unmanned
mansion of her mind.

With that music come striking images:

Now we smell
of freshly split wood,
that splintered moment
when lightning licks open
the heart of a tree.

And:

The potatoes slept beneath
my feet: pale

dirt pearls, their bellies
swollen

with buried light.

Beyond creating her music, Katie directs a cast of characters remarkable in its diversity. If one element of much contemporary poetry remains its egocentricity, its narcissism, *Basil* surprises in that what seem at first like predictable autobiographical narratives shift voices so often that we eventually suspect ego plays little role here. The first, "Fuse," opens with an image that could introduce many self-obsessed poems by young confessional writers, "She would have an affair," but ends with a name that makes such an interpretation unlikely: "with a man named Ulf." The second, "The Rapture," again begins with "she," but its word magic renders biographical interpretation implausible: *rapture*, *capture*, *scripture*, *suture*, *rupture*. The third shifts to first person, but since the speaker decides to "dedicate" herself "to light bulb collection," we should again presume that autobiography is not the issue. In the fourth poem, "Self-Portrait with Monkey," one of the strongest in the book, the speaker seems to be Frida Kahlo, or at least the figure in Kahlo's painting. The title poem, "Basil," uses the voice of the herb itself: "In India, they place me in the mouths / of the dying." As a poet Katie seems to have developed not only an ear for word music but also a skill she ascribes to those "young women who are learning to listen," for often she listens to and speaks for others rather than for herself.

If not her self, what? In a set of three poems near the physical and emotional core of this slim volume, Katie introduces a theme central to her work, to this review, and to the GMC itself. In this cluster she contrasts an unnamed male who asserts, "I've

never met a pie I didn't like" with "Chloe," who longs for the "hearthstone lost / in the double-dark . . . a heartbone . . . of has-been and will-be and now." This heartbone maintains, like the moon, "confirmation // of circumference: even if you can't / see her all at once," a heartbone she calls "my nub, my sweetness, my buried / bruise," and about which she wonders, "when I find you / will I be found or not found?" In two other poems she turns inquiringly to Pablo Neruda's *Book of Questions*, but at this moment, in *Basil*, the questions remain, appropriately, unanswered.

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In *Miracle Atlas* Jay Leeming shares a commitment to the heart. The opening poem, "Beggar," introduces the theme:

It was the bardic scientists of the ancient future
who discovered that at the heart of everything

there was not a particle, a quark or a vibrating string

but a single line of poetry.

At this point the reference seems casual, idiomatic, secondary to thematic irony, but later in the book the centrality of the image becomes explicit: "the choosing of a man's vocation is . . . a matter of heart and not of head." Near the end of the volume he reiterates the science/heart contrast: "Today the pressure of reality on art exceeds a million pounds / per square inch. No instrument can measure it, only the heart."

This commitment to the heart, however, contrasts with Jay's public persona. His conference readings emphasize his trickster qualities, his coyote nature. At his most recent GMC performance, he read to considerable applause poems such as "History," which progressively tumbles names, occurrences, and texts in a "dream of fact . . . from which you have yet to awake":

It turns out that the first white man in North America
wasn't Columbus, it was a Viking from Jorvic. . . .

It turns out the Declaration of Independence

was originally written in Celtic by Duke Ellington
and Mao Tse-tung, then translated into English
by the druids of Mexico.

In “Days of Glory” the poet mock-heroically pillories “the shimmer of our grandiosity” in an office setting populated by “Bob,” supposed “Pillager of Cities,” and “Debbie, / Clearer of Paper Jams.” Like Harold Pinter’s, his language reflects the banality of our daily linguistic experience, as in the cluster of brief phrases that constitute “Hang On”: “We’ll have dinner. / Nice to see you again. / You look great. / I missed you. / Hang on. / I’ll be right there.”

Miracle Atlas comprises four parts. The first contains mostly work that highlights the author’s wit and his role as ironic chronicler of the other side, the side that ignores, denies, or turns away from the heart. It ends with “The Silence Artist,” a poem raising serious concerns treated by Kafka and John Cage, but on the surface a comic piece depicting a poet whose success grows as he becomes increasingly reluctant to perform his work. Whereas Katie creates musical magic, Jay ironically casts doubt on the efficacy of words, his skepticism levied not only on Pinter’s inarticulate characters but also on us. In our linguistic environment, he asks, how can one continue to write, to speak?

Miracle Atlas is the longest and most complex of these three books. If Part One identifies Jay’s skepticism, Part Two applies it: “All this time // I’ve been using language to protect myself . . . how determined I was not to see.” “All of a sudden you get tired of the story you’ve been telling yourself.” “Homecoming” interrupts the “snores and baby-cries. . . . the cough of the man sleeping” on a night train with the “loud voice” of “two men . . . in sunglasses and desert camouflage” who remind the reader of the linguistic and military violence that underlies our culture: “I came this close to blowing / his fucking head off.” He begins the last poem in the section with the language of mythic storytelling: “my mother put me in a basket and set me adrift // in the river. . . . and when I awoke I sang the poem of creation,” but shifts to a contemporary environment: “until I came to a field / strewn with empty beer bottles and cigarettes, / until I . . . stumbled // out into the parking lot between Office Max // and Hollywood Video.” In this new environment he again rejects the significance of the tale and of its articulation: “And though a lot happened to me after that // none of it is worth telling.”

Part Three attempts to reclaim the efficacy of poetry and language by invoking mythology—Gilgamesh and Sisyphus as well as Disney World and Superman—but ends again in an implicit rejection of linguistic communication. The last poem in the section, “Trail,” suggests a search for resolution of the poet’s dilemma, but finally announces “when you’ve gone far enough // you realize you’ll never get any other answer / but a fern or a loose stone.” This conventional nineteenth-century vision provides no assistance for a twenty-first-century ironist. More interesting is the penultimate poem, in which three twentieth-century poets, Yeats, Neruda, and Whitman, emerge as models who might teach us how to live and write. Yet in this poem, titled “From *Lives of the Saxophonists*,” Jay has transformed the makers of word-music into actual musicians, ironically suggesting that mentors we might have as poets use no words, no language, only music as their medium. And despite his praise of their poetry and vision, their message eventually remains in its final image that of Romanticism: “And the man turns back to his tomato plants arriving out of the dark earth.”

Part Four opens “at the blazing fire / of big questions. . . . ‘Why am I here?’ ‘Is there an afterlife?’” But again, as the questioners surround this “rusty oil drum at the edge of town”:

No one said
 anything, nothing was discussed
 or debated. It was enough simply
 to stand there, warmed by the fire’s heat
 as one spark after another
 flung itself up into the dark and went out.

The uncharacteristic but delicious pun in the final line begins to suggest a resolution to the poet’s dilemma. The spark of language may go out, but it nevertheless goes out into the darkness. *Miracle Atlas* darts between irony and the “fire’s heat” of the heart, “for this poem lives on the road, and knows separation well.” In a sequence of ghazals near the end of the book, the poet dances between isolation and community, between belief in language and doubt. In classic disjunction between images, the final ghazal concludes with what may be my favorite juxtaposition in the entire volume:

After the snow fell, the tracks of the deer were easier to see.
 This white page laid down between the earth and who I am.

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Basil has the feel of a first book: slender, a bit sparse in design, but with a crisp, striking black-and-white cover. *Miracle Atlas* offers color photographs, readable if traditional type, serviceable if conventional paper. As physical artifacts both resemble many volumes the *BPJ* receives each month. Not *Say Dance, Say Night*. Abbot Cutler's book presents a different face, slim but elegant, its cover embossed with a shining, spare black figure dancing on a matte black cover paper that feels like a cross between velvet and vellum. Inside a gold flyleaf peeks through the cover stock, holding in place text paper that has a linen feel to it and carries the Cochin font with conviction and clarity. Simply put, it's a lovely book, a delight to hold.

And to read. And to hear read, for Abbot has a deep, resonant, gravelly voice that he uses well as he slowly speaks the words of his quiet but confident poems. Many seem to echo Adrienne Rich's exhortation in "Transcendental Etude": "Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity / the striving for greatness, brilliance." Abbot once commented, "There is way too much focus on being published." Instead he suggests poets concentrate on their craft: "Try to write good poems then think about getting published ten years down the road."

Heart language enters this book early and often:

What do we know, heart, after
 traveling so far together, me
 with my old boots, you with the muted shoes.

And:

The heart of the great whale bursts
 onto dry sand at the sound waves
 of the shiny machines coursing the oceans. . . .
 Praise the heart of the beast, lift it up
 and the distances will begin to lessen.

Like Katie and Jay, this poet holds particular affection for Neruda:

To read [him] now
 is to have your heart blown open.

But what can one do with such a heart, such emotions? Like Jay, Abbot remains skeptical about communication within contemporary society. In "No Poem" he doesn't "want to go anywhere, not today, / not the entire summer, no / new place,

no new faces,”
no tonal singsong incredible river flow
of sound running from the beautiful
mouths of people whom I have never
met and will never see again. . . .
and no worries, no plans, no
phone, no.

For him Neruda’s odes provide an antidote to “endless sentences / about *commodity markets* and *unregulated practices* and *the new paradigm*,” though the danger remains that the sequence of life and death is simply “all / those lists and then lying down.” The possibility of language as solace, as solution, remains problematic:

the temple of words I thought I lived in
collapsed around me and it was only dust
that I lived in.

In the volume’s opening poem, “Another Place,” Abbot addresses obliquely the question of language as a tool for confronting experience, describing an arrival on “that island” (perhaps Borneo, where as a young man he taught for two years), where “there is more than one language: / gestures, signs, laughter,” and where

the noise
and your own silence will begin
to fill the space around you
and without any costume you will begin
a slow dance in the original tongue,
say *dance*, say *night*.

Silence remains central to his sense of communication, from the creation of poetry through concentration on craft, to the desire for silence that permeates the “No Poem,” to the final image from “In A Time Of Greed”: “rise at dawn and write / at a desk made from wood / found along the beach.”

The danger of unexamined Romanticism lurks in this pastoral vision, but Abbot resides too firmly in the complexities of nature for that danger to take hold. Perhaps my favorite poem in the book is a short one, “Winter Morning”:

Snow curves up and over
the stone wall, perfect in its sweep

→

out into the world. Mathematicians
and angels dancing together,
their temples against each other,
their bodies in concert, came up
with this just as it is.
In the house, *heart*, says the woodstove,
the world says, *cold*. *Little tricks*
of beauty says the table. *Nothing*
lasts forever says the black iron frying pan.

If Katie explores voices and Jay seeks to reconcile the voice of irony with the voice of the heart, Abbot seems to know what he wishes to say and how, patiently, to say it. Katie ends "What She Knows" with the line, "Yes? Yes? Yes?" Speaking as Sisyphus, Jay lets "the boulder go," grabs a beer with his buddies, but then feels "the blue addiction" come over him again, and walks "out to the boulder in the dark," saying yes to the task before him. Abbot has reached the point where he's "ready to give up the way I have of hiding / behind the sly smile of irony," ready to "untether the horse of need and empty the saddlebags / of the fast food of *I don't care* and *whatever*," ready to

Say yes and tomorrow and absolutely and yes,
yes, yes.

The three do not speak with a single voice, but they speak well. And although Robert Bly is now of an age that he can no longer join us in Maine at Camp Kieve during the first week of June, many of us will be there next year, joined by new participants, speaking with our own voices, but with his words and spirit in our hearts and minds. For all his wild energy, his sarcastic humor, his at times harsh political and social commentary, his fierce insistence on quality, his explorations of darkness, Robert Bly has continually offered one lesson: listen to the heart, prepared to say, again and again, Yes.