

“FOUNDATIONS OF WONDER”:

POPULAR CULTURE IN THREE RECENT BOOKS

By Chris Cunningham

Ignatz, by Monica Youn. Four Way Books, 82 pp., \$15.95.

Words for Empty and Words for Full, by Bob Hicok. University of Pittsburgh Press, 128 pp., \$14.95.

All Night Lingo Tango, by Barbara Hamby. University of Pittsburgh Press, 88 pp., \$14.95.

We do not, with sufficient plainness, or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstance ... Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy, and the temple of Delphos, and are as swiftly passing away... Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” 1844

Within a dozen years of the publication of Emerson’s essay, Whitman answered the older writer’s call as plainly as he knew how, offering a poetry peopled not with gods and goddesses but with as many American selves as he could catalog, decorated not with hothouse roses but with the unadorned green of grass, and written in an idiom that drew its music as much from American colloquial speech as from the English of Shakespeare and the King James Bible.

It’s been a long time since one could complain that American poets fail to address their own times, or that we lack poets who, in Emerson’s words, dare “to write [their] autobiography in colossal cipher.” Indeed, one of the hallmarks of American poetry since Whitman is an active engagement—thematic, formal, stylistic—with the American present. The most powerful effect of this engagement has been the rejection, following Whitman’s example and Wordsworth’s Preface, of traditional poetic diction in favor of the “language of common men.” At the same time, poets have been equally willing to take up what Emerson called the “raw and dull stuff,” the “barbarism and materialism” of American culture, to make poetic art. “The experience of each new age requires a new confession,” wrote Emerson. All three collections discussed here carry Emerson’s project forward in one way or another, engaging and using American popular culture and colloquial speech to sing their own times and ways.

I

George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* comic strip, which ran from the mid-teens to the 1940s, offers a corrective to the world’s most famous comic mouse. In place of Disney’s cheery, whistling, hail-

fellow fellow, Herriman's comic presents Ignatz, an unapologetic cynic, whose recidivist brick-throwing continually lands him in jail in the Dali-esque desert of Coconino County. A less well-nourished mouse than Mickey, Ignatz is drawn with skinny legs and scrawny tail, a compact body, flat, clawed feet, and a long, rat-like nose. In his recurrent abuse of the hopelessly amorous and self-deceiving Krazy Kat, Ignatz is more like Bugs Bunny without the charm and dapper dress: in each full-page comic, Ignatz devises some new way to connect a brick with the back of Krazy Kat's head, which impact Krazy takes as a token of Ignatz's affection—for Krazy, abuse is how it feels to be in love.

And so this is the romantic duo that Monica Youn selects for her collection, which traces a speaker's—the volume's Krazy—serial romantic failures through four destructive relationships. Just as, say, the Demeter/Persephone story offers a mythic template by which poets can explore the mother/daughter relationship, Youn adopts the tragicomic eros of Krazy/Ignatz as a way to understand a certain kind of romantic self-destruction: for Youn, Ignatz is not so much an individual—although each of the men the speaker loves has his own distinctive character or physical features—but rather the name of the way the speaker loves, a serial beloved whose secondary qualities may change but whose essence is betrayal.

The first section has at its heart an intense, sexually charged relationship, as we see in the surreal “Landscape with Ignatz”:

The rawhide thighs of the canyon straddling the knobbled blue spine of the sky.

The bone-spurred heels of the canyon prodding the gaunt blue ribs of the sky.

The sunburnt mouth of the canyon biting the swollen blue tongue of the sky.

The hangnailed fingers of the canyon snagging the tangled blue hair of the sky.

The blistered thumbs of the canyon tracing the blue-veined throat of the sky.

The sleep-crustid lids of the canyon blink open . . . *your soft, your* *cerulean eye.*

As in the original comic strip, Ignatz' eroticism is mingled with intimations of violence. Suggestions of rough sex run throughout this section, whether thematically, as in this poem, or on the level of simile and metaphor. The section opens with a bloody sunrise: “A gauze bandage wraps the land / and is unwound, stained orange with sulfates. // A series of slaps molds a mountain, / a fear uncoils itself, testing its long / cool limbs.” Or again, in “Ignatz Oasis”: “When you have left me / the sky drains of color // like the skin / of a tightening fist.” And yet, almost as soon as things are good—and the good here is certainly ambivalent—things are bad, for Ignatz

leaves and the next poem announces his “wedding,” leading immediately afterwards—from Krazy’s romantic perspective—to his “Death.”

Ignatz is resurrected in the second section as a self-regarding, “gloaty giant,” a self-important hero in awe of his own god-like “sufficiency” (“The Labors of Ignatz”). Youn simultaneously dramatizes and satirizes this Ignatz in mock-heroic diction in the prose poem “Afterwards Ignatz,” where Ignatz’s departure from a party for a walk on the beach takes on an ironizing epic grandeur:

Afterwards Ignatz rose and without taking his leave of them opened the sliding glass door and vanished onto the lightless beach. And there were those who later said that he never opened that door, that the molecules of glass parted at his touch, or still others that he stepped through the glass door as some of his brothers might move swiftly through a downpour while never being wetted, for as his brothers were to the common run of men, so it is said that Ignatz was to his brothers. But the truth of it was that Ignatz slid open the door, stepped through, and slid it shut again so smoothly and swiftly that to distinguish one action from the other would be to count the blades of a flying helicopter, and that good door, well-greased in its gasket, did not betray him by a single ill-timed creak, so that by the time that they say that he had gone from them, his dark head was already lost in the black waves of sand and the black waves of water.

Again, Ignatz betrays the besotted Krazy, when his epic self-regard takes a spiritual turn in the form of Augustinian asceticism:

in medias res Ignatz remarked,

Sometimes I don’t like

fucking. Whoosh!

The third and fourth sections follow similar trajectories, retracing two more times the path from eros to loss: the third lover, a blue-fingernailed man first seen slumped in a chair at a Free Clinic, attracts and then burns the speaker, leaving her a “moth sobb[ing] brokenly in the middle of the room” (“Ignatz at the _____ Hotel”); the final Ignatz seems safely domesticated, a sleepy lover apparently content in the “sylvan bower” Krazy creates for him, until this flighty, “winged Ignatz” escapes from his birdcage into the neighbor’s bed.

The collection ends not because Krazy comes to some culminating self-understanding—on the contrary, the speaker recognizes over and over her own self-destructive impulse, does what she knows she shouldn’t do. As she says in “Invisible Ignatz” (quoted in its entirety):

I would forget you were it not that unseen flutes
keep whistling the curving phrases of your body.

Or again in “Ignatz Recidivist,” whose seven short lines rehearse the direness of Krazy’s situation:

to blush
to blame
to bleed
to bless

helpless
helpless
helplessness

The poem’s anaphoric infinitives not only take these actions outside of the conjugated time of any individual relationship but also underline the sheer repetitiveness of Krazy’s romantic failures, which repetition we hear again in the head-shaking hopelessness of the final tercet. Indeed, what is striking here is precisely the lack of emotional progress or growth. In this sense, the comic strip is the ideal means for expressing Krazy’s dilemma. As a narrative form, the comic strip is simultaneously static and iterative, re-enacting versions of the same story—without character or plot development—year after year: Charlie Brown will always fall for Lucy’s football trick, Calvin will always cause trouble for the babysitter, Blondie will always be shocked by Dagwood’s huge sandwiches. The comic-strip genre thus rehearses formally—as Krazy and Ignatz rehearse thematically—Youn’s vision of romantic-erotic defeat.

Indeed, the problem for Youn’s Krazy seems to be sexuality itself. The challenge ultimately is to imagine a right relation between man and woman, between what, in a different context, Youn calls the hard and the soft:

... if this is a lesson in how something harder and something softer can achieve a mutuality if the harder thing has a curvature that suggests an accommodating mindset and the softer thing is willing to relinquish some measure of contingency so the softer thing can come temporarily to rest and if a test were devised on the subject of this lesson then what would be gained for one who took this test and passed it or one who took this test and failed? (“At the Free Clinic Ignatz”)

In the context of the larger prose poem, Youn is describing the man who will become the third Ignatz sitting in a “secondhand classroom desk” chair, but the stakes are higher than how to design comfortable seating for high school students: rather, the problem is whether—how?—one can

“achieve a mutuality” between two beings apparently willing to make accommodations on both sides in order to come, at least, “temporarily to rest.” But the prospect of “mutuality” and “rest” seems almost impossible to imagine, much less describe. Embedded within a series of hypotheticals and concluding inconclusively in an interrogative swirl of subjunctives and conditionals, the poem loses itself in a syntax and diction as baroque and abstractly euphemistic as late Henry James.

Understood in this way, Youn’s collection is almost gothic—sexual violence, emotional self-destruction, repeated romantic failure. But there is a tension in these poems between their explicit emotional content and the style and form in which that content is given voice. Herriman’s Krazy Kat is a singer, often pictured with a stringed instrument that looks like the bastard child of a sitar and a banjo. And indeed part of the fame of the Krazy Kat comics is due to Herriman’s own voice, his stylized ventriloquism of the American vernacular, Krazy and Ignatz and Officer Pup speaking in an urban demotic rendered in dropped *g*’s, apostrophes, and creative spelling. Youn’s Krazy is also a singer, her four linked love songs to Ignatz serving as epigraphs to the four sections, offering lyric expression of more or less traditional romantic love:

O Ignatz won’t you play me
like a filigree flute?
I’d trill any tune it might
please you to hear.

“O Sweet Adeline,”
“Au clair de la lune,”
Your song my only voice,
your breath my only air.

But Youn’s mercurial voice is harder to pin down, ranging tonally from irony to eros and formally from terse, fragmentary lyrics to substantial, sometimes garrulous prose poems. And yet, what ties these poems together is the way they handle their emotional content. Youn draws on a range of techniques to craft a poetics of emotional restraint: her use of the third person, the personae/characters of Ignatz and Krazy themselves, irony and satire, violent enjambments, imagistic juxtapositions, and fragmentation create poems that invite aesthetic contemplation and appreciation rather than emotional engagement. In the end, we are less moved by Krazy’s loss—or outrage or desire—than by the often startling, careful beauty with which these emotions have been sculpted.

II

Like a season of “Law and Order,” the subjects of Bob Hicok’s poems in *Words for Empty and Words*

for Full are ripped from the headlines—national and personal—that rattle Hicok’s consciousness: a partial list of his concerns includes Nestle Corporation and the depletion of aquifers, President Bush and the Iraq War, the election of Barack Obama, a friend’s abortion, the five remaining speakers of Mohave, Hicok’s wife’s medical struggles, the plight of gorillas in the Republic of Congo, the melting of the polar ice caps, the financial crisis, the deforestation of the tropics, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina. *Pace* William Carlos Williams, for Hicok, poems are one of the places we *can* find, and try to make sense of, the news—not the least of which is the death of “miserable men.” For at the heart—emotional, artistic, philosophical—of this volume is the Virginia Tech massacre of 2007, in which Seung-Hui Cho, a senior English major (and a former student of Hicok’s) shot 32 people and then himself.

The shooting incident is the explicit subject of the second section of the book and haunts the collection as a whole, representing an almost existential crisis for Hicok: the fact of violence itself (Cho’s and, by extension, human violence as such) undercuts Hicok’s faith in the power of language to undo the distances of hate and fear and misunderstanding. At the same time, in the period after the shooting, Hicok finds himself, if not exactly at a loss for words, then unable to find the linguistic solace that is otherwise central to his identity. The collection traces an emotional and intellectual arc, from Hicok’s greatest fear—that words are empty—to Hicok’s greatest hope, and in the end, his faith—that words are full.

One of the hallmarks of Hicok’s poems is their momentum, the exhilarating force with which his voice carries them forward. But the poems here are driven by an especial sense of urgency, by Hicok’s need to engage with the problems that swirl around us, from climate change (“Some things that come together in coming apart”) to serial killers and war weaponry (“Methodical”) to financial collapse (“In these times”) to the human and cultural losses attendant on modernization and globalization, as in “Endangered species,” a prose-poem meditation on the “five remaining speakers of Mohave”:

So the last speaker of Mohave will soon be sitting on the edge of her bed, noticing for a last time the beauty of cups, the entirety of their existence the honor of holding and giving over, emptying fullness into her empty mouth, and she will whisper a word the cup has heard many times over, and when she’s dead, someone will take the cup away without putting it to their ear to listen to the last, the entire ocean of what is left of a people.

This urgency—the pressure of loss and impending loss—that haunts so many of these poems is compounded by a profound sense of responsibility, of “if not me, who?”: “The only answer I want when the night taps me on the shoulder / and asks, did you try, is yes, yes sir, hard and double hard / and harder still” (“Redoubling our efforts”). But for Hicok responsibility is not only political, but also linguistic, or, to be more precise, politics is precisely the responsibility to speak:

I'm a phantom of the body politic
if I don't speak, I'm required to, freedom's
a tended dream, a public mapping of belief.
When we're silent, government flows into the spaces
we leave open, and remaps, acquires for itself
the severed faculties of democracy.

("Watchful")

And yet, however imperative political engagement may be, words and speech are ultimately more important. For Hicok, politics is just one manifestation of the fundamental existential reality of language: without it, "we disappear, who are only speech, / as a cheetah is only speed, as the sun is only a burning / that does not singe the sky" ("Watchful").

This reality is why Cho's violence is so profoundly unsettling for Hicok, for having claimed the centrality of language, Hicok is confronted with an act that destroys the foundations of his faith in linguistic potency:

You did not
do enough, I write to myself, about the kid
who turned in writing about killing
a few buildings from where he killed.

...

I don't know what I could have done
something. Something more than talk to someone
who talked to someone, a food chain of language
leading to this language of "no words" we have now.

("So I know")

Not only does language suddenly seem ineffectual as a means to prevent terror, but it's also inadequate both as a way to find meaning in terror and to make meaning in terror's aftermath:

Maybe sorry's the only sound
to offer pointlessly and at random
to each other forever, not because of what it means
but because it means we're trying to mean,
I am trying to mean more than I did
when I started writing this poem....

("So I know")

People wrote, called, mostly e-mailed
to say, there's nothing to say. Eventually
I answered these messages: there's nothing
to say back except of course there's nothing
to say, thank you for your willingness to say it.

("In the loop")

Contrary to what one might expect given the darkness of Hicok's subjects, the collection is ultimately hopeful, even uplifting, a direct—one is tempted to say, an inevitable—result of Hicok's voice. In the midst of all this, Hicok manages at times to be a bit of a class clown, the guy in the back of the room cracking jokes as the teacher stands up front talking about things that really matter. Here he is at his silliest, in a poem about his wife:

She has the gene, the cytosine, adenine
her mother sister had, her sother
mister had, they've named the gene.

If I named a gene
I'd name it Gene, I knew a Gene,
brother to Greg.

We are like genetically mice,
tiny creatures with toes,
she is like genetically 87 percent likely
to have breast cancer, ovarian
cancer: ovum, Oppen, open, closed.

("BRCA1")

At such moments, Hicok is an ADHD kid who has read everything but who can't stay focused, punning, rhyming, riffing, goofing off. But Hicok is also the teacher at the front of the room, who turns out to be not the droning history teacher of "Ferris Bueller's Day Off," but Robin Williams in "Dead Poets Society"—a charismatic, passionate talker who believes in majuscular abstractions like Goodness and Truth and Justice. As Hicok says of himself in "A Primer," a "Midwesterner can sincerely use the word 'sincere.'" Indeed, what prevents the book from sinking under the weight of its own heavy subject matter is the combination of Hicok's two voices. At his best, this poet weaves urgent pathos and witty, jittery word play into poems whose whirlwind momentum lift into lyric:

I could offer this in Hegelian or Sartrean terms
of engagement before the void, but really,
if you're alive, and sentient,
you're an existentialist in that you know
most of what awaits is neither breath
or the electrochemical dream of you
you carry forth and mix with fellow soothsayers
of the eternal mysteries, know intuitively
that work is money, honey,
but also and maybe moreso, is your hands
kept busy with needle and thread, hammer and scythe,
memo and counter memo, is you
joining the thrum and hum that is all there is
except what there is not.
("In these times")

As Hicok suggests here, the way forward, despite the "void" of environmental disaster, of human violence and human misery—of human self-destruction from the local to the global—is to engage, to "[join] the thrum and hum that is all there is," to keep doing and talking in spite of the apparent hopelessness of our situation. Indeed, Hicok suggests that hope—the ability to read the paper and know what you know about the world and still carry on—is some uncertain hybrid of instinct and will, a manifestation, as much as language itself, of being alive:

Maybe hope's
what I've long thought, a choice, a decision
I have to make as often
as my heart decides
yes, until my heart decides
no....

("Meditation on a false spring")

If nothing else, says Hicok, "Let us tell each other everything we can" ("A Primer").

III

Barbara Hamby opens her new collection, *All Night Lingo Tango*, with an ars poetica, an "Ode to Anglo Saxon, Film Noir, and the Hundred Thousand Anxieties that Plague Me like Demons in a Medieval Christian Allegory." The poem's central concern is why the poet thinks and speaks the way she does. She points, first, to the apparent incongruity of writing poetry in the messy helter-

skelter of English, which she speaks because of a “weird fluke” of history, “because the kick- / ass Angles were illiterate hicks while the sublime Greeks / had been writing poetry for a thousand years.” For Hamby, this mongrel linguistic inheritance is further inflected by the “Three Stooges-Lawrence Welk” soundtrack of mid-twentieth Century American popular culture:

My mind’s a train wreck
of two lingo, twenty-six letters, and thousands of quick
images from movies, French—yes, but mostly *am-shucks-*
ma’am Hollywood Westerns or *policiers* in stark
black and white, and I’m the twist, tomato, skirt, the weak
sister who rats out her boyfriend, palms a deck
of Luckies she puffs while scheming with the private dick
to pocket twenty large, or I’m the classy dame, sick
of her stinking rich life and her Ralph Bellamy schmuck
of a boyfriend.

But language is identity, and what starts out as an investigation of linguistic origins becomes a search for selfhood: “So who are you? Not the hippie chick / of your early twenties or the Sears and Roebuck / Christian judge your mother became...,” not the long list of female movie types listed above, and not really a champagne-swilling, black-wearing, French-speaking poet in her “swank / *appartement à Paris*.” Rather, her speech has

the echo of those shock-jock
Vikings
and though your husband looks like the Duke
of Cambridge, that’s not what you love so much, ya dumb cluck
but his Henry James-Groucho Marx-Cajun shtick. Knock
knock. Who’s there? It’s Moe, Larry, and Curly, nyuk nyuk nyuk.

In this first poem, then, we find Hamby exploring her recurrent obsessions—and making her typical poetic moves: an interrogation of the sources and resources of English, including the alphabet, the sentence, received poetic form, and a version of the American vulgate that has its roots in the movie patois of the forties and fifties; a wildly associative, disjunctive consciousness; a poetic voice that is simultaneously playful, neurotic, acerbic, irreverent, lyric, frenetic, and sentimental; and an investigation into the meaning and origins—familial, cultural, linguistic—of selfhood.

If movies offer Hamby means of self-expression, they also offer her means of self-understanding, mirrors in which she can recognize—or perhaps reimagine—herself. More

specifically, Hamby's poems are peopled with—one is tempted to say they are cast with—a certain kind of Hollywood leading lady. Hamby likes powerful broads and plain-talking dames like Barbara Stanwyck, Ava Gardner, and Marlene Dietrich; further afield, she finds versions of this same kind of won't-take-crap-from-a-man woman in Queen Mab, Olive Oyl, Cleopatra, and a re-imagined Leda, who puts Zeus in his place. Hamby admires these figures for their confident sexuality, their willingness to question and speak truth to figures of power, their jaunty self-sufficiency:

*I beseech thee, O Yellow Pages, help me find a number
for Barbara Stanwyck, because I need a tough broad
in my corner right now. She'll pour me a tumbler
of scotch or gin and tell me to buck up, show me the rod
she has hidden in her lingerie drawer. She has a temper,
yeah, but her laugh could take the wax off a cherry red
Chevy. "Shoot him," she'll say merrily, then scamper
off to screw an insurance company out of another wad
of dough.*

(“9 Sonnets from the Psalms,” #2)

But there are dangers for Hamby in this world of popular movie culture. As she herself puts it, “Such a world begs you to believe in the Hindu idea of *maya*, which / is to say everything is illusion” (“Working at Pam-Pam’s”). Hamby clearly loves this world of illusion, but she also knows what’s real, what’s not; indeed, the most powerful moments in the collection are often those that come out of relationships with real people—an elegy for a friend (“Ode on Laundry, Lester Young, and Your Last Letter”), a love poem for her husband David Kirby (“Ode to White Peaches, Pennies, Planets, and Bijou, the Dog”), or poems about her troubled relationship with her parents. As she says at the end of a poem about Ava Gardner—who herself ultimately rejected Hollywood with its “nose jobs, snow jobs, blow jobs”—“O Vishnu ... Empty me of everything I am—sphinx, minx, / yogi, yeti, yenta, yodeling nun. Forgive me for being so dense, so numb. / Break my back with the beauty of the world” (“Working at Pam-Pam’s”).

The other challenge for Hamby is more difficult, because it cuts to the heart of her poetic project. In one of her odes, Hamby describes the vapid babble of “three / American girls about the appointment the next / day with a hairdresser, and if there is a subtext / to this talk, I’m missing it.” Once “they have exhausted the present / tense, they go on to the remembrance of hairdos past / high school proms, botched perms, late-night drunken cuts.” Before the poem swerves into a meditation on historical contingency, Hamby concludes of the trio, “The Loch Ness / Monster would be lost in their brains as in a vast, starless / sea.” (“Ode to Airheads, Hairdo, Trains to and from Paris.”) It’s an amusing, well-drawn scene, but is it also perhaps the expression of a repressed fear, that the poet’s own brain and perhaps poems, full as they are with the sounds

of real American speech, are just as empty, that her vulgate may just be vulgar? Put another way, the challenge for Hamby is how to use the vernacular—how to harness the vitality (paraphrasing Wordsworth) of “real language really used by Americans”—without sounding like an “airhead.” Anxieties about senseless chattering trouble a number of poems in the collection:

Cassiopeia
of the teeming mind, O sentence, string of words straining
for sense in the mad jumble like an addict mainlining
heroin or a child stacking blocks

(“Ode to Diagramming Sentences
in Eighth-Grade English Class with
Moonlight, Drugs, and Stars”)

O chittering squirrel,
ziplock sandwich bag, sound off, shut up, gather your words
into bouquets, folios, flocks of black and flaming birds.

(“Ode on Dictionaries”)

Indeed at a couple of points, Hamby castigates herself for what she fears may be her own inanity:

Examine me, O Lord, for I have loved the trivial,
have turned the pages of magazines so glossy
and insubstantial they almost seem to unravel
before my eyes.

(“9 Sonnets from the Psalms” #5)

I entertain
so many idle thoughts that the inner cupcake of my brain
has mounted an armed, and, may I say, vicious campaign
against itself and its thousands of questions, mostly inane

(“Ode to Odor, Ardor, and the Queen’s Chickabobboo”)

In another of the “9 Sonnets from the Psalms,” Hamby concludes quite simply, “I hate vain / thoughts, but what else do I have?” (#9)

Despite Hamby’s concerns, there are two things that give these poems artistic, intellectual, and emotional ballast. First, Hamby’s range of allusion brings the world of American popular culture

into contact with a larger artistic world that enriches both; her reading and intellectual interests are wide-ranging, including Proust, the Psalms, Hinduism, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Pindar, Freud, Horace, Keats, and others (more on this below). Second and just as important is Hamby's use of poetic form: extensive rhyme—mostly monorhyme and couplets; sonnets; and varieties of abecedarian, including both a wickedly complex form she calls a “double-helix abecedarian” and a virtuosic 26 poem sequence of “abecedarian sonnets.” These forms not only bring a rich musicality to the collection—Hamby is a gifted and clever rhymers—but they also put pressure on Hamby's American English, giving order to the “teeming” fluency of what she calls her “scattershot brain.” Prosody turns the potentially prosaic into “bouquets, folios, flocks of black and flaming birds.”

The best place to see this transformation in action is in the collection's second section, a sequence of “Lingo Sonnets,” twenty-six 13-line formal poems, one for each letter of the alphabet. Aside from a small handful of more traditional lyrics—poems of personal reminiscence—the poems here are for the most part what one might call personae mash-ups, in which a fictional or historical character—from Betty Boop to Titus Andronicus to Nietzsche—is placed in an incongruous situation, Caliban at his driving test, Olive Oyl on Quantum Theory, or Ulysses talking to Freud. The pleasure of these poems is the cleverness of the combinations, the titillating frisson of anachronism, of seeing people you know well wearing new or ill-fitting epistemological and linguistic clothes. Here's Nietzsche explaining the *Übermensch* to Lois Lane:

No, no, no, no—he doesn't even have nerves of steel. No
point asking him to save you, ma'am, he's more likely to rescue
rain from the street. Born on your block, not Krypton, he's
terror with a capital *T*, the beautiful mind you
vain dames can't see for the mascara on your lashes. You saw
exactly nothing when you clapped eyes on him, a nerdy
zip, not even head of the class, just skulking in the back, a
brilliant light in a room full of blind men. But when he rises, havoc
descends on the world, lightning storms blister the earth, for he
fears nothing, feels nothing, sees everything. From the beginning
he's been juggernaut, crushing everything in his path, from the Hindi
Jagannath, Lord of the World, a guise of the god Vishnu. A dark
Lex Luthor was more what I was thinking than Superman, ma'am.

There are several issues worth noting here. First, we can see Hamby's “lingo sonnet” in action: in each poem in the twenty-six poem sequence, the initial and terminal letters are determined formally by the alphabet's strict sequence. Here, the poem runs from the “n” of “No” through the “z” of “zip” (line 7), starts over with “a” at the end of line 7 and concludes with the “m” of “ma'am” (the

next poem, “Olive Oyl Thinks about Quantum Theory,” begins “Oh” and concludes with “then,” and so on). Part of the pleasure of these poems is Hamby’s formal control and virtuosity. Equally impressive is the play she finds within the tight form: the “q” she finds in “rescue,” the “x” of “exactly,” the double satisfaction of “you,” and the way the alphabet governs not only the poem’s shape but also individual words and lines, as in the opening line, where the same negation begins and ends the line, satisfying the form’s double alphabetic obligations; or, the micro-satisfaction of “Hindi,” whose first letter echoes the line’s first letter, even as its final letter complete the line’s formal contract (Hamby loves such words—in another poem, one of her “double helix abecedarians,” she concludes smartly with “Alcatraz”). Tiny details, to be sure, but these are also the pleasures of form. At the same time, they participate in one of the collection’s larger themes—the play within and playfulness of language.

Furthermore, yoking together the seemingly disjunctive worlds of Lois Lane and Nietzsche, the poem reveals and then interrogates the linguistic connection—a kind of cross-cultural pun—between the two. At their best, these personae poems show us something new about the colliding worlds Hamby’s associative poetics brings together: the Superman of comic books and movies looks different when next to the Nietzschean one; likewise, we re-understand Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* when Hamby incarnates him as just another boy down the street, a “nerdy zip” “skulking in the back” of class that “vain dames can’t see.” Although Hamby has Nietzsche thinking of “A dark / Lex Luthor,” one can’t help but think of Lois’ nerdy platonic friend and colleague—in Hamby’s vision, it’s as if the *Übermensch* were Clark Kent gone postal.

Finally, the poem shows the combustion of idiom under pressure: while the final six lines after the volta swell apocalyptically, it’s really the opening of the poem that gives it its power, starting with the emphatic negative but then the consistent play with movie dialog—“terror with a capital T,” “vain dames,” “can’t see for,” “exactly nothing,” “clapped eyes on.” The best line in the poem—and the one that best distinguishes Nietzsche’s from Lois’ Superman—begins almost flatfootedly but takes us somewhere we would never have imagined: “No / point asking him to save you, ma’am, he’s more likely to rescue / rain from the street.” One can’t help but suspect that the wonderful discovery of “rescue / rain” was facilitated precisely by the rigors of Hamby’s alphabetic form.

One of the pleasures of poetry is the way it defamiliarizes language, rediscovering the material qualities of the words we use unthinkingly every day. If rhyme and meter disrupt (and enrich) meaning with the fact of musicality, Hamby’s alphabetic forms likewise complicate our uncomplicated use of English by highlighting the physical-linguistic facts of orthography, finding pleasure within the alphabet’s “scanty plot of ground.” Indeed, for Hamby, the finite, linear order of the alphabet “teems” with chaotic possibility. As she write in her euphoric “Ode on Dictionaries,”

No, all beasts are welcome in my menagerie, ark

of inconsolable barks and meows, sharp-toothed shark,
OED of the deep ocean, sweet compendium
of candy bars—Butterfingers, Mounds, and M&Ms—
packed next to the tripe and gizzards, trim and tackle
of butchers and bakers, the painter’s brush and spackle,
quarks and black holes of physicists’ theory. I’m building
my own book

...

a never-ending parade
with clowns and funambulists in my own mouth, homemade
treasure chest of tongue and teeth, the brain’s roustabout, rough
unfurler of tents and trapezes, off-the-cuff
unruly troublemaker in the high church museum
of the world.

Here we see Hamby’s work at its best: the formal stricture of alphabet and rhyme (an abecedarian in couplets) creates the pressurized space where her language combusts into exuberant lyric, a rhapsodic yawp. This poem is also the best answer to Hamby’s own concerns about the emptiness of American speech: she finds real poetry—and a democratic vision that echoes both Walt Whitman and Emma Lazarus—in an American linguistic “menagerie” of “Butterfingers” and “black holes,” of “butchers” and “spackle” and “quarks.” In the end, even if she sometimes finds herself “gagging” on it, Hamby ultimately revels in—even as she gives form to—the anarchic language the “Viking dudes” bequeathed to Hollywood and Madison Avenue.