

# The Cascadia Subduction Zone-

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Why Ask Y ☉ Kristine Campbell

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In This Issue





# Painting and Writing: My Yin and Yang

by Kiini Ibura Salaam

The impulse to make art is as mysterious as it is insistent. Most artists cannot explain why they are drawn to create, let alone why they create in a particular medium. Artists create under the sway of biology—physical and mental aptitude—and inexplicable urgings to develop something new. Though we separate artists from non-artists, artistry can be seen in every aspect of life. From wardrobe to word choice, we all curate our self-expressions. When the persona we created hits the mark, we are alive to the thrill of knowing that our external expression effectively broadcasts the thoughts, feelings, and perspective we experience within. Making art is like that. It is the process of expressing a person's internal landscape in a creative format that can be shared with others. When an artist captures the impulses and intentions that spur them to create, the rush is amazing.

Artistry was one of the central foundations of my childhood. My four siblings and I grew up in a swirl of music, visual art, dance, literature, and activism. We lived among thousands of iterations of art—from shelves upon shelves of vinyl records lining the living room walls to vibrant prints and paintings covering nearly every vertical surface, to bookshelves loaded with both books and three-dimensional art from the African diaspora: art was central and omnipresent throughout my upbringing.

The art objects in my home were not simply objects that had been collected for visual impact; they were the cherished expressions created by members of my parents' community. Living among the creations of relatives and family friends inculcated in me the understanding that art was something you made, not just appreciated; that it was normal for you and the people in your community to create work that brought value to the lives of others.

My parents themselves were creators, makers of things that others appreciated. My father was a poet and profound lover of music. He would take us to dark bars, where we would sit in a booth and watch Ellis Marsalis pound out Monk on the piano. My mother was constantly creat-

ing posters for political marches and colorful teaching materials. She treated us as apprentices, teaching us how to measure, draw, cut, and color letters, numbers, charts, and designs. It is no wonder, then, that as children all five of the Salaam siblings were always creating something. My sister and I frequently transformed the environment in our bedroom, collaging tables and walls with colorful images pulled from magazines. My brothers drew superheroes from the pages of their comic books; my sisters and I drew women we imagined, sketched out fashion we wanted to wear, and made oversized greeting cards and posters for friends and family members.

Interestingly, only one of us became a visual artist; I became a writer. Because while art was always there, so were words. A family of voracious readers, my siblings and cousins were all fluent in the literary arts. We frequently created booklets of our stories and ideas with no regard for whether our writing was remarkable. I never considered my own writing personally significant; I had dreams of being a dancer. Before college, I abandoned dance and chose computer science as my major. But after my first semester, I gave up ignoring my ease and facility with words. I dropped the pretense that literature held no special meaning and changed majors.

As I delved into literary criticism and black women's autobiographies, I continued to make posters and greeting cards, but I did so as a self-professed amateur. It was my older sister who was the artist. She was a fashion designer; a watercolor, oil, and acrylic painter; a portrait artist. Her mediums were varied—paper, pencil, marker, bark, moss, leaves, orange peels, calligraphy ink; anything she could use to make a mark and hold form was fair game. Art was not only her innate talent, it was also her personal expression and her chosen vocation. While making art was a fluid part of my sister's life, a chasm stretched between me and artmaking. I dreamed of being a real artist, but I stood on the wrong bank of the chasm, unable to reach the place where "serious" art was made.

*"Though we separate artists from nonartists, artistry can be seen in every aspect of life. From wardrobe to word choice, we all curate our self-expressions."*

*"Living among the creations of relatives and family friends inculcated in me the understanding that art was something you made, not just appreciated...."*



*“Painting, for me, is always an exercise in improvisation born from surrender. I lay down a line and follow it through to a curve.”*

Three years after college—after I had traveled the world, earned a Master’s degree, and had my first job—I finally acknowledged my desire to create “real” art. It happened away from home where no one could judge or comment on my efforts, where I could not compare my work to that of “real” artists. I had buried myself amongst the crumbling old buildings of Pelourhino in Salvador, Bahia, to write a novel. As I wrestled my ideas into themes and chapters, I found myself surrounded by art. Sculpture, paintings, masks, and crafts spilled out from ragtag galleries that displayed art of varying skill levels. My gaze bounced from the realistic renderings of highly trained painters to tourist art that vibrantly captured the city with rough strokes and stick figures. The range of what the galleries presented and sold as art heartened me. The certainty that my art would be less sophisticated than the best and more refined than the crudest was seductive. I found myself buying paints and canvas. Untrained and uncertain, I decided I would give painting a try.

My first painting was of a woman I had sketched after seeing the work of a local sculptor. The woman’s facial features were mask-like, and both her clothing and background were red. The Bahians who saw it insisted that it was related to Candomble, an Afro-syncretic religion based in Brazil.

When an artist surrenders, truly surrenders, to the artistic impulse, there’s no telling what will emerge. My first painting emerged with a bold air of mysticism that would become a hallmark of my visual art regardless of intention or subject matter. Painting, for me, is always an exercise in improvisation born from surrender. I lay down a line and follow it through to a curve. The form of what I have committed to canvas sparks a new idea, and I am guided to create echoing or contrasting forms. Each impulse leads to the next, eventually birthing a piece of art that has its own unique identity, one that often bears little resemblance to what I might have imagined when I sat down to create.

I find it remarkable that the act of painting sparks a completely different feeling in me than writing. Both disciplines are authentic expressions of my soul, yet they draw on different facets of my creative self. Writing requires an intense level

of hyper-awareness. I must cut through mental chatter and listen keenly to locate the right note to identify the exact flow of words that will effectively embody my idea, thought, or character. Writing demands vigilance to false starts, lazy descriptions, and vague statements. Only after I have picked through a jumble of words, images, and ideas can I unearth the precise details that accurately render the contours of my subject.

In my first draft, I am like a stenographer, transcribing the words as they fall through my mind. In the second draft I am an explorer, hiking my way through a labyrinth of possible approaches in search of the right path of words to follow. On my journey, I encounter walls that I must navigate, obstacles to climb over, strictures to wrestle with. Editing is vigorous intellectual exercise, a logical quagmire, a mathematical challenge. Writing presents a Rubik’s Cube of choices that I dare myself to engage with. I often find myself squinting, forehead wrinkled, as I attempt to see past the paragraph bluffs to identify the combination of words, the sentence flow, the voice and tone that will best deliver the truths I am trying to invoke.

Painting requires an entirely different type of engagement than writing. It does not ask that I be sharp or demand vigilance. There is no hunting involved, and not much logic either, except the intuitive kind. In fact, I cannot arrive at the ideal arrangement of color and form through intellectual activity. I cannot reason my way to a harmoniously balanced or well-rendered painting. If writing is a maze, painting is a wide open field that contains a plethora of choices—no one approach better than another. I choose my entry point on pure impulse, then I play with colors and techniques, surrendering to whatever images organically develop from my paintbrush.

To succeed at painting and surrender to my intuition, I have to go soft around the edges. I ditch thought by anchoring my focus to the brushstrokes and trusting that the spread of color will lead me to a beautiful place. When I am completely enmeshed in painting, I am whisked away to a time and space where daily concerns cannot touch me. I levitate above dark

*“Writing requires an intense level of hyper-awareness.... Only after I have picked through a jumble of words, images, and ideas can I unearth the precise details that accurately render the contours of my subject.”*



moods, confusion, and conflict. It is peaceful, meditative, expansive.

I love the interplay between painting and writing, though my productivity in painting comes in fits and starts. I paint in a furious burst of activity, then I don't paint at all. The paintings, when they emerge, are like mysterious artifacts from another planet, rather than creations from my hand. I have much more control over my writing—and many more years of practice in it. There is a precision about the way I have trained myself to obey the flow of writing, to sort through various expressions and select the best term or phrase. Painting, on the other hand, is like a beautiful, enigmatic visitor; when she comes she dazzles me with soothing vibrations and magical creations, but her presence in my life is erratic and unpredictable.

For me, writing is about fitness, it relies on my ability to turn my mind this way and that and spear the truest words to communicate the thoughts and images that swirl in my head. Painting is about relaxation, my ability to surrender to an altered state where existence and thought dissolve and there is only the back and forth of the brushstrokes, the play of color. I must constantly operate my judgment in writing—how long should I stay with this train of thought? What tense, what point of view can best tell this tale? How decorative should my language be? In painting, I must discard judgment in favor of sense and feeling. I can't do what I *think* is right in painting, I must do what I *feel* is right. I must let go of judgment—even when I judge things as ugly. If my heart says it is right, I must ignore my judgment. Later the harmony and rightness of the painting will reveal itself to me.

During those heady days in Brazil, when I began my relationship with the painter within, I wrote in the mornings, wandered the streets, soaked in the sunshine, lunched with friends, then went back to my room where I painted from afternoon into evening. It was like living in some fantastical world where expressing my artistic impulse was my *raison d'être*. I fantasize about living that life again. I fantasize about owning a large airy room with huge windows, the walls lined with shelves loaded with a dizzying array of paper, markers, paints, and brushes: a for-

real studio in which to house and nurture all of my artistic impulses.

Oddly I have no fantasy writing space. I dream of no desk or room crammed with books. Writing has surpassed fantasy for me; it holds a very real space in my life. To overcome a block of years fraught with dry spells, frustration, and failure, I had to make a personal manifesto of writing. I realized that there is no writing god in the sky that will fulfill my writing dreams. If writing is to be my life, then I have to live it—no questions, no assists, no fairy dust. It is on my must-do list along with the laundry and preparing school lunch. I pack in my writing sessions when and where I can: on the train, at my kitchen table, in my bed. The mandate is this: if I lift up writing and take responsibility for maintaining my own productivity, writing will lift me up.

Writing is the dirt I grow in and from, and painting is the breeze, something I cannot grasp or contain with my bare hands. Something I cannot command or capture. I must simply breathe it in and breathe it out, open-handed and submissive, willingly following its soft, whispering pushes through to completion. Together writing and painting form a yin and yang in my life. One grounding, the other elevating; one revealing, the other alluring; one solid and certain, the other just a suggestion, a possibility, far from a given.

On the surface, painting seems to impact my soul, while writing impacts my ego. I feel timeless when I paint, like I exist not to rush, not to travel, but to just be. When I successfully arrive at my destination with writing, my ego is fed, my talents are encouraged, and I have the language to understand my own growth. Together, writing and painting create a feedback loop in which I affirm my faith in myself, my abundant love of creativity, and the courage in my heart. As I use these two mediums to delve deeper into my possibilities as an artist, I simultaneously discover the magic of spirit and the strength of my humanity.

*"For me, writing is about fitness, it relies on my ability to turn my mind this way and that and spear the truest words.... Painting is about relaxation, my ability to surrender to an altered state where existence and thought dissolve and there is only the back and forth of the brushstrokes, the play of color."*

*"Together, writing and painting create a feedback loop in which I affirm my faith in myself..."*

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Kiini Ibura Salaam is a writer, painter, and traveler from New Orleans. Her work encompasses speculative fiction, erotica, creative nonfiction, and poetry. For the past ten years Kiini has written the KIS.list, an e-column that explores the writing life. A collection of her short fiction, *Ancient, Ancient*, was published in May 2012 (Aqueduct Press).





# Line Improvisation: Notes by the Fly in the Web

by Mark Rich

*“While growing up monolingual, I grew up surrounded by three forms of expression that existed apart from the realm of infant language skills...”*

Children born into bilingual households may be delayed in talking, say observers. They stay silent too long for parental comfort. Yet out of such silence springs forth a child displaying rudimentary skills in not one but two tongues.

I emerged from no such experience, myself, having been brought up in an English-speaking household—although my grandmother, speaking only Japanese, often took care of me. Maybe she cooed Japanese baby-nonsense over me, which may be what slips from my lips when at play with Scottie dogs. I doubt that my newborn brain took extra time for processing the skill, though.

I provoked no worries about slowness, being instead too quick. My mother, Kikue Rich, *née* Kikuchi, says that in the maternity ward at the University of Chicago hospital I raised my head and gazed around with large, curious eyes—a vivid memory, for her. My being alone among the newborns in doing this presaged, perhaps, a lifetime of being somewhat alone in my view of the world.

While growing up monolingual, I grew up surrounded by three forms of expression that existed apart from the realm of infant language skills.

Charles, my father, played piano. He repaired and played pipe organs and performed on the high-towered carillons—a kind of chimes-organ played with the fists—at Colorado Women’s College where he taught theology. I remember Kikue, who sang in choir, sometimes complaining to Charles that he should play “real music” during the offering and at other such moments in a church service, instead of improvising little musical meanderings as was his wont. He took on the role of church organist now and then through the years, holding to improvisation as a tool of the trade—in keeping with ancient tradition. Those impromptus of his made it everyday household knowledge that one could not only perform music but also create it at will. Later I learned of Charles’s actual compositions, lush with a wonderful mid-century romanticism.

On rare occasions Charles also drew amusingly. Interest in visual art ran strongly in the Kikuchi clan, however, with one of Kikue’s brothers being a prominent Chicago architect, and another being a talented watercolorist. A large work by the latter, Atsushi, hung above the piano, with smaller ones scattered around the house. The younger Kiyoshi drew in ink during the family’s wartime internment, filling notebooks with delightful drawings that during my childhood sat on our Colorado book shelves. Kikue herself painted in oils for a time and placed at least one work in a museum show in Denver. Her paintings, few in number, remained on display in our suburban two-story.

Shelves of books downstairs held other indications that momentary creation can yield to permanency. Charles’s dissertation sat high on one shelf. Here and there, too, sat a few copies of a book by his father, my namesake, as well as pamphlets Grandpa Mark had written on American Baptist issues, which had seen print and distribution. Less clearly evident than these signs were Charles’s daily labors—preparing lectures, giving them, or writing for his talks before the camera for a television show broadcast locally Sunday mornings at an hour before we children were awake.

An overactively busy household, or maybe an overly splayed one, this must seem. Yet small event followed small event, as in any household. The paintings and drawings received admiration while being taken for granted. Musical activities appeared as opportunities for community participation and contribution, not for personal or family self-aggrandizement. Having a hardbound book on the shelf by one’s grandpa struck another note of normalcy, even to a child whose name was the same as that on the spine.

It seemed natural for me to pursue interests in such a household. The urge to be a writer and artist rooted early. I recall, in first grade, being asked to help the third-grade class with their wall-length mural of ocean life. None in that advanced class could draw a crab. I felt dissatisfied with my crabs, as I did when I attempted an-

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other favored subject, trilobites—but could draw them all the same, and do so quickly. At home I produced little “books” written and illustrated on folded pieces of notebook paper. The musical impulse in contrast may have been delayed. Not until fourth grade, as Kikue remembers it, did I come home from school announcing that I wanted to play violin. I struggled with the instrument, often complainingly, just as I had struggled over my crayons and construction paper, never the prodigy in the arts that I was in the newborn head-raising department.

Somewhere along the line I came to feel a bedrock security about my talents. My bedrock, however, was overlain by a fantastic disarray of shattered strata, so that my quickness hindered more than helped me acquire anything like certain footing. I stumbled and mis-stepped in countless places where others of my years strolled on with noticeably surer command. Yet the bedrock feeling persevered even in the face of my multifaceted ineptitudes. The feeling may have arisen from the core of my writerly being—for in that area the notion of professional activity took early root, leading me to see a first poem into print in the *Denver Post* and to receive my first form rejection of a short story from *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in my early teen years. Through high school I played an active if minor role in the fantasy small press venue of the middle 1970s, writing endlessly on my Olympia portable typewriter—letters, poems, stories, and articles, with all but the fiction enjoying some success in finding print.

This energetic activity came to a sudden halt upon entering college, where I made an oddly rational choice. I told myself that I was motivated to teach myself what I needed to know, as a writer—ruling out English for a major—similarly, art. On the other hand I felt I lacked impetus to delve deeply into music theory on my own. I had the already incurable habit of improvising on piano and mandolin, which taught me how little I understood of musical structure. Music seemed my weakest strength.

I pretended not to feel an immense pride in the miniscule achievements of my middle teen years. I can only believe that an unfortunate sense of superiority weighed me down in an environment within which

I might have soared, especially as a writer. Beloit College had attracted me in part because of its association with the *Beloit Poetry Journal* and the presence of Chad Walsh, whose attitude toward speculative fiction I knew to be friendly. Yet I chose a Music major—adding more fracture and fissure to my mental landscape, if aiding me in pushing me outward from my inward-turning tendencies. I realize now the unintended benefits of my choice: for it forced me into an arena where I was most likely to fail. In music, you must step firmly into the reality of others than yourself, with worldly confidence and secure technical prowess—attributes I lacked in all aspects of my creative soul. In music I felt most sharply aware of this, however; and because of this to it I turned.

Through those years I became known as a singer more than an instrumentalist, although Baroque and Medieval instrumental ensembles became haunts of mine. I may have been better known for drawings, however, which other students saw everywhere—for I produced dozens of posters for musical and theatrical events. That as a writer my force on campus was nil, on the other hand, became clear to me when a friend and I became summer-term co-editors of the campus paper. The supervising faculty member assumed my participation was to be as art editor. My graduating English-major co-editor, however, left mid-term to hunt for jobs out West, leaving me in full charge. Later that summer another older student, whose writing I would one day encounter in *The Rolling Stone*, told me I had accomplished something quite hard to do: I achieved consistent tone and style over the entirety of each issue.

I would acknowledge the advantages of specializing, and of settling upon One True Art. Even my dream-floating self could wake up, now and then, to my situation of being greatly talented and even more greatly wanting in saleable abilities. Yet in the strange time not long after college when I made one of the many nonsensical decisions of my life and dubbed myself a free lance, I found it impossible to jettison any aspect of my tripartite artistic soul. I would be writing, and would lack money to buy postage to mail manuscripts, when a minor piano job would fall

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Cont. on p. 8



## Line Improvisation (Cont. from p. 7)

*"I conceived a phrase that described my interests and activities: line composition. A line made by pencil or pen upon paper moves in such a way that it draws forth from the inner self newness."*

*"People speak of the imagination as though it might be an organ of the mind.*

©  
8 *Imagination may be simply the natural expression of the mind, perhaps of the whole mind, when offered the freedom of release along a forward-moving line."*

*"Line improvisation leads to cultivating instantaneity as a quality having artistic value. As instantaneity rises as a value, however, the results of approaches calling for deliberation, planning, rethinking, and reshaping decrease in value."*

into my lap. A local art show would then offer some chance of earning a few dollars—which would lead to small commissions for larger works. Periodically through these confused and confusing months and years I enjoyed more regular work, as when a dance teacher needed an improvisational pianist for her Modern Dance classes—work I might have continued down to the present moment had I possessed the basic Mass Age life-skill of driving. Similarly, arts-reviewing opportunities opened up at local newspapers, leading to part-time editorial work.

Besides having my hand forced by chance opportunities, I could abandon nothing because in each field I had experienced inner, illuminating moments affirming each as a true calling. I confirmed my One True Art three times. I did so, unfortunately, in the Reagan years, when it became evident that the only art that mattered, and was worth being trickled upon, was no true art.

I conceived a phrase that described my interests and activities: line composition. A line made by pencil or pen upon paper moves in such a way that it draws forth from the inner self newness. The line produces itself from moment to moment. No certainty about what the line is comes until the line itself ends. Similarly a string of words drawn from within moves in directions to be consciously anticipated at times, and other times not at all. Similarly again a single note leads to another, yielding a musical line that is like an ink line in appearing to be continuous, and like a line of writing in that it consists instead of discrete stopping points—notes rather than words—that contain within themselves the potential for movement forward.

People speak of the imagination as though it might be an organ of the mind.

Imagination may be simply the natural expression of the mind, perhaps of the whole mind, when offered the freedom of release along a forward-moving line.

Not all minds may express themselves in this way. Not all minds mature in environments nurturing the sense of line.

I might more accurately have called this line improvisation—for the natural fluidity of line fascinated me, in writing as in art and music. I say natural, yet am thinking of an achieved naturalness—of the

sort found in comfortably accomplished expression. This fascination freed and enabled me, for it helped me dispense with many of the reins, harnesses, and blinders that limit the movements of our minds during most hours of the day.

In equal parts it restricted and restrained me.

Imagine drawing and producing a tangle of lines upon the page. How do you lift out the one line of particular interest? When working with india ink, you do no such lifting out—except with the eye. Each touch of pen nib to paper commits hand and mind to the result that is being left on the page. If one line remains, all do. The touch of the moment yields instantly to permanency.

The movements of the pen that seem true: those are yours. The movements that stray: those, too, are yours.

Line improvisation leads to cultivating instantaneity as a quality having artistic value. As instantaneity rises as a value, however, the results of approaches calling for deliberation, planning, rethinking, and reshaping decrease in value. The creative soul enamored with the act of line improvisation may reach the point of losing the capacity to embrace other ways. A stillness may fall on the previously ever-moving soul, at the thought of turning back upon the created line to rethink and reshape.

Balancing my interest in line improvisation, I persisted in an attempt to understand structure. I appreciated the spontaneous effect on the mind of successful art, but understood that some if not much of this art came into the world not as the instantaneous expression I pursued and valued but through some more deliberative and structural approach.

Since I almost never had money to buy oil paints, in artwork this issue pressed less upon me. I could plan and execute some larger, more ambitious inks and watercolors, yet without change of mindset: for whatever my care in planning and preparation, each pen stroke remained of the moment and indelible. To a lesser degree the same was true of the watercolor brush. The challenge of oils that can be worked and reworked had to be put aside for the future, however much I hungered to meet it. In writing and in music I grappled with the issue constantly—sometimes



swaying fully toward the improvisational line, sometimes fully planting myself in a thicket of structural concepts. For periods of time, for instance, I accepted poems as conceived. If they had freshness they found acceptance in my eyes. In other periods I would descend into a process of constant remaking—so that for some periods my files of poetry would be thick, but not because of the number of poems contained. One can as easily overwork a poem as a drawing, I learned—with the difference that a poem's earlier drafts can be pulled out for comparison—an act inaugurating an aeon of weighing, refashioning, and indecision, when all available space fills with the littered leaves of the Great Tree of Rewrites. At such times I have traveled far toward that great literary zero at the end of the universe. Others, I know, have come near reaching it.

The challenge for me arises from the mutability of writing. How can I touch that resultant work, how edit and rework it, without destroying the fact of its nearly instantaneous creation? "Edit for clarity," you say. Say what? "Edit for style." Again, say what? The hand capable of line improvisation is a hand born of long struggles over issues of style. "Then edit for content—for consistency—for God's sake!" Again, again, and again, say what? The well-decorated Iowan midstream of American would-be letters runs up against no such issues, never having allowed loose the vast galumphing verbal mind anywhere near a page, preferring to express thoughts as one expresses juice from a lemon, through a Clarity sieve, through a Style strainer, or upon a Content and Consistency and God reamer. Yet these questions overwhelm the writer grappling with the notion of written art. Even when our Age of the Masses glitter-flecked monochromes and billion-burger mindfilters drown and downgrade our sensibilities, the creative soul can move along its own course; and if I give it opportunity to freely draw some mapping of that course by means of the improvisatory line, why then should I as critical and interfering consciousness inflict bland Mass Age principles upon that expression?

That question leads me to no easy answers. One short story arising from such spontaneous flow found publication unchanged aside from minor word correc-

tions: for when I re-read it, it appeared to my eyes as nearly unchangeable. With another, shorter story, several years needed to pass before the haze of the generative act, perhaps the generative vision, parted enough so that I could see places where the conceiving hand had faltered. I then could deliberate and reshape without worrying about wrongs I might be doing to the expression: for with something akin to a new conceptual haze I was undertaking the task. If the literary miniature was to move beyond being a personally effective line of words to a line of words that another reader might fall into and experience, the effort to improve was essential.

In prose as to a lesser degree in poetry, the pursuit of line improvisation inadvertently but perhaps necessarily raises a barrier between the creative self and the reader. The india-ink improvisation you might call a sketch; and you might judge its success based upon its power of suggesting instead of stating, of evoking rather than describing. In such an improvisation, the line avoids spaces, as opposed to filling them. This suits the nature of the drawn, continuous line. Words, on the other hand, typically fill spaces. The connections they express often move inward upon the subject rather than away—being invasive rather than evasive.

A drawn line stimulates curiosity about what it pictures. Similarly a sentence creates a desire to know what the words are about. The method of the charmingly evocative pen line, if applied to writing, however, yields results that may come across as sketchy and inadequate, incomplete and obscure. The phrase "evocative language" tends to apply to passages in which a writer has dug into rich veins of meaning and imagery and has covered the page with aptly placed verbal touches, much as a painter might cover a canvas with paint dabs. The phrase less often points to passages where the writer has sketched out a large scene with a few, simple words and phrases that outline and go around their subject in the manner of ink improvisation.

I grew aware, slowly over time, that the concepts and images that hovered in my mind—those conceptual and imagistic hazes surrounding the act of creation—tended to remain in my mind without my having placed actual, analogous equiva-

*"The challenge for me arises from the mutability of writing. How can I touch that resultant work, how edit and rework it, without destroying the fact of its nearly instantaneous creation?"*

*"I grew aware, slowly over time, that the concepts and images that hovered in my mind...tended to remain in my mind without my having placed actual, analogous equivalents on the page—so that my experience went unshared, in some part, with the reader..."*

*Cont. on p. 10*



## Line Improvisation (Cont. from p. 9)

*“My musical leanings may have compounded my difficulties.... the pianist Julian Bern... saw in my piano playing my usual tendencies in all matters of art: to be too flitting, too fast, too demonstrably technically able; to be a fount of energy without a guiding sense of center.”*

lents on the page—so that my experience went unshared, in some part, with the reader, and so that the reader’s experience was incomplete, or was markedly different from the intended one. I might have intended to convey a feeling or image and have written what seemed exact words—yet because of my not moving beyond the line, I conveyed too little. That imagistic haze within was a mist over the created landscape—a mist that left no dew on the grass to dampen the feet of those who came later.

While conscious of my art, while aiming for the evocative and meaningful, in my adhering to the line, I inflicted a narrowness upon my words when they may have wanted to follow their natural tendency to smudge, smear, and broaden into larger washes, splotches, and strokes of more laden expression. I came across as vague if not obscure, illogical if not arbitrary.

Some of this quality I intended. Much of it, however, arose at the moment of pen touching paper or typewriter striking page—somewhat spontaneously, somewhat unintentionally; and whatever arose there remained there. The page preserved the expression of the moment. I could alter what had arisen only with the fear in my mind that I was losing an essential quality in the writing.

My musical leanings may have compounded my difficulties. Rather than the usual Romantic sonatas and symphonies, I admired the cogency of Baroque music, the shameless simplicity of Medieval dance, and the angular and erratic puzzle of the Moderns. The Baroque composers excelled at allowing the simple statement, the simple line, to develop its own complexities. Meanings and feelings seemed to emerge on their own from musical lines that were the product of a merging of intellectual and expressive powers; and the grandeur that was not only of the emotions, as could be experienced in works by Bach and Handel, wove itself into the tapestry of desire that was my artistic ambition. The Romantics, who more consciously practiced methods of picturing through melody and evoking emotion through harmonic complexities, seemed in comparison too often overstated and extravagant. Had I worked harder at understanding their works, however, I might

have come to appreciate the value of conscious application of technique to achieve a fuller range of sensual effect.

“You must press your fingers to the bottom of the piano keys,” the pianist Julian Bern once told me. The injunction may seem obvious, at first, since any finger pressing any key sends it to a point beyond which it cannot further descend. Bern’s injunction, however, not so much contained as pointed toward meaning. I believe he saw in my piano playing my usual tendencies in all matters of art: to be too flitting, too fast, too demonstrably technically able; to be a fount of energy without a guiding sense of center. Once I began to understand Bern’s injunction—an understanding reached only slowly and falteringly—I began, too, to understand the notion for harpsichord and violin, the two other instruments my expansive flightiness then embraced. To some degree I could extend this understanding to pen and ink—and, further, to writing.

The essence of one’s self, the core of one’s being, must be what presses the piano key. The finger, a concatenation of tendon, muscle, and bone, contains within itself something not to be discovered by medical procedure. Dissection unveils the sources of the physical force that fails to produce full tone from the piano. Rather than using force, the finger must find and command the tone to be found there within the key. Similarly, forceful pressure yields not a firm line in an ink drawing but rather a broken line and damaged nib. To find firmness of line requires allowing pen to relax onto the drawing surface, to become part of the paper by the joining of ink. Writing, too, requires the movement of that within the hand which is not of the hand. The strength in the writing grows as the pencil presses through the page. I say pencil because in my hand—in a light grasp I wish I could say I learned in childhood after being told to adopt it—is a pencil whose tip is writing through this page onto one being read by other eyes than mine.

For the act of writing is also performance. The pencil is an instrument of expression.

As with the child in the multilingual household the outward appearance of the multi-focused soul is that of a slow learner.



*“For the act of writing is also performance. The pencil is an instrument of expression.”*

“He had developed late, although he had begun so early, because he was so long in acquiring veracity and knowledge,” Van Wyck Brooks wrote of his alter-ego Oliver Allston. My own inability to flower at an age when others were doing so—they, in ways that reflected their own callings—resulted from my having developed slowly, in pursuing my multiple paths. Like Brooks, too, I needed more over to acquire necessary habits and resources of mind. Undoubtedly I will develop even yet more slowly as the years roll by, until I fall, overrun by that even slower turtle in the black robe with the scythe.

Unlike other visual artists I have only a few handfuls of paintings, mostly exercises. Unlike other writers of music I have only a few minor pieces committed to paper. Unlike other poets I have no published collections; unlike other fiction writers, no published novels. Human attention is like butter, Hugh Lofting wrote: spread too thinly it becomes undetectable. Human application, perhaps, too.

The problem of the novel may loom largest for me. I started early, of course, writing much of one in high school, then finishing a short one during a college summer, and setting into others soon after. Through the years I have begun and several times finished novels that are the equivalent of those painterly exercises—for they are works extended in length, just as the paintings are works extended in depth and color. My method of seeing where a line may lead never proved adequate to that size

of a task; and in these years when I feel the settlings-in of Brooks’s veracity and knowledge, my method of scrambling wherever I can for a living has failed to yield me the necessary time.

Each time I leave a practice—setting aside music for a time, for writing; or writing, for artwork; or artwork, for music—I lose, and I gain. In setting aside all three, as has been nearly the case in the time since writing the C.M. Kornbluth biography, I have lost considerably, and again gained. I have within me still the mercurial, irresponsible youth that I was: split between various callings, capable of bursts of accomplishment, and bedeviled by a seeming determination to approach life in any but a practical manner. That part of me will remain unchanged and unchangeable, in many ways—for my life is a line improvisation, an expression that must stand unrevised. Whether in art or music I can give the world what I believe I gave it with *C.M. Kornbluth* remains for me to discover in myself; and whether my current writings will surpass *Kornbluth* in some essential qualities may depend on the further integration of my unquestionably tripartite nature.

I am monolithic by no means. I am split, as a child may be split by tongues; and that I am so, I acknowledge and accept—with a gladness the child must in the end share.

*“Writing, too, requires the movement of that within the hand which is not of the hand.”*

*“...[M]y life is a line improvisation, an expression that must stand unrevised. Whether in art or music I can give the world what I believe I gave it with C.M. Kornbluth remains for me to discover in myself....”*

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Mark Rich has published in venues ranging from *Poem, Rattle,* and *Ship of Fools* to *Analog, SF Age,* and *Amazing Stories,* during the course of his writing life. He is the author of *C.M. Kornbluth: The Life and Works of a Science Fiction Visionary.*



## First Contact

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*

Reviewed by Suzy McKee Charnas

*"It's still the best novel I've ever read about (to all intents and purposes) first contact."*

You know a book is special when you pick it up again more than forty years after you first read it and finish it thinking, "Holy crap! This book is *so* much better than I remember!"

Of course, a groundbreaking book that posits something nobody has seriously dealt with before—a human-derived, ambisexual society on an alien planet—will be shelved in your memory as, first, that the book blew you away, and, second, as that book about a human-derived, ambisexual society on another planet.

That's all in *The Left Hand of Darkness*, of course; it's central, and it's handled with a skill and beauty and depth of feeling that is as potent as ever.

But there's so much *more*.

It's still the best novel I've ever read about (to all intents and purposes) first contact. Close up, there's the ever-shifting discomfort, confusion, and naive helplessness of Genly Ai, the envoy, alone on Gethen. He is constantly caught short by inevitable misreadings of his situation. His presence is immediately engulfed in local politics and put to use by people whose goals and motives are impenetrable to him. He is repeatedly blind-sided by his own cack-handedness in a place he at first regarded as backward and primitive (and insanely cold).

And he's not the only one swept up and bobbing like a cork on the tides of change that Gethenian cultures have themselves generated: so is Estraven, Genly's major "native" contact. Just because a person belongs to a culture, that doesn't mean she always understands or successfully negotiates its currents.

In fact, the major change agent isn't the envoy from other worlds but the high-status Gethenian, Estraven. Through enormous effort, this person manages to make the presence of the envoy a pivot-point in Gethen's history, bending that history away from the growth of fabricated and lethal nationalisms, and toward acknowledgment that there is so much more to the universe than Gethen that openness is the best response.

Then there's the sheer adventure of alliances, betrayals, mystery, and danger, building in an epic flight across a wasteland of shifting ice and hot volcanos. The thrill of suspense comes not from skirmishes, pursuits, otherworldly intercession, or a search for powerful objects, people, or secrets along the way, but from the stubborn struggle of two small figures through a landscape of transcendent beauty and harshness in which humankind signifies literally nothing, whether present or absent, alive or dead.

Our travelers, fortunately, have a map—which turns out to be wrong. This example of breaking your epically journeying toe on a rock of crappy happenstance is the kind of detail that makes the story so vividly real.

All through the book come striking asides, emanating from intelligent characters' reactions to their experiences, drawing us effortlessly into other kinds of unexpected territory: telepathy as a tool of the future, and how it might be experienced by someone new to it; what true prophecy might be and its uses, costs, and (f) utility; how societies are captured by the urges and appetites that lead to war; the comparative values of certainty and uncertainty; and how people distinguish and compete or ally with one another in the absence of our strongest dualities, those of sex and skin color.

Oh, yes; and that shocking Gethenian sexuality issue becomes an exploration of the inner and outer lives of beings who are sexually whole in their own bodies and in their experiences, versus the limitations of being fixed in one sex or the other, in societies that make that division primary. As Genly puts it to himself, what is our first question about a newborn infant? "Is it a boy, or a girl?" He realizes that his perceptions are fatally skewed by the assumptions and prejudices that come with his fixed gender, but can't help himself. He misreads and distrusts the one Gethenian who believes in him and his mission because he sees in Estraven an apparently male person tainted by a supposed quality of "effeminate deviousness." This is brilliantly done.

Grandmother Magma



The time I first read *The Left Hand of Darkness* I was thirty, unpublished, and trying to write a Western, of all things, as my debut novel. Along came this elegant thunderstroke of a science fiction book, blasting my narrow horizons to smithereens.

Imagine—a futuristic adventure story that didn't ignore sex and gender or just reiterate the received cultural "wisdom" about them, but that took that "wisdom" and exposed it as the cultural and psychological artifact that it was and is. But that wasn't *all*. The book wasn't a polemic or a one-note performance: it was a hell of a good story, full of surprises and delights.

And it was a huge success, winning both the Hugo and the Nebula awards and acclaimed by mainstream critics. It was a stunning example of the "breakout" novel, read widely beyond its marketing genre, and in translation all over the world.

I thought to myself, "If this woman can do this, maybe I can do something like that too." Three years later, my first novel was published. It wasn't a Western.

I have since heard a number of women sf and fantasy authors—and readers—say that they, too, were inspired to jump into the male-dominated, male-centered field of sf (as it was then) by *Left Hand*. With those writers' and readers' invasion of the genre, science fiction began to change. It moved beyond being about white men and their alien lovers, creations, and/or enemies in space, and began to be about humanity, with all of its social and cultural concerns, inhabiting an expanding future full of ambiguities. Le Guin didn't do this alone, and there had been some honorable earlier attempts; but it was her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* that spurred sf into beginning to grow up.



Front cover, first edition,  
art by the Dillons

*"The thrill of suspense comes not from skirmishes, pursuits, otherworldly intercession, or a search for powerful objects, people, or secrets along the way, but from the stubborn struggle of two small figures through a landscape of transcendent beauty and harshness in which humankind signifies literally nothing, whether present or absent, alive or dead."*

*"The time I first read The Left Hand of Darkness I was thirty, unpublished, and trying to write a Western, of all things, as my debut novel. Along came this elegant thunderstroke of a science fiction book, blasting my narrow horizons to smithereens."*

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Suzy McKee Charnas has won numerous accolades for her novels and short stories, including the Hugo, Nebula, and James Tiptree Jr. awards. She has been an instructor several times at the Clarion and Clarion West workshops, and her stage play, *Vampire Dreams*, has been performed on both coasts. Her fiction includes *The Holdfast Chronicles*, *The Vampire Tapestry*, and *Dorothea Dreams* (a new edition of which was published in 2010, Aqueduct Press). She lives in New Mexico.



## Looking, Listening, Hearing, and Re-Membering

*Birds and Birthdays* by Christopher Barzak, Aqueduct Press, August 2012, 96 pages, US \$12.00.

Reviewed by Nic Clarke

*“Barzak draws particular attention to the propensity of Surrealist artists to use women’s bodies—dismembered, dehumanized, laid open—while seeking to undermine traditional hierarchies and ways of thinking.”*

For all its glorious subversiveness, the heyday of the Surrealist movement in art was—in at least one important aspect—depressingly conventional, says Christopher Barzak in “Re-Membering the Body: Reconstructing the Female in Surrealism,” the short, lucid essay with which he closes his contribution to Aqueduct Press’s Conversation Pieces series. I don’t imagine it will surprise readers of this journal to learn that this conventionality centered on sex and gender, in terms of both the art itself and the wider perception of the artists: who got to be the subject of the art, and who remained its object; who was seen as integral to the movement, and who were the adjuncts.

Barzak draws particular attention to the propensity of Surrealist artists to use women’s bodies—dismembered, dehumanized, laid open—while seeking to undermine traditional hierarchies and ways of thinking. All too often, women appear in Surrealists’ work simply as vehicles for the ventriloquism of male artists who don’t seem to have considered that the female-body-as-public-property paradigm was another age-old power structure they might profitably have sought to subvert, rather than exploit. Barzak plays off André Breton’s summing-up of Surrealism (“...the chance meeting of a radio with an umbrella on a dissecting table”) to suggest that it was, in fact, “the deliberate meeting of a woman’s body with a scalpel on a dissecting table.”

The author frames the collection’s three stories, therefore, as an exploration of women artists’ contribution to the conversation, and in particular of what art critic Whitney Chadwick has identified as these artists’ contrasting portrayal of the female body—very often their own bodies, through self-portraiture—as a site of conflicting desires and an intersection of social, cultural, and historical pressures. Ultimately, Barzak says, he seeks to listen to their voices, rather than make them part of his project.

The first story, “The Creation of Birds”—initially published in Susan Groppi and

David Moles’ hugely enjoyable but under-discussed anthology *Twenty Epics* (All-Star Stories, 2006)—is inspired by the work of the Spaniard Remedios Varo (1908–63). Varo’s painting *Creation of the Birds* (1957) shows a woman with a face that is half-owl/half-woman, and with downy owl feathers covering much of her body, sitting at a desk drawing a bird. In her left hand, she holds a magnifying glass, which focuses the light from a star onto the bird she’s drawing, which is starting to emerge from the paper. Other birds fly around the room, and a strange contraption of bulbs and tubes, whose source is outside the frame, supplies color for her palette.

Barzak charmingly, but pointedly, imagines the Bird Woman (as he calls her) in a dysfunctional relationship with a man who can pull down the stars from the sky. The Bird Woman is a wryly self-aware craftswoman and artist in a world where what she does—and who she is, a woman who can fly—is remarkable but not impossible. When she is happy, she “has no time for” realism, creating sparrows with “fans for tail feathers” and imaginary birds like phoenixes; making realistic birds is a sign that she is “merely content.” Her Star Catcher sometime-boyfriend, however, only ever wants to talk about what he does; he captures stars for her not so much to help with her work as to make her feel obligated to him. When she leaves him, he tries to entice her back with a star in a cage, echoing Varo’s *Papilla Estelar* (1958), which shows a woman apparently extracting light from a caged crescent moon. The Bird Woman visits a psychoanalyst—this is also the sort of fantasy land that has psychoanalysts—and in a nod to another of Varo’s works, she leaves the session with the psychoanalyst’s head in a bag, from where it/he proceeds to provide commentary on the unwise resumption of the relationship. It’s a beautifully written piece, which ends on a note of soaring liberation and (for the Bird Woman) arch amusement. The Bird Woman uses her birds to return Star Catcher’s host of captives to the night sky and then decides to stay with



him—well aware that the relationship is probably not going to end well, but happy to do it, nonetheless.

“The Guardian of the Egg” (also previously published in 2006, in Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling’s *Salon Fantastique* [Thunder’s Mouth Press]) turns to British-born, Mexican-resident Leonora Carrington (1917-2011), specifically to her work *The Giantess* (1947), which depicts a woman holding an egg, her enormous body vastly out of proportion with her head and hands, and wearing a cloak from which geese emerge to fly around her; at her feet, tiny people shake their fists and wave pitchforks.

Following his essay’s taxonomy of the contrasts between the work of Varo and Carrington—who were close friends—Barzak places this story not in a fantasy world, but in a corner of our own. Here, the fictionalized version of the woman from the painting brings the fantastical forth into the mundane life of a small American town. She is the teen narrator’s elder sister, Hester, a high-achieving but socially isolated 17-year-old who one day starts growing a tree from her head (soon simply growing taller and taller every day). The narrator, of course, suffers all the agonies of being suddenly all-too-visibly weird-by-association at school, but his sister becomes happy and confident, even as the townsfolk mutter ever more darkly about the strangenesses that attend her. Here the story’s trajectory is one of triumph and transformation on a larger scale, as brother and sister join forces, the trees begin to reclaim the land, and Hester plants a mysterious egg in the town park. The town’s subsequent retreat into a pre-industrial way of life arguably suffers from some of the same conventionality that Barzak decries in his essay—we’re told in passing that, after the transformation, Hester’s mother spends her time sewing, while her father chops wood and hunts for food—but the subversion of the witch-in-the-woods trope is clever and enjoyable, and the way Hester gains power through her departure from social norms of how a female body should look and behave is fun.

Barzak rounds off the triad with a new story, “Birthday,” the most direct exploration of how women artists used self-portraits as acts of Surrealist reclaiming

and subversion. He imagines a back story for Dorothea Tanning’s (1910-2012) *Birthday* (1941). This is a work both confessional and confrontational; it depicts the artist standing in a bare room, slightly aslant but facing the viewer with a strikingly raw expression, dressed in vines, a rumpled makeshift skirt, and a garish, puffy-sleeved shirt left open to bare her breasts. At her feet, a strange winged raccoon-looking creature sits, wide-eyed.

Barzak’s protagonist, Emma, is a troubled young woman who owns and operates—and lives in—an apartment building inherited from her parents, who were killed in an accident. All her life she has felt distanced from others’ emotions, in a way that is, frankly, often alienating for the reader; as a child, she never felt that her parents loved her in the right way, always giving her the wrong presents. She falls into a marriage and motherhood too young and unprepared, and at every turn she says and does the wrong thing, failing to fit into the categories she should inhabit as woman, as wife, as mother. Much of the story centers around her successive attempts to find herself, through casual sex and longer affairs and borrowing others’ identities by breaking into their apartments while they’re out, trying on their clothes and lying in their beds. At the story’s climax, after an extended period alone—except for the creature from Tanning’s painting, the only companion who makes no demands of her—in a previously unseen room between two of the floors of the apartment building, she destroys a portrait painted of her by one of her lovers and replaces it with a self-portrait of her own. Finally, she has made her own identity and presented it to the world; and the world, as represented by her past lovers and the other inhabitants of the building, views the painting and accepts her as she is.

*“Barzak places this story not in a fantasy world, but in a corner of our own. Here, the fictionalized version of the woman from the painting brings the fantastical forth into the mundane life of a small American town.”*

*“Barzak rounds off the triad with a new story, ‘Birthday,’ the most direct exploration of how women artists used self-portraits as acts of Surrealist reclaiming and subversion.”*

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Nic Clarke lectures in medieval Islamic history at Newcastle University in the UK. A revised version of her doctoral thesis was recently published by Routledge—*The Muslim Conquest of Iberia: Medieval Arabic Narratives*. She also reviews fiction for *Strange Horizons*, *SFX*, and *Vector*, and blogs at *Eve’s Alexandria*.



## Exceptional Ladies

*Lady Poetesses from Hell*, edited by Bag Person Collective, Bag Person Press, 2012, 116 pages, \$10.00

Reviewed by David Findlay

*"In both form and content, Lady Poetesses from Hell is an exceptional collection."*

© 16 *"Each piece goes somewhere different and conveys us by its own unexpected route; each is rewarding."*

*"Neither the diminutive form of 'poet' nor the use of 'lady' should distract you, dear reader, from expecting top-rate writing and industrial-strength clarity of analysis."*

What distinguishes poetry from prose is not just (or always) brevity, but a heightened realization of the inseparability of form and content. In both form and content, *Lady Poetesses from Hell* is an exceptional collection.

One of the most immediately notable exceptional elements of the book, unfortunately, is not a strength. The front cover demonstrates that web-resolution images do not generally translate well in print, and that "retro" fonts do not always withstand the test of time. This combination may have been conceived as ironic kitsch in keeping with the group's approach and the press's name, but it seems to me quite weak design. In this era of significant overlap between the reach of small presses, self-publication, and corporate publishing, packaging counts more than ever. It's a shame to give a first impression of less-than-stellar quality, particularly when the contents are so consistently marvelous.

These contents are arranged with meticulous, loving attention to detail and careful thought to ease of use. This is the book as an object crafted by hyper-competent word nerds: exhaustively indexed, carefully annotated, imaginatively arranged. One can locate poems by author, first line, section, etc., and for such a slim volume there is an astonishing abundance of appended data regarding notes, credits, and the assembled poets' backgrounds. Here I must commend the press, a collective who are also apparently the volume's editors. Upon opening the book we are reminded that behind the tongue-in-cheek framing of this project lies a significant accumulation of craft, care, and experience.

In her introduction, Terry A. Garey explains that The Lady Poetesses group grew out of the *Ladies' Tea and Poetry Salon* and first convened at a science fiction convention's poetry panel dedicated to readings of "unladylike" poetry. They continue to co-present in fancy hats at such panels. This is a collection of work by Fiercely Funny Feminists accustomed to addressing the world through layers of irony and old lace. Neither the diminutive form of "poet" nor

the use of "lady" should distract you, dear reader, from expecting top-rate writing and industrial-strength clarity of analysis.

The poems are offered in six rounds, each combining multiple writers. The Lady Poetesses from Hell are a gifted lot, many of whom will be familiar to science fiction and fantasy readers through their other poetry and prose. It is hard to generalize about the themes addressed within such a diverse collection. Topics range from decomposition to parenthood, from language to the feces of imaginary beings. It is far easier to generalize about the style, wit, depth, and generosity of these themes' treatment. Sometimes chilling, sometimes wicked, often both, these are pithy, well-selected, and entirely fearless expressions of most unladylike concerns indeed.

I was not smitten with every piece, but I found works by each contributor that called to me and gave me cause to return for re-readings.

Jane Yolen's "Orkney Lament" wants to be read (sung?) aloud:

*...Between hawk and hand  
Lies but a shield of skin.*

John Calvin Rezmerski proves to be no less (or more) ladylike than any of the other Ladies. His "Lexicography Today" is one of my favorites, but he also contributes as another, pseudonymous, writer, and those surpassingly silly gems alone might be worth the price of admission for their detailed, explanatory introductions and gloriously florid pastiche.

*...Of the messiness that attended Ethel's  
duel with Stuffhithnithur the Rheumy,  
Wherein the courtyard stones were so  
wet with snot, neither could stand.*

I was also struck by the poignant and often hilarious offerings of Eleanor Arnanon, Ruth Berman, and Ellen Klages, all rich with embodied, sparkling wisdom.

Fart jokes in elegant meter? Yes. Wry nostalgia for Mom's unique "perfume?" Absolutely. A palindrome expertly made visual through a child's eyes? Klages channels youth with ferocious aplomb.



Berman's "Cloud Manufactory" is lyrical, pure science fiction; her "Pet Fossil" and "Potatoes of the Tree" are each in strongly different styles. All are delivered with polished grace.

Arnason's understated bio belies the depth of her experience and the span of her talents. Her "Why the Coffee at Wall Drug in Wall, South Dakota, Tastes the Way It Does" is a resonant, mythic piece of cowboy tall-tale-telling, while her "Greenhouse Effect" is plaintive and haunting:

...How can we live without dreams  
of islands?

## Three = Infinite Possibilities

*Three* by Annemarie Monahan, Flashpoint Press, August 2012, 320 pages, \$16.95

Reviewed by Deb Taber

A simple question from a T. S. Eliot poem launches a young woman's seemingly ordinary life into three distinct futures. We first meet her at age 17 as she prepares her morning coffee and contemplates Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," wondering, like the poem's narrator, "Do I dare to eat a peach?" As benign and irrelevant as the question may seem, it is the turning point upon which three possible futures depend. We then meet the grown version of this woman at 41, in each of her three possible outcomes. In one she is called Antonia and lives with her lover, Josephine, in an experimental feminist commune in the Atlantic Ocean until a lightning strike nearly kills her. A second life finds her going by Katherine, a doctor balancing alternative and emergency medicine and flowing in and out of temporary relationships and periods of celibacy, still recovering from a long-ago lover who left her for the Catholic Church. In the third life, she is a relatively happy housewife, married since she was 18, mother to three kids and dealing with her dying father as she awakens to new questions and sensations after experiencing a woman's kiss.

Simplicity and complexity: the balance between these is the root of *Three* and the reason that it works so well as a book despite the large scope it tries—and almost entirely succeeds—to grasp. Blending realism and fantasy, straightforward storytelling and subtle literary devices, Monahan

As the title may suggest, *Three* here takes itself with a great deal of seriousness. Everything, however, merits attention. Each piece goes somewhere different and conveys us by its own unexpected route; each is rewarding. I highly recommend *Lady Poetesses from Hell* and feel deeply privileged to have been asked to review it.

spins a believable world where three separate lives of one woman spread out from a single point, then bend back inward and begin to weave together in an open macramé of one multi-threaded life.

What makes the story work best is that each of Antonia/Katherine/Kitty's lives is whole. She is a complex and complete human being in each, shaped by different experiences into a different woman. Kitty and Katherine are somewhat closer in their natures, while Antonia's more radical experiences place her further apart, but she is clearly still the same woman at her core, driven to extremes by choice and circumstance.

Monahan takes the question of daring—do I eat the peach? Or is it more daring to refrain from that bite?—and slowly reveals that bravery and cowardice may not be as they appear at first. Nor does one moment of bravery mean a lifetime of being bold. Each aspect of—let's call her K—has her own bravery and her own fears and weaknesses. Each is also guided by a personified Fate, but Fate does not necessarily guide each version of K the same way.

Monahan uses language beautifully. Everything she attempts to achieve with imagery, allusion, and forays into science and poetry, she achieves.

*Three* is a meditative study on who we are, who we could be, and how little we know what the outcome will be as we navigate the circumstances of our lives. It isn't

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David Findlay is a writer, visual artist, and thing-maker whose residence bounces between Southern California and Toronto, his birthplace. His poetry, fiction, and nonfiction can be found in *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Dark Matter Two*, *First Person Queer*, and *The Mammoth Book of Threesomes and Moresomes*.

*"Blending realism and fantasy, straightforward storytelling and subtle literary devices, Monahan spins a believable world where three separate lives of one woman spread out from a single point, then bend back inward and begin to weave together..."*

Cont. on p. 18



## Infinite Possibilities (Cont. from p. 17)

*"It isn't the grand, bold decisions that shape who we are, the book contends, it is the daily living, the small actions, the thoughts we stifle or allow, that shape who we are to be."*

*"Three is about possibilities made real."*

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Deb Taber is a freelance editor who works with authors ranging from novices to *New York Times* best-sellers. Her stories have appeared in *Fantasy Magazine* and various anthologies, and her first novel, *Necessary Ill*, is due out in March 2013 from Aqueduct Press. Visit her online at [www.debtaber.com](http://www.debtaber.com).

the grand, bold decisions that shape who we are, the book contends, it is the daily living, the small actions, the thoughts we stifle or allow, that shape who we are to be.

But that's not what this book is about.

*Three*, more than any other book in recent memory, is about the reader. How do you react to Katherine's, to Kitty's, to Antonia's situations and decisions? Are you intrigued, revolted, hopeful, uncomfortable, devastated, confused? *Three* does not stand on its own without the reader's involvement—and that is a rare and good thing. It is a book that makes you think—about your choices and the unchosen parts of your life, where you are and how you got there and where else you could have gone—even if you've thought about it all before. What are the questions, the actions, you have denied in your own life? Who is the self you did not let yourself be? Are you brave enough to face her now, maybe in just an e-mail, then a phone call? Would you make a date with your other self, and would you show up at the table, ready to find out who you really are, not just who you could be?

Toward the end of the book, Monahan brings Katharine's and Kitty's threads together in a way that gives a form of resolution to Kitty in her final section in the book, but rather than growing Katharine's final section out of this, she instead returns this character to the experience and tone of her previous sections. This is the only area of regression in the book. That may be intentional on the author's part, but as a reader, I hoped for more. Antonia's final section, however, returns to the book's roots of who K is at heart, bringing her fire and sense of humor back into play as Antonia moves on with her life after the commune.

*Three* is about possibilities made real. It takes weighty subject matter and doesn't turn away from it, yet within the story you'll also find humor, lightheartedness, even jocular. No book is for everyone, but regardless of gender or orientation, *Three* has something to say to anyone who will listen, and the more you participate by asking yourself the questions the story asks of its three-in-one character(s), the more you can gain from the reading experience.

## Ortygia to Trimountaine

by Sonya Taaffe

Between bronze Neptune  
and granite-sluiced Amphitrite,  
Arethousa is sleeping in the Brewer Fountain,  
the nereid of Tremont Street  
with dolphins in her hair,  
patron of lost Paris and Plato's Sicily.  
Persephone sang six weeks on the stage of the Bijou,  
Hermes called the stops between Boylston and Adams Square.  
A jealous river frets up against the Charles,  
but the bridges she built will not let him in.

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Sonya Taaffe is a Rhysling Award-winning poet. Her poems and short stories have appeared in numerous venues. Her poetry is collected in *Postcards from the Province of Hyphens* (Prime Books) and *A Mayse-Bikhl* (Papaveria Press). She is currently on the editorial staff of *Strange Horizons*.



## Sewing for Apollo

*Spacesuit: Fashioning Apollo* by Nicholas de Monchaux, MIT Press, March 2011, 380 pages, \$34.95

Reviewed by Karen Burnham

Nicholas de Monchaux's *Spacesuit: Fashioning Apollo* is about the spacesuit as a manifestation of the interface between humans and technology in the most intimate and iconic way. It looks at the history of the spacesuit, its antecedents, its construction, and the rather surprising fact that the Apollo spacesuits were not made by aerospace firms, such as Hamilton Sundstrand, but by the parent company of the lingerie manufacturer Playtex. For all that, this is an impersonal book; its focus is on systems, not on the humans within them.

De Monchaux's approach manifests itself first in the conceit that the book is made up of "layers" instead of the more traditional chapters, with 21 "layered essays" to reflect the 21 layers of material that went into the Apollo spacesuit. While these progress roughly chronologically, they each delve into a specific topic, from the history of high altitude flight to Dior's post-WWII New Look to the construction of Mission Control. As the topics orbit about the central focus of the spacesuit and the space race, the picture that emerges is less about people making garments for people, and more about the emerging field of systems engineering that has been so influential in shaping the past 60 years of American history. This makes more sense given that the genesis of the book was a "paper written for Georges Teyssot at the Princeton University School of Architecture in 1998, for a seminar on domestic space."

And it is a fascinating story (or perhaps, constellation of stories). The major thread starts out with man's first encounters with the upper reaches of the atmosphere and the life-threatening conditions found there. It introduces some fashions of the 20th century and the advances in materials science that made them possible, such as the synthetic latex behind Playtex. World War II caused worlds to collide, as all such materials were commandeered by the war effort, and entrepreneurs in a wide variety of fields got a taste of defense contracting.

It was this that later allowed Playtex (or rather "The International Latex Corporation") to hear about and bid on contracts such as the Apollo spacesuit. While traditional defense contractors focused on building "hard suits" that were particularly futuristic looking and easy to spec out, Playtex focused on fitting suits to astronauts. Hard suits were *manufactured*; soft suits were *crafted*. Interfacing the NASA specification-and-requirement culture to a shop full of craftswomen who worked off of patterns instead of engineering drawings was challenging, to put it lightly. Both systems had to flex to accommodate the other. NASA almost didn't budge, going so far as to order a re-compete of the contract after the initial award to Playtex. Given that the competitor suits all had defects that could result in the death of the astronaut, there was no doubt that Playtex had the superior product, even if it had (by NASA standards) abysmal paperwork. This makes it seem like NASA is more concerned with paperwork than with safety, but in the NASA culture, traceable paperwork = accountability = quality control = safety. Everyone had the same goals in mind, but they used very different institutional methods of achieving those goals.

The play of systems against and within systems forms the core of this book. It opens out in its later essays, and we learn about the construction of the media environment covering the first space landing (the multiple sets, miniatures built to simulate the landing approach, early computer graphics, etc.), the design of the Mission Control room and its origins in the centralized military control spaces meant to embark on and survive a nuclear war, and even the application of NASA technology and systems to urban revitalization efforts in the 1960s and '70s (and their almost complete failure). The focus on image is seen through the lens of President John F. Kennedy, his vision for the space race, and his personal struggle to maintain a public image in the face of bodily infirmity.

*"While traditional defense contractors focused on building 'hard suits' that were particularly futuristic looking and easy to spec out, Playtex focused on fitting suits to astronauts. Hard suits were manufactured; soft suits were crafted."*

*"[T]he picture that emerges is less about people making garments for people, and more about the emerging field of systems engineering that has been so influential in shaping the past 60 years of American history."*

Cont. on p. 20



## Sewing for Apollo (Cont. from p. 19)

*"I hope that some intrepid writer someday lays hands on de Monchaux's interview notes and writes up this story from the seamstresses' point of view."*

*"There is much fascinating history here...but the lack of boots-on-the-ground human stories left the whole feeling somewhat sterile."*

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Karen Burnham is vocationally an engineer and avocationally a fiction reviewer. She works at NASA Johnson Space Center as an electrical engineer. For the past few years she has reviewed science fiction and fantasy for venues such as *Strange Horizons*, *SFSignal*, and *Salon Futura*. She edits *Locus* magazine's *Roundtable* blog.

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Catherine McGuire has published over 175 poems and a chapbook. She lives in Oregon's Willamette Valley. To learn more about her work see [www.cathymcguire.com](http://www.cathymcguire.com).

*Fashioning Apollo* posits that the space race existed to produce one image, that of the single man in a spacesuit, standing on the Moon, with the lunar module reflected in his visor and an American flag on his shoulder—and that having produced that image, the rest of the space program is almost redundant. This is a depressing thought for those of us on the front lines of the space program, but a hauntingly plausible one.

What we don't get from this book is much of a sense for the people within the systems. There are few quotes from astronauts or from seamstresses (although the author interviewed many of these folks, as evidenced by the extensive footnotes). There are few anecdotes about the experiences of managing, crafting, or even wearing the suits. And while generals, pilots, astronauts, and politicians tend to be named in the captions of the photographs featuring them, often unnamed support personnel, be they engineers or seamstresses, appear in the background (although to be fair, in the essay focusing on the seamstresses they are all named in the photographs). I hope that some intrepid writer someday lays hands on de Monchaux's interview notes and writes up this story from the seamstresses' point of view; given what they were being asked to do (stitch-

ing through multiple layers of advanced materials with tolerances in fractions of a millimeter), how did they approach it? How did they modify their craft? Did they view it as art, or engineering, or just a job? You can get a good feel for the astronauts' experience of their suits from books such as Gene Kranz's *Failure Is Not an Option* or Mary Roach's *Packing for Mars*.

While spacesuit production was eventually returned to traditional contractors such as Hamilton Sundstrand and Oceanering, the hard suit design never made a resurgence. The soft suit has been maintained, with even softer suits on the horizon—a (female) researcher at MIT has made a spacesuit that looks like a wetsuit, with compression mesh woven throughout to keep it skin tight. How have the engineering contractors managed the interface between astronaut, manufacture, and bureaucracy? De Monchaux has a very specific focus, and the iconic Apollo spacesuit is more of a lens with which to examine systems than an object to be examined itself. There is much fascinating history here, covering a broad range of topics that I had never seen as connected before, and much to learn and admire, but the lack of boots-on-the-ground human stories left the whole feeling somewhat sterile.

## Julia Margaret Cameron, 1860s

Catherine McGuire

Though faithfully recording great men —  
Carlyle, Longfellow, Darwin —  
she gave free rein to fantasy.  
Reversing the candid trend, she posed  
her maid as Madonna, with street urchin cherubs.  
In a sweaty chicken coop-cum-darkroom  
she garbed the mundane in the mythical:  
chimney sweep Arthur, pensioner Prospero.  
Whether silver chloride fumes trimmed  
her years to 64, the stacks of soft-edged prints  
live beyond her. Photography's frank gaze  
could be persuaded, to see what was never there.  
Fairies and angels; kings and gods.

The men said, "Isn't it just like a woman."



## Fanciful Solidity

*Snapshots from a Black Hole & Other Oddities*, by K.C. Ball, Hydra House Books, August 2012, 219 pages, \$14.95 paperback, \$4.95 ebook

Reviewed by Victoria Elisabeth Garcia

Seattle-based K.C. Ball mixes and matches classic genre elements to produce straightforward stories with heart, humor, and a strong sense of place.

A relatively new writer, Ball made her first professional fiction sale in 2008. Since then, her career has done nothing but accelerate. To date, she has published over four dozen short stories and has won both the 2009 Writers of the Future contest and the Speculative Fiction Foundation's Older Writers Grant for newly professional authors over 50. *Snapshots from a Black Hole & Other Oddities* is her first collection.

The book gathers 24 of Ball's stories, seven of which are published here for the first time. The assembled pieces are ambitious in their diversity in terms of subject matter and length. Space thrillers, ghost stories, flash crime fiction, a post-apocalyptic fantasy novella, and a nearly-mainstream story featuring Elvis Presley can all be found within.

Ball came to fiction after working for years as a media coordinator, a journalist, and a public information officer. This training and experience show in her writing. She conveys scientific information efficiently and gracefully. Her settings are especially well-rendered, and fanciful tales of angels, dinosaurs, and superheroes gain an admirable solidity from firmly-grounded descriptions of Key West, rural Montana, and Seattle.

The collection leads with its strongest piece. "Snapshots I Brought Back from the Black Hole," originally published in *Lightspeed Magazine*, is told from the point of view of an artificial intelligence assisting with an interplanetary research mission that goes horribly wrong. The story is structurally elegant, and its AI protagonist's combination of intimacy and alienness offers the reader a compelling window into the minds of people whose day-to-day emotional and working lives are lived in a state of constant, almost

quotidian peril. "Flotsam," the book's other space adventure, is also quite good.

The book includes several other highly worthwhile stories: "In His Prime" is a compelling, SFnal slice-of-life piece about a famous young boxer. "Bringing in the Dead," a military horror story, offers a quiet but wrenching critique of both war narratives and zombie fiction. "Synchronized with Evelyn" is a taut and enigmatic piece about the magnetism of public tragedy. And "Bannockburn Night," a seafaring ghost story set on Lake Superior, ends with a nifty twist.

But though the stories in this collection are almost always engaging, they are very rarely surprising. Many feel like basic re-shufflings of favorite genre and pop culture tropes: "Cretaceous on Ice," a story about dinosaurs and time machines, ends with the phrase "...(T)astes a lot like chicken." "Dial Tone," a post-apocalyptic flash piece, reads like a *Twilight Zone* episode. In "According to His Substance," a mysterious, altruistic figure crosses between alternate worlds to save lives in a way that evokes *Sliders*, *Quantum Leap*, and the like.

In addition, some of the stories do contain moments that feel jarring or false. "Calling Forth the King" ends on a cozy and loving note that is propped up by a rushed justification of an apparent rape. "The Fluting Man" is a romance whose central relationship springs from a credibility-straining moment of love at first sight. This, coupled with the monolithic unpleasantness of the protagonist's rival, makes the story feel hollow where it ought to feel warm.

But even when Ball's stories falter, they remain readable. Ball's adventure tales are well-paced, and her main characters, by and large, are strong, smart, and agreeable, with clearly drawn emotional arcs. This is ably crafted work from an energetic new talent who is clearly on her way up.

*"Ball mixes and matches classic genre elements to produce straightforward stories with heart, humor, and a strong sense of place."*

*"...even when Ball's stories falter, they remain readable. Ball's adventure tales are well-paced, and her main characters, by and large, are strong, smart, and agreeable..."*

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Victoria Elisabeth Garcia's fiction has been published in *Polyphony*, the *Indiana Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Seattle with her husband, comics creator John Aegard, and a chunky but agile little dog.



## Dress Series

### Kristine Campbell

Kristine Campbell's Dress Series explores the dress as an object of complexity without the interference of the human body. Through this series Campbell contests the singular linkage of dress with woman alone and focuses on storytelling. She relishes fashion and fiber art, so exploring ideas of landscape and story with the dress as a centerpiece, holding image, around which she builds layers of story are a wonderful meld. Although Campbell doesn't start with a particular story in mind, what begins as static images, particularly the central image, often moves toward narrative as she paints and fits sections together.

Campbell manipulates paintings in many ways, including use of a computer to better visualize the image. Her artistic process begins with pencil sketches or charcoal and then watercolor to lay out the central idea and design. Once the image is finalized in her mind the ideas are developed further on the canvas or panel, or more recently using the computer to aid in visualizing the final piece. She uses paint, printing, and layering with wax.

Working in series format with a common central image gives Campbell room to delve deeply into a particular theme or object. She generally works on two or more pieces at the same time. In this way related pieces evolve with the same palette and theme. In all her various series, a common central image links the pieces and fosters a dense investigation of an idea.

Kristine Campbell began working on the Dress series 3 years ago and continues to add new works. At present it is composed of 16 wood panels in sizes ranging from 6-by-6 to 40-by-40 inches. Each panel's central focus, the floating dress along with gloves and shoes, is surrounded by a surrealist background. The works in the series were constructed using mixed media and encaustic on wood panels. When she began to work with encaustic [hot wax painting] Campbell spent time at the Whitney Museum and MOMA to view Jasper Johns work in that medium. Early in her study of other artists' works she was drawn to Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. She has

described working in the same medium as enhancing the sense of connection to other artists. Because targets, for example were a big part of Johns' early works she sought to incorporate that image in some of the paintings. The current news dealing with women's issues brought together those two ideas—gender and target. The *Birds are Not the Target* group plays off of artist Jasper Johns' famous paintings of the target, using the same image to instead represent women's issues being targeted in the media.

Major elements of the Dress Series flow directly from Campbell's life and family experiences. Since the beginning sketches of the series were conceived from memories of old family photographs, the type of media was selected to produce a final image that would appear ethereal or floating, thus the use of encaustic. She inherited many boxes of gloves of all types and colors from her mother, and they soon began appearing in her art in forms conjuring movement and gesture with the gloves. While living in NYC she worked with the gloves as side objects, exploring different locations and kinds of movement like hailing a taxi, controlling puppets, holding flowers. And she loves socks, owns drawers filled with colorful, image-laden pairs, some of which have found their way into paintings.

In discussing why the human body is absent in this series, Campbell explains that "a human figure would not just be a distraction; as soon as a face or figure is used it becomes someone, a stranger the viewer does not know. This removes the viewer from seeing the work as something they can interpret or become a part of. By leaving the form unexplained the viewer is persuaded to work out the ideas for themselves." There are no preconceived answers to what the images might mean. And the viewer's eye must acknowledge that the image is perhaps genderless, forcing an awareness that maybe gender identity is superimposed by the viewer's own icons of gender.

Campbell hopes "that fashion becomes more about personal choice and not gender-specific dictates...fashion as wearable art and runway shows as performance art—moveable fibers." She examines the idea of the dress as not defining one gender and deftly transcends that idea in this series.

<http://kristinecampbell.webs.com/>





Compear



Formula of 2 Hands Clapping



Fish Walk



Garden Walk





*Birds Are Not The Target*

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\$4.00

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