

# BOOK REVIEWS

come from some of everywhere to speak for the country  
[position. keep  
it right there in another country-ass country. revamp fugues  
[for tore up  
buildings. raise them up from bloody knees. groove to act out  
all them secret urban plans. articulate the newly made country-ass  
[class  
position. roll back the cover. shade! good god, it's a raid.  
[double up the  
superimposition by broken singles. have subtitles for the full  
[enjoyment. (67)

Here, the urban(e) assumptions that propel and enliven the title poem, inviting a kind of lax enjoyment of Moten's good-natured, tragicomic sensibility, are driven out. Moten forces us to acknowledge him as an implicated *observer* (interested, pained, but an observer nonetheless) and *translator* of a "country-ass" experience (most recently revealed in images of persons and places ravaged by Hurricane Katrina) none of us really wants to know about (h-e-l-l-o). "can't pass the people" is just one exceptional example of Moten's masterful use of a rarely written, resonant, and specific idiom, an unofficial language of reflection that feels entirely new.

Somebody is going to tell you that Fred Moten is a jazz poet, a blues poet, that Fred Moten inherits the mantle of Amiri Baraka and Nathaniel Mackey after him, and that he belongs in that tradition/canon/pantheon. Then you will read "μετοικε." I think Moten's poems occur in an anticipatory space—he would say "cut"—where unimaginable freedoms (the freedom of, for example, "them / impossible domestics" who "always be talking about Cedric / Robinson" [18]) erupt beyond the haunting/haunted original Crenshaw where so much, so many remain confined. In these poems, gentleness and awe (as in his "Stefano and Truculent," stuff that fills in "the world between blue and good" [24]) enlarge our understanding of what the language of blackness will be.

*Simone White lives in Brooklyn.*

KIT ROBINSON  
THE MESSIANIC TREES:  
SELECTED POEMS 1976-2003  
ADVENTURES IN POETRY / 2009  
REVIEW BY KYLE SCHLESINGER

I'll be honest: I'm not a big fan of selected poems. About two years ago, I was weeding my library and made a decision to get rid of most of them because they tend to fall between the cracks, lacking both the authority and finality of a collected poems as well as the context of the publication's occasion embodied by first editions. When I like a poet's work I'm inclined to read it all, book-by-book, cover-to-cover—what's the use of sending a lifetime of well-made books to a poetic chop shop? I did, however, hold on to a few because I was either particularly interested in the editor's selection or because they are the only available representation of texts otherwise long out of print. Like anthologies, selected poems are perhaps most useful in the classroom because they are compact, affordable samplers ideal for introductions. But once in a while, a special selected comes along that casts the poet's work in a new light,

reminding longtime admirers of the breadth and depth of a poet's oeuvre, while simultaneously exuding the potential to inspire a new community of readers. Kit Robinson's *The Messianic Trees: selected poems 1976-2003* is just such a book. It is the first substantial retrospective collection within the poet's dynamic body of work, a body that is still very much in process, getting better all the time.

Clocking in at 305 pages (the longest book published to date by the magnificent Adventures in Poetry), *The Messianic Trees* possesses the elegant (not ungainly) heft of a respectable collected, covering just over the first quarter century of work by this major American poet. The cover of this generous gathering of poems resembles a university press edition (cool palette, dynamic grid, and clean sans serif display fonts) while maintaining the refined personality and sensible attention to detail that I admire in the books published by Adventures in Poetry. *The Messianic Trees* doesn't look like a selected poems. In fact, it's easy to miss the qualification, "selected poems 1976-2003," that appears in discreet white letters and maroon numbers against a dark grey backdrop just beneath Hélio Oiticica's painting, culled from the *Metaesquemmas* series on the cover. It's worth noting that "metaesquemmas" is a neologism coined by Oiticica that combines the Portuguese words 'meta' (beyond vision) and 'esquema' (structure), because it comes very close to describing Robinson's keen negotiation of discursive images and formal experimentation. The monochrome shapes described as "obsessive dissections of space" by means of color" remind me of the signature tension between the poems' prismatic, composite surface and the ostensibly simple, often colloquial, language.

*The Messianic Trees* comprises selections from 13 books that have appeared in fairly regular two-year intervals since the publication of his second book, *The Dolch Stanzas* (This Press, 1976). *Chinatown of Cheyenne*, the author's first book, published in 1974 by Michael Waltuch's legendary Whale Cloth Press, and his collaborations with Alan Bernheimer and Lyn Hejinian, were not included. The organization of *The Messianic Trees* is practical; the table of contents divides it into 13 sections marked by the title of the book (and happily, the year) in which the poems first appeared. Although there has been some shuffling of poems within each section, the order is chronological. Once you're in, there are no title-pages dividing sections, allowing the poems to seep, reflect upon and mingle with one another in unexpected ways that reveal an impressive array of forms (consistently pleasing to the eye) tempered by a remarkably alert ear ("The right note out of time is far worse than a wrong note in time" is the old adage he quotes in *The Grand Piano: an experiment in collective autobiography*, Part 5 (Mode A, 2007)).

*The Dolch Stanzas* alone far outweighs the price of admission. Long out of print, and republished here in its entirety, this seminal work was championed early on by Michael Gottlieb in  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ , and has, more recently, become a source of inspiration for a new wave of procedural and conceptual writing practices. In part 7 of *The Grand Piano*, Robinson notes that, "*The Dolch Stanzas* follows a standard form for the modernist lyric adopted early on by Mayakovsky and Williams, the three-line stanza or tercet. The advantage of the tercet is that unlike the quatrain, it does not tend to produce resolution, but rather thrusts the attention forward from one stanza to the next." He goes on to explain the method of constraint employed by *Dolch* in this chapter, as does Barrett Watten in his generative analysis that appeared in the first chapter of *The Constructivist Moment*, where he calls the poet's work "a demonstration of a theory of meaning that begins with the way poetic vocabulary at once constructs and interprets interlocking frames of language and experience."

# BOOK REVIEWS

What follows is a perpetual reinvention of perception. Many of the poems demand speed, then urge us to stop and smell the flowers. They're agreeable, like the author, willing to stop cold, throw it into reverse, and pause to look, and look again, at the flickering particulars rolling by. What moves moves us with remarkable clarity. The strabismic minimalism in the sequence of one-word-per-line structures in "Ice Cubes" gives the illusion of slowing down movement by increasing the duration between one image (word) and the next, while long and winding prose poems like "A Sentimental Journey" sound like the script of a New Wave film:

## DELTA LINES

camera strap

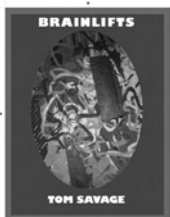
Guy does pull-ups from branch of tree. Guy leans on parking meter. Other guy climbs tree & straddles limb. Hangs by one hand, drops to sidewalk. Knocks street sign w/ half-full beer bottle. Gets in car with buddy, drives off. Guy splits, bicyclist splits.

## 門 STRAW GATE



Whose Place Lydia Cortés

## Lydia Cortés, *Whose Place*



Brainlifts Tom Savage



heart stoner bingo Stephanie Gray  
The Rorschach Factory



In Sunsetland With You Bill Kushner



The Rorschach Factory Valerie Fox

and Tom SAVAGE Stephanie GRAY, Bill KUSHNER, Valerie FOX

[leafscape.org/StrawGateBooks](http://leafscape.org/StrawGateBooks)

Wide awake and peppered with meaningful irony, dreams, linguistic follies, magic, choppy undercuts, postmodern sobriety, humor, sensual observations, ease, non-nonsense wisdom, bizarre juxtapositions, and elusive patterns, these poems come to us from a forest of messianic trees, a school without walls.

*Kyle Schlesinger writes and lectures on topics related to poetics, typography, and artists' books. His books include Mantle w/ Thom Donovan (Atticus Finch, 2005), Hello Helicopter (BlazeVox, 2007), The Pink (Kenning Editions, 2008) and Look (No Press, 2008).*

## PRAGEETA SHARMA INFAMOUS LANDSCAPES

FENCE BOOKS / 2007

REVIEW BY KAREN KOWALSKI SINGER

Prageeta Sharma's *Infamous Landscapes* invites the diligent reader on a map-tour of landscapes populated with voices exploratory, self-investigative, lyrical, and sometimes whimsical. This collection, her third, is concerned with a relationship to language and poetry ("All those etched poses neatly joined: / Mastery, hierarchy, witchcraft and shamanism")—as well as with the messier complexities of navigating the channels of love, romance, and relationships in the contemporary world.

The opening poem, "Candor," invokes Wordsworth: "of candor in the grass, / feelings can disqualify future feelings." So saying, she moves beyond "emotion recollected in tranquility" to plot the uneasy footing of a poet concerned with the transformations of language and the intricacies of expressing them in poetry that is new in form and strategy. She acknowledges her debt to George Oppen and Barbara Guest, as well as

Wordsworth, and some poems nod to poets Katy Lederer, John Ashbery, Heather McGowan, and dramatist Ruth Margraff.

The landscapes encountered in those poems are not Romantic or painterly. We view such landscapes from a distance and imagine ourselves inside them. In Sharma's poems, we see occasionally and vividly the tree, the bird, the flowers, the clouds of the Romantics, but they appear, displaced and transformed, landscapes perceived schematically through such technological tools as the lensatic compass or topological maps—not new technology certainly, but put to new uses in these poems. She employs these modes of perception to position herself—or to locate her position in the 21st century, as a woman, a person of Indian descent, a poet post-Romanticism. Sharma's schematic landscapes cut an opening through the traditional visual and imagined views. Employing juxtaposition, conflation, and syntax that, while fully connected, is nearly surrealistic in its leaps, she exposes slices of the background and foreground: the thought, philosophy, art, technologies, commerce, and relationship dynamics that make up a self and a world it moves in and against, so that we see infrastructure or topology—not just the way things look, but history, underpinnings, and connections. And still, the tree, the bird, the "bare ankle entwined" pop up with a vividness that locates us squarely in the physical world.

The book documents the poet's attempt to define her position and locate her power, both sexual and artistic. "Here and here" reads as a description of desire, frustration, and the search for fulfillment. In "Off Year: Several Hopes and Health Games": "You are not really a master! / I just invented this



**Poets In Need** is a non-profit organization providing emergency assistance to poets who have an established presence in the literary community as innovators in the field and a substantive body of published work. Assistance is given only in cases of current financial need that is in excess of and unrelated to the recipient's normal economic situation and that is the result of recent emergency (due, for example, to fire, flood, eviction, or a medical crisis).

Checks should be made payable to Poets In Need and sent to

Poets In Need is a non-profit (501(c)3) organization. Donations are tax-deductible.

Poets In Need  
Post Office 5411  
Berkeley, CA 94705