

POETRY IN
REVIEW



S T E P H E N Y E N S E R

Some contrivances can be light, tentative, airy, and immediate enough that they hardly seem contrivances. Think not of Joseph Cornell's boxes themselves but of those boxes as rendered by Octavio Paz's "Objetos y Apariciones" – or indeed by Elizabeth Bishop in her wizard translation of Paz's eulogy. Consider the last stanzas, their "monuments to every moment":

A comb is a harp strummed by the glance
of a little girl
born dumb.

The reflector of the inner eye
scatters the spectacle:
God all alone above an extinct world.

The apparitions are manifest,
their bodies weigh less than light,
lasting as long as this phrase lasts.

Far-Fetched, by Devin Johnston (*Farrar, Straus and Giroux*, 77 pages, \$23.00)

Joseph Cornell: inside your boxes
my words become visible for a moment.

Much of the effect is sonic: *comb – strummed – dumb*; or sonic and semantic at once: *manifest – less – light – lasting – long – lasts*. And much of it is the work simply of connotation: *glance – inner eye – spectacle – light – visible*. These lines might seem as much the product of whim and accident as of purpose and intent. And maybe they are.

The kind of verse I have in mind gives the illusion of accommodating accidents and hints, guesses, innuendoes and echoes, hints and intimations. Its implications call their own existence into doubt, they are so subtly present. If they were material, its stanzas might be gossamer and bits of lichen, thread, and thistle-down stuck together with hummingbird spittle. The bougainvillea bract that seems a dwarf moth suspended in still air and turning as on angels' breaths hangs from such a wisp of web as might be used in these ghosts of nests. Words can make such things, perhaps. Mallarmé thought so. Others besides Mallarmé and Bishop have given us examples: Wallace Stevens in certain moods, James Merrill in his symbolist mode, Ezra Pound here and there, and Pound's protégé Basil Bunting – and others back at least as far as the troubadours, writers of *trobar clus* and *trobar ric* ("closed" and "rich" poetry), verses so oblique and recherché that their readers had to be connoisseurs.

Devin Johnston composes poems in that tradition – or that vein. Not always, but often enough to be identified as a descendant of William of Aquitaine, the Troubadour, and none of Johnston's work is untouched by the mode. In fact, his "New Song," one of the poems in *Far-Fetched*, his fourth slim volume of verse, derives from William's poem beginning "Ab la douzor del temps novel," and while his version is not as arcane as some troubadour verse, its opening stanza insinuates a relationship:

As sweetness flows through these new days
the woods leaf out, and songbirds phrase
in neumes of roasted melody
incipits to a new song.
That love should find lubricity
and quicken, having slept so long.

Johnston's logophilia, evident here in "neumes" and "incipits" and the etymology of "lubricity" (which looks back to "flows" in the first line), comports with trobar ric and to some degree undercuts with a nice irony the poem's concluding stanza:

I hate the elevated talk
 that disregards both root and stalk
 and sets insipid pride above
 vicissitudes of love and strife.
 Let others claim a higher love:
 we've got the bread, we've got the knife.

At the same time that he disavows "elevated talk," his sly reference back to the "root" of "lubricity" and his witty echo of "incipits" in "insipid" and "vicissitudes" prove his fondness for heightened speech and refined style, as does the paradox itself. This "New Song" is in more than one sense an old song.

So it is that we get a rendition of Horace ("Sailing under Storm" is a seductively homespun translation of *Odes*, I.14, "O navis, referent in mare"), and "Two from Catullus" (one stems from number 7, "Quaeris, quot mihi basiationes," and the other enlarges a bit on number 72, "Dicebas quondam solum te nosse catullum"), and yet another by him, "Bright Thorn" which begins with the crux in the notorious couplet "Odi et amo" ("I hate and I love," number 85), and so on. The referent in Pound's dictum "make it new" can and probably must involve a model. A past so much deeper as to be ogygian haunts other poems nominally concerned with quotidian life in St. Louis, where the poet lives and teaches. "Come and See" must recount an anomalous appearance one Sunday morning in the neighborhood of Our Lady of Sorrows Church of a Clydesdale horse, perhaps wandered away from the Warm Springs Ranch breeding farm near Booneville, Missouri. The poet has just told us that he has "lived here / thirty, forty years" and therefore got us retrogressing when

Suddenly a Clydesdale
 with no tack or rider
 clip-clops around the corner
 and trots along
 the yellow lines.

How can one not go on and on with the dimeters and trimeters (a couple of monometers sneak in), even as the progress of the horse takes us back in time?

A marvel of
 the Pleistocene,
 creature of grass and dung,
 it must have wandered far
 to reach us,
 through all hours
 and seasons,
 trampling the dust
 of every kingdom.
 From dark recesses

— as from the caves we lived in —

residents
 step out to watch,
 stepping away
 from busy lives,

— and right back into the present in Missouri —

something on the stove
 a bath drawn,
 the phone covered
 like an astonished mouth.

It's Sunday morning, we recall, and here near the local Roman Catholic church the residents have had their sermon — and even a marvel. This, as Auden noted, is “how it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along.”

“The past is never dead. It is not even past.” Johnston understands Faulkner's obsessive theme even as his sensitivity and means — delicate, reticent, subdued, transparent — could not be more different. In “Turned Loose” the setting is his home in St. Louis on a weekend, when the family, “stunned by the week / of home and work,” get to “rise late / and linger at the table / above the morning's residue / of orange peels and magazines.” It's Saturday at this point, not Sunday, so the faintest echoes (or adumbra-

tions) of Stevens's "Sunday Morning" are appropriate. They are "light and unobtrusive," one might say, and indeed

Light and unobtrusive,
 a pencil rustles paper
 to sketch a horse with arched neck
 and whipping lines for legs.
Does anybody have the red?

There is no "holy hush of ancient sacrifice" in the air, but there is something of the concentration thousands of years ago that accompanied the plausibly magical or religious paintings made in Chauvet Cave, say, or Lascaux, of which that horse is undeniably though hardly ostentatiously reminiscent. So yes, here's the red. And then it's Sunday, and after a domestic "ritual" or two, "we find ourselves / within the hall of mastodons, / our clothes still radiating cold," inspecting "an arc of tusk / and chronicle of bone." They are in the city's chief museum, one gathers, though it is tellingly unspecified, where among "so many strangers / the children cling" to the poet "like burrs," and he must suppress "the impulse / to be free of them." On Friday, they had been "turned loose" to "fling themselves out of doors" and into the weekend's freedom, but now they need his protection. On the next day, Monday, in a mirroring paradox, the poet, separated from them for the nonce, wants "nothing but their presence." The contemporary domestic and the historical subterranean situations, the breakfast table and the cave, dovetail surprisingly and gracefully in the poem's meticulously worded conclusion:

I want nothing but their presence,
 my ears attuned to outdoors
 and the timbre of their voices,
 the damp friction of their shrieks,
 so primitive and freshly peeled.

The hypersensitivity and synesthesia are characteristic. Here is the initially unassuming, increasingly uncanny opening of "School Days":

Passing our porch, a girl of ten
 holds a drum against her stomach
 as you might a covered dish.

China trembles with a truck's idle
 or the white hum of compressors,
 the morning air muted
 as though near the ocean,
 lightly ruffled by subaquatic
 scales on a clarinet
 and the tuning of strings.

All is tremulation, movement transmutes into muffled sound, as it does when katydid make their substrate vibrations, and the small ocean waves overlap with the scales of fish beneath them while the breeze blends with the sounds of a muted clarinet amid an orchestra tuning up.

“Pure poetry”? “Correspondences”? A hard stanza to emulate, in any event, and when in the poem's second half the tremulation turns by way of the *k* sound into an “insect chorus” and then “a pinprick of cricket song,” while the yards “lie thick / with indo-therms and agitrons” (the cartoonist's words for the icons indicating heat or shaking), the reader might feel that purity has briefly given way, if not to self-parody, perhaps to preciousness. The poem returns to its symbolist home key with “the lemon zest of walnut leaves” that “illuminates the lawn,” a phrase apposed with the final words, “brickwork slowly revealed,” and we sense that it's we who have been taken to “school,” even put in a “daze” by a technique that describes nothing but itself.

The delayed pun is a device Johnston exploits masterfully. An example: “Want” opens with the injunction “Let the child cry awhile / with a rasp that strains his throat.” The parents relent, then give the child his “cuddy,” a blanket that frays out into “a mushy cud / that smells of spit”:

As the soporific
 takes effect,
 eyes roll inward
 and night unravels
 the wale
 the day has knit.

Impressed by the range of diction, from “cud” and “cuddy” to “soporific,” we just have time to sniff out the link between those

words and the “sop” in “soporific” before recognizing the connection between the textile image and the opening line, “Let the child cry awhile.” If in retrospect we hear subliminally “a wail” in this “awhile,” we are confirmed sixteen lines later when Johnston calls our attention to “the wale” of threads in the fabric.

The sleight-of-hand might well make “eyes roll” – Johnston likes to gloss his felicitous *trouvailles* with a wink – but surely real admiration prevails as we understand that the fabric is that of the poem he has “knit.” Or that he “unravels.” Or both. Since *ravels* is a contranym, meaning both to knit up and to take apart, *unravels* must have a corresponding duplicity. It is a duplicity that happily conforms to that between the child and his father. Back in the first section, the latter expands that initial injunction with another, “Beneath a blanket, let him [the child] find / some solace in himself”; and here in the second section, under cover of precisely a blanket, the poet has entertained himself (the autoerotic undertones cannot be ignored) by weaving contraries together. The “Want” of the title, at once the lack and the desire to remedy it – the “appetite,” to call forth the third section’s last word – produces the work of art. That third section one must leave to the unraveling of others. Suffice it to say that I can’t guarantee that we are invited to conjoin the last syllable of “appetite” to the last syllable of the earlier “solace,” but much can assuredly be made of the second section’s (delayed) rhyme of “word” with “inward.”

Other poems curl inwardly with a clever reflexivity. Johnston turns out to be something of a birdwatcher with an affection for the South Pacific, so “Ting” records the calls of the whipbird and the bellbird, both of which would have contributed to New Zealand’s legendary “dawn chorus” before climate change decimated it. The bellbird’s song comprises notes that are “each . . . a drop of water / or tap on glazed ceramic / or *tink* of sonar / to sound the empty space / and test how long / how far” it can sustain itself, so, by virtue of Johnston’s customary border crossings among time, place, and art form, it makes us “think of Ming brushwork / and how each island / has its *ting*.” At this juncture, the poem is in its fourth stanza, so now when it needs “to pause” euphoniously “among eroded rocks / and cataracts of moss,” it can emerge as “a river / still unscrolling” across a break to the fifth stanza. (Though the whipbird’s call “punctuates the morning,” at the outset, Johnston, winking again, omits all punctuation thereafter and marks

each new sentence simply with a capital letter.) The poem is its own “unscrolling,” visual and melic alike, from its title, “Ting,” through “*tink tink-ting*” and “think of Ming” and a whole bian-zhong of *tinks* and *tings* and present participles including “unscrolling” to the final word. At its end,

cool yet intense
 [it] gathers fog around it
 to sound the hush
 and make it ring.

Repeating his quibble on “sound,” Johnston brings the song full circle – in a manner, we note, evocative of Pound’s “luminous moments,” such as the touchstone near the end of Canto XI: “In the gloom the gold gathers the light against it.”

In such poems Johnston, who is addicted to the short iambic line, recalls not only Pound but also Elizabeth Bishop, a convergence of influences that might jolt us into musings on the futility of extricating “pure poetry” from poetry per se, as well as the rich possibility of the involvement of the rarefied and the ordinary, the extravagant and the routine. If one were to argue for the simultaneous presence of Ol’ Ez and Miss Bishop in contemporary verse, one could do much worse than offer into evidence Johnston’s eight-part sequence “Late October.” Its opening section could hardly be more modest:

Kids crowd the stoop
 backs to a darkened house

 so close to nothing
 yet incurious

“Incurious” indeed, these lines, if by that word we mean “plain” or “common” or “near to negligible.” Along with this characteristic reflexivity, we notice the feathery, Johnstonian rhyme of “house” with “incurious,” but there doesn’t seem to be much to work with or to build on. Nor does the second section seem extraordinary:

Across the brick façade
 a kestrel

 races to meet
 its shadow

“Eight Ways of Looking at a Suburb,” perhaps. If, impatient, one skips down to section 6, the difference is jarring (unless one has read the first paragraph in this review):

Cashing out
 the bartender croons
If you see me getting smaller
Trobar clus
 Closing time

This could be a patch out of Eliot, who knew almost as much as his *copain* Pound about the troubadours, crooners and inventors of the trobar clus, or closed form, and who immortalized the pubkeeper’s formula “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME.” The sequence takes on a new cast, so to speak, as the opening’s “darkened house” turns vaguely theatrical. Are we spectators as it were at a drama closing – or beginning, since the houselights go down then? Could the sequence have begun with an ending? Given *The Waste Land* as a backdrop, “Closing time” suggests the larger, apocalyptic “Time closing,” and the “nothing” the kids seem indifferent to looks more like a Beckettian “Nothing.”

With the first section also now in mind, if we glance back at the second section, the word “kestrel” illuminates the interesting word “stoop” – a Midwestern locution that means (incorrectly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* informs us) an ordinary porch of a house. It is also an Elizabethan term for the sudden, steep descent of a hawk toward its prey, a sense pertinent because a kestrel is a small hawk, sometimes called, like Hopkins’s glorious, augural bird, a windhover. This slight sequence has a keen eschatological edge.

We read his poem this way partly because Johnston guides us expertly in the third section:

Hawk and starling sport
 through all this rigging
 of blocks and lines
 counterweights and arbors

 the street
 a theater set for storms

The hawk returns, and so does the “darkened house,” now explicitly “a theater set for storms.” The “theater” will have its

guywires and blocks and pulleys, mechanisms for lifting and moving sets, its “rigging / of blocks and lines” and “counterweights,” just as the poem has its own rigging or arrangements of blocks or stanzas and lines or verses. The word “arbors” deftly rhymes with “sport” and “storms” (that is a part of the poem’s “rigging”), but also introduces the concept of a variety of scenes – a covered alley, say, a retreat or bower, a garden, trellised shrubs – that might serve as counterweights to the ominous “storms.”

This is a sequence worthy of the composers of trobars clus, as the fourth section, picking up the *or* rhymes twice in the first four words, and iterating the “rigging” in the phrase “faintly nautical,” intimates:

A chunk of sycamore
 adorns the telephone line
 branch and trunk long gone
 stump a faint impression

just that cylinder
 faintly nautical
 hung in a crown of air

It is probably irrelevant that scholars like Robert Graves in *The White Goddess* observe that the sycamore or plane tree was associated by the ancients with the aspect of poetry we also call wisdom. It is more to the point that although those whom Graves thinks of as “the lyre-plucking, red-stockinged troubadours,” who “tried to bridge the functions of priest and poet,” are “long gone,” vestiges remain – in Pound’s work, and Eliot’s, and Johnston’s. This ingenious invention in verse seems intended both to create and to “stump a faint impression” (the noun works also as a verb) of a deep-rooted tradition.

Graves’s eccentric tome, as I said, is probably superfluous here, though once it has been introduced, it would seem perverse of us to overlook the sequence’s seventh section, the most banal yet the most weirdly singular: “Two boys lug / a Samsonite / full of leaves / across the lawn.” The name of the luggage company fairly jumps at us, and the eponymous Samson is for Graves a version of the Hercules – god and sacred king – who is the consort of his White Goddess, the hallowed mother and muse of all poets. Don’t

the “leaves” in the suitcase come, in effect, from the chopped-down sycamore? In any case, the venerable pun on “leaves” is unavoidable, and the absence of the tree and the birds (and their signified, the tradition) comports with the sequence’s last lines: “song gives way / to sunlight on concrete.” In view of the vatic overtones of sections 1 and 6, this sequence could have ended more dramatically with its remarkably concentrated penultimate couplet: “A starling whets / her thorn of beak.” The compression – the replacement of a descending dove by the starling, the conflation of starling and shrike and thorn tree, the biblical overtones (the fourth section has touched on “a crown of air”) – is so powerful that it recalls Geoffrey Hill in *For the Unfallen* and Robert Lowell in *Lord Weary’s Castle*. (Shrike, thorn tree, dove, and wisdom all figure in the latter’s “Where the Rainbow Ends.”)

But Johnston’s sensibility is quieter, restrained. He always has something in common with his birds, and here is his “buff-banded rail,” a “Scavenger,” the object of whose “queries,” in this densely decussated volume, hark back to the thin religious strain in “Late October”:

It queries fallen fruit
with manners so refined
as to be indeterminate,
its herringbone immaculate.
Aloof though underfoot . . .

He resembles his lyrebird in “Small Triumphs,” whom he finds “fossicking for worms. / No song, no *éventail plissé* / of filaments and plumes.” As those delightful lines demonstrate, his delicacy itself can be extravagant, but modesty is his way – so inveterate that he can begin his new volume with a tacit comparison of himself with a hen, of the breed “Ameraucana,” to be specific. The Ameraucana, as its name suggests, is a domestic American chicken, though it came to the United States from Chile and thus might be called “far-fetched.” The poem is so thick with the particulars Johnston loves (“mercury-vapor light,” “lateen tail,” “tufted auriculars,” “a tussock of cloverleaf”) and a synesthesia that seems innate (“mahogany tones / of a tenor deep within the house, / but not the soft chromatic descent / of snowmelt”) that the poet seems to disappear behind the lovely, vivid object. But for the reader who

has looked deeper into the book, this first poem's final lines yield another dimension:

From a fallow bed, so much undone,
 your parched and reptilian cry proclaims
 a perfect form of incompleteness:
 first egg of the year.

At the other end of "Far-Fetched," balancing the mundane "Ameraucana," we find the exotic "Satin Bowerbird":

Devout in your compulsion,
 you weave a bower of endless night,
 from something old and something new,
 collecting bits of broken glass
 from a bottle of Bombay Sapphire gin,
 a single curl of dyed wool,
 parrot feathers and filaments
 of your own electric eye.

By copping his second line above from William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" ("He who torments the Chafers sprite / Weaves a Bower in endless night"), and his third from the old saying about the bride's good-luck charms, Johnston intimates his relationship to this avian collector and designer of bright bits, which he then elaborates in stanzas that compare the bowerbird to a still life painter. Finally, in his valedictory lines, he addresses the bowerbird as any poet (or troubadour – the term means "finder," after all) with a predilection for this poetic vein would secretly want to be addressed:

Alert in your devotion,
 unseen by any human eye,
 you weave a bower of endless night
 and pause within, head cocked
 to nudge one azure bead
 until magnetically aligned,
 fussing over vestiges of sky.