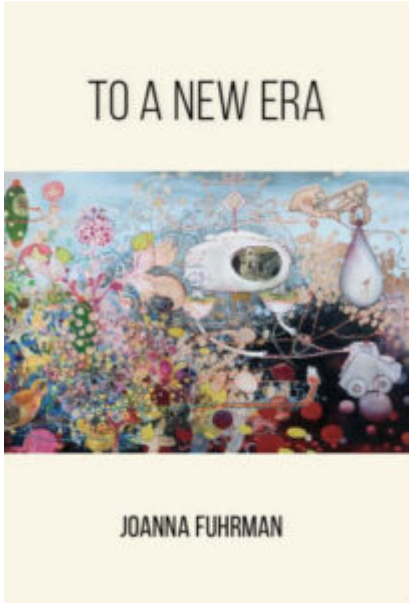
Weirder Sadness, Reverberating Empathy, Invisible Revolution – Joanna Fuhrman's To a New Era

written by Chris Stroffolino | March 1, 2021



To a New Era by Joanna Fuhrman
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"If we are fundamentally/ timeless," Fuhrman asks early in *To A New Era* (or late if you read it backwards) "can we still be damaged by time?" (8) Whether this time is seen as biological aging, or an economic and cultural paradigm shift (too many to list), or the glut of dystopian thinkers and feelers, Fuhrman claims, "the dystopian surface/…is not enough to satiate/ the present, or unmake the water buffalo of the past" (42) without having to resort, on the other hand, to utopianism.

Rather, the sentience in this book inhabits the empty core in the circle of history–or discursive prose–to destroy "ghostly bodies and conspiracy tambourines" (1) and put the fun back into being malfunctioning and defunded, and bring me to a place in which middle age can feel like childhood (but with sex, liquor and hipper boots, 11), where we "*pretend* history is the truck running us over." (33). But part of what makes her faith in such "timelessness" throughout the book feel so *earned* is that it is not escapist as a transcendental ideological posture, but more to do with health, humor, a secret crush on everybody in the world that does not preclude some jabs of tough love along the way to strengthen us to "face…the wind's teeth." (101)

In the wide range of aesthetic strategies and poetic forms (pantoums,

sestinas, aphoristic one-liners, Abercederian, prose-poem “essays,” Berriganian or Mayerian sonnets, etc) Fuhrman brings into play in this collection, such “timelessness” turns out to feel more alive, embodied, emotional, and present than the time-bound disembodied. Rather, it’s something put on trial, on an everyday basis, whether in the horror of an activist realizing s/he might very well have “a cell phone in (their) pocket, instead of a heart,” or getting so wrapped up in political activism and arguments over successful strategies, that you don’t notice your “missing flesh…where a chest used to be” (48), and “mistake a beautiful etcetera/for a righteous plan.” (51) —and, no, this doesn’t mean she doesn’t engage in activism!

Fuhrman is well aware how the hostile external forces that we resist, fight, try to quell can trojan horse their way into us, or that externally directed anger (33,36) may end up not to harm any enemy but ourselves on a physical level while also making us less fun, at least that’s what this line makes me think of: “Each day I woke to the sound of a monstrous bell.
Without/noticing, I had become the bell myself.” (80).

Reading lines like “The world is burning, but everyone needs sleep (54),” other lines etched into my brain in college return, like D.H Lawrence, “If we make a revolution, make it for fun” or Wallace Stevens’ “The Revolutionists stop for orangeade”—but even more I feel the spirit that Frank O’Hara (whose “Naphtha” she rewrites), Kenneth Koch and other New York (School) poets tapped into and strove to embody is alive and well and updated in a funky, at times fierce (the aphoristic pieces have that John Yau punch), feminism that in Fuhrman’s head heart hand poems has healing potentials for that self-torturing little bell. Fuhrman’s meta-political poems not only flesh-out the second wave feminist dictum that the personal is political, but remind me how defiant Kenneth Koch was titling a book, *The Pleasures of Peace*, at the height of the Vietnam war, and the militant anti-war movement.

In this collection, bodies, like hearts and spirits, are porous, whether felt in the contagion of a toddler’s *transhistorical* “primal scream,” (12) or the transmittable pre-covid germs in a stranger’s sneeze, or joy of another (ahistorical) toddler smiling on the B train (5). Throughout, there are many images of outside and inside encountering each other or overspilling boundaries: oceans in bathtubs (14-16), water/in iron shoes (44), currency made of pigeon blood spilling out in a bus (61), and what Martine Bellen calls “funicular modes of language transport,” even in the most grounded poems.

The complex porousness between “outside” and “inside” is especially dynamic in the playful engaging surfaces of frame-shifting poem, “The Happiness Factory.” Set in a classroom and sustaining a conceit of poem-as “pigeon-shaped dwelling,” it may be the best poem I’ve ever read about teaching imaginative poetry—I can’t believe Kenneth Koch wouldn’t love it—in part because it’s no mere recounting of an experience, but also casts the reader into the role of the students listening to her embodied *ars poetica*, a pedagogy of fun that tells of the ‘purposeful purposelessness’ of the sublime or “magical thinking” by showing it and vice versa.

Even though the poem uses a “I-they” dynamics, the speaker is less a dead lecturer than a kind of zen master blowing their minds without any hint of paternalism or condescension. There’s an awareness, on part of the speaker, that the students are skeptical and that she has to seduce their imagination:

I know some of my students

would rather be asleep in bed, and that others are

daydreaming about pre-gaming with their ancestors.

They have a faraway look in their eyes as if their

great grandmother is holding their ponytail up

during a quick before-party hurl.

The outside is already inside, there in the here, memories and future projections in the “now” of the class-session. Reading this passage, I realize it’s not fair to reduce the setting to the classroom, because there’s so many things going on here, a teacher imagining their students imaginations wandering to time and space, a sense that you don’t have to teach “imaginative flight,” but tap into it. Later, when the skeptical students ask, basically, what’s the point, in the final three stanzas this teacher-speaker tells us:

I made up stories depending on who was in the room,

I’d tell them that one pigeon was being built to shelter

a future god. Another would be used to store a special

refrigerator capable of reproducing the food removed

from its shelves. I told them of “top secret” designs.

One would be so comfortable that its silk pillows

would instantly cure PTSD, and another would be

so quick it would travel faster than a rumor on Twitter.

I often said if we became experts at building

the birds it wouldn’t even matter if our planet

died. The pigeons could be our new homes.

It wouldn't matter that none of us had the key. (65)

This is a teacher who can *read* her students, and meet them where they are—whether their concerns and anxieties are more spiritual, environmental, or more in terms of mental health or reputation, and these defenses are so-over the top (a self-replenishing fridge?) that when I get to the deflating punch-line, "it wouldn't matter that none of us had the key," I do not feel despair in the fact that we may not be able to live there, that even if the (post-capitalist worker-owned collective) happiness factory cannot build any inhabitable, bullet-proof, happiness, you can still have pigeon-shaped fun trying.

Other poems may also suggest a similar relationship between fun and happiness, as if you can be fun, and even have fun, without exactly being happy. In "Ode To Unhappiness" (53), another poem that brings to mind Kenneth Koch poems like "Locks" and "Thank You," she praises the beautiful things that ordinary unhappiness has given her, from "the cloud of spoiled milk ruining beautiful/ bitter coffee" to "songs too remote/to be required to hear." This epideictic praise of unhappiness culminates in the last two couplets:

And for the warmth of your orange catlike

body, snuggling quietly between us,

The ghost mouse of the future, weirder sadness,

wriggling slowly in your closed jaw

Is ordinary unhappiness a cat with a not-quite-yet dead mouse in its mouth? Does "orange" suggest the shadow of Trump and Trumpism that haunts some of the poems in this book? Has anyone ever been able to rid themselves of unhappiness once and for all? Better to embrace a "future, weirder sadness" it seems as more glamourous than the personified solitary "Happiness" in "Crunch!" (81), who doesn't seem very happy, or, if happy, not very fun. The praise of the ordinary can also get us to some of the sorrow that informs even the book's lightest poems, especially as regards patriarchy which (unlike say the 'tech revolution') was as much a part of the old era as the new.

Many of the poems, especially in the book's 3rd and final section, foreground gender and men's perennial attempt to flatten women's emotional intensity or seriousness:

In the Bible, Abraham thought Sarah was in a funk,

but she was actually shaking with grief.

(Lavender, 72)

She thinks “breakfast,” but the world

hears “steak.” She thinks it’s time to tie

the ribbons on the invisible revolution,

but the world hears “party time,”

(Moveable Us, 87)

In one of the poems titled, “History Lesson,” she writes, “Women noticed that their tears/had the potential to be sexy if they wore/them inside out so the dry interior/hid the messy wetness of the drop’s/skin.” (58) The gravitas and the pathos in these excerpts deepen and ground the humor and sense of fun foregrounded in some of the other poems that satirize various forms of the patriarchal poetry tradition: “The Poetry Reading,” (74) or “Bro-Realism” (“You may be a bro, but that doesn’t mean/your liver doesn’t wear a pink feather beret,” 92).

“Listen to the Rooster,” (69) seems like a send-up of a Whitmanian mode, both stylistically and thematically, as the ‘barbaric yawp’ of Whitman’s incantatory abstract transcendentalism becomes a “rust-gilded squawk” of barren cowboy bro-poet cosmic slop, the “I” here a polar opposite of the more grounded “I” of the domestic poems in the first section of *To a New Era.* The poem “Old Weather” (70-71), in a more serious, and nuanced vein, with its barren bull, missing sky father and steeple, which, “like any other work of beauty,/pretends to pray for the end of thinking,” seems to be a send up of Christianity/theology/philosophy but also Wallace Stevens (and his critique of surrealism as merely inventing, and not discovering), but with more sympathy and empathy.

One of the most capacious meta-political (and metapoetic) poems that takes place in a faultline in intersectionality between the artist and activist, personal and political, the transhistorical and historical, narrative and lyric, thinking, feeling and praxis, is “Broken Singularity: Kali Tribe Sestina.” While many sestinas get more strained, clunky, or lose their inspiration at the end under the constraints of ‘boxed being,” the skillful transformations Fuhrman takes her 6 ending words through (and/or let them take her through), create a world that cannot be contained by any reading (every time I reread it, I find something else I somehow missed, like a reusable mirror).

Most of the poem is spoken by a “we,” in a detached meditative tone, looking back, without regret, self-pity or snark, at an involvement in a utopian

collective art movement, righteously struggling for “more post-capitalist travels” against billboards and broadcasts of the oppressive status quo systemic enemy that “put a cage around our hope.” Trying to read it in terms of a narrative, it appears there are 3 characters, the “we” speaker, their babies/children, and an implied “they” of systemic oppression represented metonymically as “billboard” and “Broadcast.” To this, by the end, we could add an “I,” a singular speaker who appears to be part of the “we,” like when a choral piece of music becomes an aria (though we could say the “we” is also part of the “I”). While many political poems against systemic injustice take the form of “us” and “them” binary, Fuhrman’s addition of the children triangulates the artist/activist’s struggle.

The contrast between the speaker(s) and their children is particularly nuanced. Is it a primarily generational contrast, like a 70s feminist art-pioneer wondering if their children are born with advantages they weren’t (perhaps because of their labors in fighting against the billboard?) Or are “we” fighting primarily on an aesthetic and spiritual dimension (“for portable arias”), where our children are primarily fighting on militant activist, social realist level, as is suggested when she writes “placards,/ not poetry, taunted us,” in contrast to “our children,” who “wrote transformative placards/ in the womb.”

Yet the children are associated with arias, as if they embody what the “we” is but longing, hoping, wishing, fighting for, as some artists speak of their work as babies, and have been known to envy their works for their revolutionary power to shatter “the space time continuum.” The children, however, do not reappear in the poem—or one could map the triangulation as less between characters and more between words: at one extreme the negatively connoted “Billboard,” and on the other extreme the positively connoted “aria” (which can also be defined as a “written or spoken passage or emotional, dramatic text”) and somewhere between them the word “placard:”

> We tried to convince ourselves the blank and spiritual placard
>
> we held above the burning city was more than a placard.
>
> We hoped its blankness could change minds.

The linguistic slippage that occurs in the word “placard” here attests both to what Martine Bellen calls *To A New Era’s* “debate with language’s complicated conundrums, histories and alternate histories, as well as Elaine Equi’s praise of this book for its embracing “our commodified pop-art present, turning its tools against itself.”

Beyond this, “Broken Singularity” removes any more specified historical context, and it also purposely does not gender this “we,” that is, if we ignore the title and its dedication to pioneering second wave feminist activist artist Mary Beth Edelson, (now 87), who referenced “Kali” (the goddess of destruction) in her anti-patriarchal art. So it’s as tempting to locate the speaker *as* Edelson, as much as Fuhrman herself. Since Fuhrman, in

another poem referencing gender, writes “all context is a lie,”(87). it could be any contemporary who has found themselves operating in the of interstices of art and activism, or anyone who ever identified more with a “we” than an “I” (as if the “we” is what caused the “broken singularity” of the title).

In the 6th stanza and envoi, as Fuhrman’s words, soaring with an elegant, seamless use of enjambment portray (we’re still officially in the past tense) and (re)enact a transformation in sinuous conversational sentences, a “radical change like a spell” seems to occur as the “we,” following its children, vanishes from the poem, and we are left with, or introduced to, a previously absent “I,” alone, being inspired by listening to (rather than singing, or fighting for) a portable aria:

> …..I could hear the music beneath the broadcast
>
> and watch its notes wrap themselves in wet leaves, soft placards
>
> encircling pain. I’d slip wishes inside the slim volumes of travels.
>
> I wanted to believe in this, in nothing else, I wanted to hand/
>
> over my future in the present tense, to ignore the billboards
>
> for war and shopping, but I knew I needed more than an aria’s
>
> reprieve from suffering. No song would be enough to broadcast
>
> the reverberating empathy required to upend the billboard and the placard.
>
> No open hand would be open enough. There is no travel but travel.

Not only does the “we” become “I,” but active yields to passive, receptive. Words like boxed-in, envy, fighting, faming and raised fists yield to the previously elided sensual beauty, pain and suffering, as if to return to the lyrical singularity that had been broken before the poem began, but it doesn’t end there.

In the envoi, the final sentence is the only one in the present tense, and its enigma recalls, but betters, Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo.” Travel here seems far less tourism than it does travail, work, labor. Is she saying we may need to feel the world as, or through, an “I” to feel more reverberating empathy in the present than a “we” with a future oriented transcendent ideology of hope that might be able to change minds without changing hearts? Or does she reject such either/or of narrative closure? It may be a both/and, not opposing the “I” to the “we” but repairing the broken singularity to reground a wider tribal “we.” Part of what makes this declaration of “reverberating empathy” so earned, and so convincing is that

it is not merely a declaration, but is *being enacted* in the poem's equanimous and empathetic attitude towards the "we" in the first five stanzas, as if you can't truly be empathetic to others without extending such empathy to your own (or collective) past, as if to forgive it, laugh and cry with it, rather than dismiss it as something you've moved beyond.

Even though this poem dedicated to a painter avoids using colors, "Broken Singularity" itself could be called a "ricocheting opalescent aria" (a solo voice in a multi-voiced artform). In the end she claims that no matter how artful and emotionally powerful an aria can be—an "I can die now" moment—it's insufficient and reduced to mere 'song' by the end). Yet, paradoxically, experiencing the poem feels like entering a world in part because of this declaration; it may not be sufficient but that doesn't mean it's not necessary. And though I do not know the author's intention, right now I prefer the feeling of "reverberating" to "ricocheting"—the latter feels a little more like a bullet, the latter more like a spine tingle.