

natural world isn't pushed as far as it could go, because it attempts to recast the natural world instead of merely observing it, it's a quantum leap ahead of the simple environmentally friendly writing one reads in the United States.

Brian Whitener

§

Barbara Guest. *Rocks on a Platter: Notes on Literature*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999.

Rocks on a Platter contains some of Barbara Guest's most obscure and compelling lines since *Defensive Rapture* (1993). It has been interpreted by other reviewers as one long poem that examines the "implacable poet" as subject and vector in the process of creative production. While that may be the case, these poems are also literally "notes" on literature, as its subtitle suggests. The book can be seen as Guest's own jottings in response to her inspiring and eclectic research, with texts dissected and arranged to become poetic objects resonating as in a still-life painting.

Guest was one of the central members of the New York School, though David Lehman (in *The Last Avant-Garde*) omits her in favor of an unnecessarily reductive, masculine view of the group. It could be argued that Guest's work, and perhaps Guest herself, is more radically individual, and less easily summarized. Canonical practices have typically excluded such writers in favor of more homogenous categorization. While this tendency has long been under critical scrutiny, the practice of dropping particularly influential, but often more clairvoyant poets from critical schema persists (see, for instance Alan Kaufman's omission of Edward Dorn and his connections to Black Mountain and the Beats from *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry*). But what critics fail to recognize or like to forget is how different kinds of poets still speak to each other, still have friendships and discussions that are crucial to artistic germination whether or not they share the same aesthetics. The best poetry demonstrates this kind of complex engagement with different kinds of poetry and with a greater, interdisciplinary community. Most recently, Guest's work has been noted as one of the foundational influences for what could be considered a feminist "wing" of post-L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets such as Kathleen Fraser, Brenda Hillman, Meimei Berssenbrugge, Lisa Jarnot, Juliana Spahr, and Jena Osman.

Intrinsic to the New York School's poetics was a fundamental cross-fertilization with the visual arts. Painters such as Motherwell, Freilicher, and Rivers were just a few of those whose work and ideas coalesced with those of

the poets. Frank O'Hara worked at MOMA and Ashbery worked as an art critic, as did Guest. Her own work often achieves a kind of poetic equivalent to Abstract Expressionism, forcing the literary critic to work with the vocabulary of the art critic: abstraction replaces representation, patina replaces simple imagery, chiaroscuro, diction. Her poetry reveals a primacy of page as "canvas" that draws from modernist sources, yet achieves a texture which is distinctly postmodern in its absence of a central, controlling ego.

That Guest is the artist of the collage on the cover of *Rocks on a Platter* confirms that her close relationship to the visual arts and to artists is one of the fertile resources of her work. The collage is composed of several subtle, textured surfaces in nearly indistinguishable tones of gray, black, white, and beige. The collage, like the poetry, appears to be composed of shadows, of water and sand as much as of paper. Placement here is as imbued with meaning as the weighty rocks. This cover evokes "natural" sculpture: nature "placed" on a created surface.

Rocks on a Platter is concerned with nature and the natural world, from the "flotsam of the world of appearances" to its "wet earth." One vision which emerges from these "Notes" is that of the natural world as element and object, as force and "life," animate and inanimate. Land is both ship's destiny or conquest and the very limits of language, "ground" is earth and page:

Ship
shoal rocks

to approach this land raving!

Rocks, platter, words, words. . .
X' mammoth teeth. (3)

The book begins with the aqueous beginnings of earth, with "Dreams set by / typography" like a ship in an immense sea. Ideas find themselves in trees and typography, on shore and ship. These "ideas" evolve into an impetus for prose, which yields an archetypal fairytale about children, a wolf, a king, and "baked apples." "Mobility" is "interseamed with print" in a voyage through printed texts: from "secular" mythologies, to references to Keats's "Urn" and other literary milestones, to the final, illusive or heavenly "Dolphin God," who "swims" on the page as a soon-extinct natural wonder, provoking a quotation from Hölderlin: "In ancient times / Heavenly Beings made sense of themselves and how / they have made off with the strength of the Gods."

We travel by way of "Childe Harold"—Browning's poem written amidst nineteenth century re-definitions of "nature"—moving from Darwin to

Freud to Nietzsche. Quotations from Hegel, Adorno, and Hölderlin are interspersed with references to Williams, Eliot, and H.D., and quotations from Dr. Samuel Johnson: “To invest abstract ideas with form, and animate them with activity has always been the right of poetry.” This poetic collage tries to get at the “reality” that is not an “empirical inner and outer world” but a “truer reality.” This is something much of Guest’s poetry confronts: those things that cannot be said, or those things that are suggested by gaps and silences, in the given air between the arrangement of “rocks.” In this way, her art often creates “sacred places” where those emotions or intuitive bits of knowledge that are most difficult to express can be evoked. It is the place where human creation (platter) and earthly creation (rock) meet, where they work, often paradoxically, to become a third, entirely other thing that is neither artificial nor natural. In the following lines a kind of gardening becomes “story,” an activity invested with plant-like “fragrance” which grows from both soil and words into its own life:

She digs with her fingernails into the earth while speaking and
 weeping. Her face is also
 introduced into the story:
 a fragrant narration. (5)

Guest recognizes a nature which is no longer the “capital N” powerful nature but instead one which has become moveable as an object. It is a natural world with a late twentieth century lingering guilt: we believe we are capable of arranging it to our liking, to such an extent, perhaps, that we must try in a kind of quiet, desperate invocation to summon the return of some “Dolphin God.” Beyond early American desires to “control” nature or tame it, beyond the atomic age recognition of our ability to obliterate it and ourselves, this is a kind of prophesy of a new age:

An episode with new palm trees.
 Words in magnetic order
 Words in natural order.

Vulnerable Dolphin skin
 and magnetic skin. (48)

This “magnetic” order of nature asks for an intuitive world, a “charged” set of relationships which imbues the world with a life both “vulnerable” and “magnetic.” The natural “order” refers to that of language as well. In Guest’s poetry, the “field” of poetry is “charged,” which is one of the clearest keys,

perhaps, to understanding Guestian poetics which emerge from Olson's "breath." Word placement substitutes "place" (Olson's Gloucester) as words themselves hold their own histories. And how better to "conduct" this charge than to flood the field with water—the watered page,—water whose immeasurable depths give the illusion of surface? "Entry into waterfield," she writes, "is the wax waterfield, / and savaging." *Rocks on a Platter* begins and ends in water, is at once a statement of poetics, a collage of literary and philosophical influences and responses, and an enigmatic key to Guest's oeuvre.

Catherine Kasper

§

Roberto Tejada. *Amulet Anatomy*. Hadley, MA: Phylum Press, 2001.

The intricate hand stitching, the almost-square shape, and the functional zipper on the black cover make Roberto Tejada's *Amulet Anatomy* (designed by Thomas Glassford) seem more like a collaboration—or an artist's book—than a standard chapbook. Glassford's design gives *Amulet Anatomy* the visual appeal of a fetish object and creates an appropriately erotic context before the poems are even read. Although the poems within *Amulet Anatomy* manipulate a wide range of formal strategies—long, near prose-like lines, couplets, short cutting lines, seven- to seventeen-line stanzas—they all move around a central exploration of desire through the physical sensuality found in familiar landscapes, the male body and its connection to another body, and language and its rhythms. Even while Tejada manipulates the shape of his poems, he maintains a consistent tone and cadence that makes each poem a variation of the one just before it, but always a variation that changes our understanding of desire by showing it to us in subtly different terms. The difference between "play of aimless bodies like and unlike" and "into curve of nameless / limbs, the waters out of which / we surface now with heavy / prick in hand to occupy / the silence," for example, is a difference that moves us between desire as an idea or an ideology that we must negotiate, and the experience of desire in a particular body and situation.

Given that Tejada grew up in L.A. and lived in Mexico City for ten years, as well as New York and Austin, it seems appropriate that his concern with the social and cultural representations of experience materializes as a conversation between disparate communities, both national and linguistic, both sexual and cultural—conversations also taken up in *Gift & Verdict* (Leroy Press, 1999), and in *Mandorla*, the magazine he has edited for ten years. Also significant is Tejada's work with contemporary artists and twentieth-cen-