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Introduction

Robin Linn

Spectacle, Identity, and Otherness: Nine Poets Speak is a special all-poetry issue of *The Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism and Practice* that features the work of nine artists including me, the issue's guest editor. While this collection, like all poetry, may sidestep attempts at classification, there are a number of schools of thought—i.e., psychoanalytic, sociocultural, Marxist, and/or feminist criticism—that the reader (or writer) might use toward contemplating the themes contained in the collection. Like poetry, a theme implies a way of looking, or, a lens one might use to further engage a subject. Broadly defined, this issue looks through poets' eyes at aspects of the human condition.

As a kind of art-based researcher, I see the poet's practice as observing, studying, translating, reporting on, and creating new forms from the data of personal, social and cultural experience. My subject matter often includes the self and its place in the world. Where, why, and how do we belong, for instance? The theme "Spectacle, Identity, and Otherness" stems from my burgeoning interest in the circus after seeing George Bellows' painting, *The Circus* (1912), in the Addison Gallery at Andover's Phillips Academy. Inspired by Bellows' artistic interpretation, I saw the potential to understand more about our psychology by looking at circus performers, especially clowns. I was drawn to the spectacle of these performers' personas—created from their costuming, dramatic play and unique environment; how they are viewed as outsiders to mainstream society because of their roles; and how they provide audiences—their spectators—a reprieve from reality through the roles they play.

The origins of the word spectacle are Latin, from *spectaculum*, meaning show, and, French, from *spectare*, meaning to look at. Our eyes are caught, as are our other senses, by that which stirs and stimulates. As archetypal entertainers, clowns and other circus performers evoke our passions as their play acts out life's emotional spectrum, they catch our eyes and help make up a bigger world of illusion. Like medieval court jesters, circus performers exhibit exaggerated and melodramatic selves that engage imaginations and expectations, mixing comedic actions and social satire. Operating in the spotlight, perhaps under a big top, clowns are examples of commodity and spectacle common to Marxist theory. From an economic perspective, their performances resemble the majority of us in a capitalistic society: we trade products or services for the purpose of survival and to better circumstances. But circus players are people, too, and subject to things all humans might experience; they might be wealthy or survivors of trauma, dysfunctional family histories, physical and spiritual challenges, joys, disappointments, and the span of resulting feelings. They are both carnivalesque public figures and representatives of the human race.

Because of these concrete parallels, the spectacle of clowns and others within the circus' milieu can be seen as a cultural microcosm of larger society. In fact, "mainstream" society is rich with everyday levels of spectacle, identity and otherness. Beyond the obvious professions of media and entertainment, public speakers, sales executives, teachers, coaches, lawyers, leaders, politicians, and ministers work to keep their audiences engaged. These "ordinary" people all embrace certain levels of show, rhetoric, and posturing, employing stances and techniques necessary for successful communication and transactions.

Overall, and somewhat like the circus' big top, I think that the theme of "Spectacle, Identity, and Otherness" might also be viewed as a transparent, colorful umbrella housing notions of what it means to live within one's unique background, environment, assets, vulnerabilities, experiences and coping mechanisms. I suggest the umbrella's transparency because the theme frames a subset of ideas and perceptions but still allows for streams of light, darkness or precipitation to show through. Thus, our views can be colored by a day's pace and tenor, priorities, feelings, and even the weather, while our larger notions of security, purpose, personal and interpersonal relationships can be illuminated and/or obscured by external events.

I am honored to be the guest editor of this special issue, and to be able to present, along with my own poems, the fine contributions of eight poet-colleagues. In order of appearance in this issue, we are: Yolanda Franklin, Jean LeBlanc, Albert U. Turner, Jr., myself—Robin Linn, Steven Cramer, Natalie Young, Tom Daley, Elizabeth Gordon McKim, and Jamie Leighton. Biographical information and personal statements by the poets can be found at the end of this issue. Below, I've briefly noted how some of our poems touch upon ideas of spectacle, identity, and otherness.

In Yolanda Franklin's "Blurry Vision," identity is affected by one-sided recognition, or the way that other people may not see us. Here the poem's speaker has a chance encounter with an unnamed someone at "a makeshift produce stand" on "Orange Ave." It seems an ordinary day "visiting mom with the kids" and "running errands," and the speaker buys turnips, coincidentally, "right next to" a person who is not a stranger. This unnamed person, upon whose head "(t)ime shined a spotlight," viewed (the speaker) "familiar,/the way the old/recall time" but did not recognize her. Thus thrown off balance, the speaker is left to conclude, "Now, I am the iris/out of focus." In her "De Oppresso Liber," Franklin addresses surreally ideas of patriotism, capitalism, commodity and horrors of war. The poem's first stanza in Section III personifies the "dollar bill" which playfully and horribly "marches to taps, points/at fatigued soldiers & lulls the pin" from a grenade that "hopscotches/across the turbaned battlefield." This exchange and its overlapping/blurring of entities and roles invite readers to a fresh consideration of, among other things, the power of money in our society.

Jean LeBlanc's *Emma Lazarus* ("Emma Lazarus Visits the Studio of John Singer Sargent and Sees Portrait of Madame X") compares herself, and her own struggles—"all the years/bound in corset and meter, the constant desire/for freedom, for being known"—to those of the unnamed woman portrayed on Sargent's canvas. Like a mirror that challenges one to judge ideas of beauty, the self-reflection Lazarus endures upon viewing the portrait also begs her to question her sanity and how she feels about the world. As is the case with many artists, Lazarus wants the impossible: to be free but also recognized for her work. On the other hand, the innocence painted in LeBlanc's "Liberation," of five young girls "on the edge of sea past midnight" "bewitched by the tidal swell," reminds the reader of simple, joyful moments that we live for. Dreamy, yes, complete with moon, dancing and laughter, and the poet imagining a grand belonging—via Homer's profile of a woman in his *Summer Night* ("last figure on the left"). LeBlanc muses that it could be her grandmother in the painting, who uninhibited, dances alone and "concedes a flash of modest ankle" to the moon.

Albert U. Turner, Jr.'s sensually rich poems of historical allusion often take us behind the mask to the human emotions of famous entertainers. For instance, the speaker in "Ode to Ira Aldridge, 'the Negro Tragedian'" asks [Ira] "what did you see after you eyeballed/the mirror, wiped away your greasepaint"; this is followed by the somber suggestion, and real possibility of the time, that it might be "elaborate escaping (a) noose." Readers are allowed an off-stage glimpse into the actress in Turner's persona poem, "Vivien Leigh Thinks of a Streetcar Named Desire, 1951"—in contrast to "Brandon's bellowing Kowalski" is Leigh's sweet-dripped vision of some strangers' kindness: "peeked-through lace curtains monsooned by the scent of magnolia." In his "A Photograph of Otis Redding Being Pulled from Lake Monona, Wisconsin—December 11, 1967," the poet reveals the vulnerable side of musician Otis Redding, who "works the crowds like the miracle/of new boots and Woolworth's perfume," but also "cr[ie]d 'I live my life/in doubt, you see.'" The poem captures the perseverance and charm necessary to be a star, and the poignancy of Redding's premature death.

Robin Linn's poems often feature entities longing to belong, as in partnerships and/or community, and to ascend beyond mere existence to higher function and accomplishment. This longing is evidenced in her persona poem, "Embouchure," written in the voice of a "glum trumpet." It has known the thrill of active, ambitious nightlife— it is "[e]nthralled...in memories" and "invisibly dipped in the buzz of laughing breath." It longs to escape its current "subdued" state of "rest in pale velvet," predicting a synergistic partnership with "someone" who will "revive" it and "stir the hearts of listeners." In "Please tint me," the poem's speaker wants "a twine to wave with me daily," and affirms both the creative usefulness of such partnership—"Notions take cue to resurge"—and the "fine purpose" of "togetherness"; this

contrasts with “Cruel heaps of debris” that “smoke and burn” and are “separate by their nature’s intention.” A hummingbird “seeks to meet its/object of affection” in Linn’s “The Hummingbird Swoops,” which also refers to latent promise: “Potential caught mid-cycle...alert... for speechless kindling.”

Except for the Turner boy, responsible for the rather creepy deed of digging “rows of holes with a spade” in the “playground,” and a “someone” the speaker addresses, Steven Cramer’s “Untitled Events” is populated with unidentified figures that function within the small, anxious world set up in this poem. The strangeness and somewhat depressing nature our human relationships are capable of is captured in the lines, “Women lie awake/next to men who’ve shared their beds for years,” and, “Men cross the street to avoid scaring women.” Of little solace, the poem’s sky is “a blue/so dull it’s barely a color”; the implied danger of the sky’s transformation to “white/naked, veined” seems confirmed when the atmosphere is referred to by the unknown addressee as “poison.” Although the reader isn’t told what calamity might occur in the setting, fear and freezing temperatures are givens. Groups, gathered “on...porches” are referred to eerily as “[k]nots of people.” It doesn’t seem too much of a leap to see these people as representative of all humans in their vulnerable, hopeful states: they “nod” together and imagine “get[ting] through the night/without” becoming news themselves.

“HonK’s \$1 Store,” by Natalie Young, is reminiscent of a home for misfit toys with its aisle of “pastel porcelain animals” that are all slightly off. It features a pink puppy “with a droopy left eye,/a drop of red lacquer nuzzled in her/tear duct,” plus “an extra lump/of porcelain on [its] out-stretched paw.” It would be wrong to “take the puppy home,” the speaker muses, for s/he wouldn’t be able to “stop running...fingers over her/one-dollar defects.” In Young’s “What the Wild Animal Knows;,” a polar bear, “Princess,” and “a lady in Berlin” illustrate ideas of identity, spectacle, and otherness. When the lady “climbed into the polar bear exhibit,” because she was suicidal and/or she “couldn’t stand change,” she traversed boundaries between safe/sane and dangerous/insane behavior, becoming both spectacle and an other. The lady enters the bear’s tank; prior to this, the bear had existed as a dangerous spectacle which humans observed from their controlled safety on the other side of the glass. As a spectator, “Princess” may identify with “glee in the polar bear’s eyes” at his unexpected treat; she doesn’t “believe in happily ever after”; and within the psychological struggle to understand her own changes, she “laugh[s] out loud” at the lady’s drastic action and consequences, which include surviving the attack.

In this collection, all of Tom Daley’s poems are written in the voice of his mother. Since persona poems speak to identity via roles that one plays and/or by which others perceive them, the poet’s mother/speaker can be identified as a real woman given the stage and green light to speak dramatically. The mother’s desire to mend her son’s

gender-defiant behavior in Daley's "My Mother Explains Why She Threw Away All My Dolls" begins as a concern to keep him from being tossed off the second grade kickball team: "I stashed your darlings/in the magical cache/of Junkfill Hill"; this after her son was found "clutching,/in each hand, a rag doll." In "My Mother Tells Me She Saw a Man in a Coffee Shop Who Looked Like My Father Might Have Forty Years Ago," Daley's mother/speaker revisits her memory of the poet's father, repeatedly calling him "gaunt" and dramatically describing his face as a "sheepish net," where "[o]ne might have caught the hectic calm/of a carnival about to close." These poems remind the reader that a well-written script plus an actor's ability to go beyond everyday constraints creates vibrant new versions of truth, fiction, or a combination thereof, suspending disbelief and captivating the audience in their look at human behavior, needs and emotions.

Elizabeth Gordon McKim's series of poems revisit her love story with poet Etheridge Knight. In "Memphis Entry January 7, 1991," the poet recalls a drive "in a rented silver caddy/to pay respects to E.K.'s daddy/Etheridge Bushie Knight." In the cemetery, the two poets "cross the tracks/past the creek" to find the cemetery's "part reserved for colored." It is raining and Knight is sick, "his hand on his burning liver/and his mind on his daddy"; back "at the days inn," the two "hold tight and shiver/watch the senate hearings/on the gulf war." McKim's "The Knife," alludes to Knight's state at the time through the poet's description of a "beautiful enamel-handled...knife" that she got in San Francisco's Chinatown: "the enamel handle painted with...curling red blossoms and smoking blue dragons and curving green vines." When the knife went missing from where she had stashed it, she realized Knight had taken it, "for the forays/into the projects to get the rock/you were blowing your life away on." In McKim's "School Ties and Other Synchronicities," the disparate backgrounds of the lovers are contrasted: "In the early fifties" she went to a girl's school "wearing a grey flannel blazer/emboldened with...cheer"; "his streets were blazing/with fury and fear." With these autobiographical love poems, McKim passionately speaks to identity and human vulnerability.

Jamie Leighton's "Entangled" illustrates poetry's power to attract and melodically delight with its economy of words that represent larger ideas, in this case, aspects of the human condition. Beginning with the lyrical "Strands of hair ensnared," the poem employs like-sounding words—"strands," "strung," "swing," and "sway"—as well as repetition, and multiple rhymes, including "hair," "ensnared," and "air." Its simple accessible image of hair caught in a web prompts readers to notice the textural similarity of certain hair and the make-up of a spider's web. Metaphorically, strands of hair "strung between the spider's silky strands" suggests the complex delicacy of our human spectacle and identity: it is a "frail stringing" that includes remaining in certain situations, where "wishing to stray, we sway and stay." Further, "Entangled" reminds the reader of an old adage about the tangled webs we weave. A romantic relationship

is sketched in Leighton's poem, "Rings," in which both desire and a practical, self-preservationist attitude are entwined. "Should you leave,..[t]he nights will not/suddenly extend to fifty-five hours," says the speaker, who doesn't care for "a diamond ring/or chains," wanting only "our arms around...each other." Despite loving "opening up the doors/to find you there," even if that love left, "the firm world would rotate around the sun/the moon would continue too."