

## POETS FROM A DISTANCE

*Miniatures and Other Poems*. Barbara Guest. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002; *By Reason of Breakings*. Andrew Zawacki. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2002.

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A lifetime of poetry separates these two books, with Barbara Guest's *Miniatures and Other Poems* arriving at an octogenarian moment and Andrew Zawacki's *By Reason of Breakings* announcing the advent of a new poet upon the scene. But the half century that intervenes here connects as well as separates the two, since Barbara Guest is one of the poets that has made possible, if not the kind of poetry Zawacki writes exactly, then at least the cultural atmosphere in which it breathes. Guest is well known for her early affiliation with the New York School of Poets, though of late perhaps better known for the way in which that connection has been oddly occluded by literary historians of the movement. The fact that "affiliation" means "to adopt like a son" might be said to say it all in her case. But questions of gender aside, Guest is nonetheless part of how it came to be that readers of poetry no longer expect poems to cohere around discursive sense. If Robert Frost thought writing poems without rhyme and meter was like playing tennis without a net, then we could say that poetry nowadays is often played without a court. There are still lines, to be sure, but one doesn't have to abide by them. We can run around the lawn batting the ball however we wish. There is a marvelous freedom in this, and a good deal of exercise as well, though it can be wearing on the reader, who has to chase down errant balls in the undergrowth. Still, we are happy with our liberties and it does seem poetic licenses are more readily obtained. If the increased difficulty of contemporary poetry is an unintended consequence—and it is by no means clear that it is unintentional—it may be because readers are trying too hard to make sense of it or because they don't properly appreciate, in Yeats's phrase, "the fascination of what's difficult." Both Guest and Zawacki are demanding poets, insisting on a high level of attentiveness and a sophisticated intelligence, but the terms of those demands are rather different. Guest asks us to look at what's behind her poems, while Zawacki asks us to see what's inside of his. In both cases, perception is the key.

Barbara Guest has often talked about the importance of painting to her poetry. She is, in fact, a gifted collagist, as the cover of her new book attests. And when she quotes Chekhov for an epigraph, "I, too, am an ardent





energies on language, not form. The result is a heightening of effect, a quiet insistence on the seriousness of the endeavor. And because Zawacki resists dramatized self-involvement, the “distance from the I” allows for an opening to the reader, a space in which the language of the poems can operate more freely because the poems themselves do not coalesce around personal self-expression—“as if to escape were part of what it meant to strip to nothing,” as he puts it in “From the Book of Divine Consolation.” This, I take it, is what he is talking about in the first stanza of “Velocity among the Ruins of Angel Republic”:

In that gesture toward signing the stages to fullness,  
 even if nothing went without saying, or everything stayed  
 despite what’s been said, distance would have to be structured with all the rest.

Distance is structured by the poem, by the poem’s distance from the I of the poet and—equally important—from the reader. The reader is not appropriated as an audience, in the way confessional poets seem to do in craving attention and approbation. The reader here is free to interact with these poems in a *process* of reading. Meaning is not the product of the poem but an integral part of its onwardness. Meaning is local, rather than global; it unfolds as we go along but rarely folds back upon itself as a complete or final whole. That is why we might be puzzled by a poem such as “Argument for an Elemental Aesthetic,” which opens:

—deficiency implies  
 local forecast & fruition  
 & the climate of a country  
 without which it wavers:

discretion & exposure,  
 say, or uncompromising  
 intimacy of snow

“What does it mean?” is not the most interesting question to ask. “How does it mean?” is more fruitful. We understand the words, but they puzzle us, even as we are taken by the clarity of the diction, the assuredness of the tone, and the beauty of the final image. We experience it as poetry, but not in an easy or comfortable sense. “People wish to be settled,” says Emerson in “Circles”; “only as far as they are unsettled, is there any hope for them.” Zawacki’s poems unsettle us in this Emersonian heuristic sense, provoking the reader into a “self-reliance” that has nothing to do with oneself in the ordinary sense, but rather with that “distance from the I.” These poems are

full of questions, put to us directly and indirectly, troubling our certainties and presuppositions, as in “The Hour between Midnight and Midnight”:

Was it the radical insufficiency, the snow in the rooms and walking  
from one to the other? Was it the iced-over pantomime of sleeping  
  
under a false set of stars, interrogating angels and getting nowhere?

The poem goes on in this manner and ends with an interrogative that doesn't settle the question but rather further unsettles:

What else could it have been if not the hour  
between midnight and midnight, a meridian of suspended acoustics and torque,  
  
when you turned to me and, living it over, said these were the orchestrations  
of two glaciers fretting, but it would take more than that to see in the dark.

This notion of seeing in the dark is a trope for vision, a recognition that we see now as through a glass darkly, but leaving open the question of whether we might later see “face to face.” In this context it is interesting to note that Zawacki's book opens with an epigraph from Augustine, “yet not so broken and cut off from,” and it is worthwhile noting the passage from which he takes it (from *On the Trinity* 4.1.2):

But since we are exiled from the unchangeable joy, yet neither cut off nor torn away from it so that we should not seek eternity, truth, blessedness, even in those changeable and temporal things (for we wish neither to die, nor to be deceived, nor to be troubled); visions have been sent to us from heaven suitable to our state of pilgrimage, in order to remind us that what we seek is not here, but that from this pilgrimage we must return thither, whence unless we originated we should not here seek these things.

Despite the allusion, we should hesitate to ascribe any specific beliefs to Zawacki; he is too much the seeker, too distant from certainty. But Zawacki's poetry—“suitable to our state of pilgrimage”—moves by implication in a world saturated with meaning, a world made all the more meaningful by his poems.