

Vertical's Currency: New and Selected Poetry

Joel Lewis

Talisman House (January 1999)

Unknown \$13.95 (136pp)

978-1-883689-83-4

Like other of the poets of the New York School of Poetry, Lewis' work exhibits an urban sense of place, self-conscious sophistication, a playful sense of linguistic wit and a flirtation with French Surrealism. Of these, his sense of place is most interesting and fresh. His work is not only urban, but gritty Eastern urban. This sense of place stems from industrialized New Jersey: Newark, Hoboken, Paterson: specifically the streets and gathering places of these cities.

Lewis celebrates "monochromatic Clarkson Street," the "Burger Zones," and "Lennie Tristano's Subway Stop" about which he claims: "This is paradise: A gate. /This is utopia: A stopwatch." The poems happen in diners, cafes, before store windows—sometimes to the sounds of Grand Funk Railroad, sometimes to the old Jazz greats, but always with a feeling for both the industrialized ugliness and the quirky beauty which shape the American urban experience.

Despite these energetic and often profound landscapes, these works are challenging. His own poem, "Spinner" perhaps best describes his style: "think of tone, the tone of words trying to surf above the sine waves/of dialectic static..." The reader must enter these pieces with commitment, expecting the unexpected, enjoying the surreal juxtaposition of contradictory or unrelated images which then resonate in the contradiction.

This kind of linguistic sleight of hand is best exhibited in his long poem, "Nervous Fabrics" in which contradiction laces the sense of the poem, delighting and provoking simultaneously. "Let's find a website for the emotionally challenged/ & set up shop. The world's annual/coffee production is a volume equal/ to the hourly outflow of the muddy Mississippi." Despite these ninety-degree turns, this long poem is the most grounded, perhaps because it is an exploration of his Jewish heritage against a more homogenized pop-culture.

Throughout the text, the writing is dense and light-hearted, political and intimate. Lewis' voice is not always easily accessible, but it is always startling, unpredictable and utterly unpolluted by convention.

Vertical's Currency will appeal to fans of the New York School, but will also be refreshing fair for most sophisticated readers of poetry.

ANNE-MARIE OOMEN (March / April 1999)

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