

Like A Bungee Chord

Brian Henry, *Astronaut*. Arc, £7.95

Stephen Burt, *Popular Music*. CLP, Colorado, \$29.95

For better or for worse, Americans were the first to land on the moon and the originators of rock and roll. One could argue these two events alone have considerably influenced the entangled course of American and world history in the late twentieth century. So is it any wonder that two of America's most promising poets have titled their debut collections *Astronaut* and *Popular Music*? Despite this seeming transparency, neither NASA nor *Rolling Stone* could have forecast the emergence of Brian Henry and Stephen Burt, two new stars who have burst into the galaxy of younger American poets. Both writers demonstrate a vivid display of language, an extensive variety of poetic forms, and a refreshing exploration into the many meanings of the self.

Brian Henry, the Fulbright scholar, accomplished editor, critic and promising poet invites the reader into his wonderful collection *Astronaut* with an epigraph from Camus's *The Fall*: "Yes, few creatures were more natural than I." *Astronaut* is a voyage into the poet's organic creation of his multiple selves. Like Camus, Henry flitters back and forth between his profoundly acute, subjective consciousness and its perception of (and often construction of) the external, "natural" world. In a somewhat Romantic gesture, Henry titles each of the book's three sections "Doppelgänger", "Bystander", and "Diviner" each signifying a traditional role or persona for the poet. But contemporary readers need make no mistake about Henry's poetry: this verse adeptly vacillates between styles, forms, and subjects.

In *Astronaut*'s first section "Doppelgänger", Henry seems to assume a number of alter-egos. This may echo that famous Romantic chameleon, however Henry puts a post-modern twist on his negative capability. Here, the self undergoes a process of fragmentation, dissolution, and only partial recollection (see the section's title poem and "Not"). At times, words and names in this collection seem no more than "plaster" covering, "skin flakes", and labyrinthine lists and labels that wrap up the reader in sounds and rhythm, as in "Garage Sale". At other times, Henry's poems reveal utter disjunctions between words and their referents. Take the collection's first poem, "Insomnia":

—and some say it's like the calm after the storm.
 Whereas others insist on the morality of the thing.
 There are those who will tell you it's the cat's fault, or the fire
 station's.
 And those who believe it's a motor inn on wheels that travels
 faster than the speed of light.
 A famous mathematician wants to solve its matrix, but must
 approximate due to the lack of concrete boundaries.
 Nine people are writing the definitive book on it.
 Some college student, thinking it a highball, orders a shot of it.
 Fortune tellers everywhere rely on it for advice.
 Three dogs—all Doberman pinschers—share its name, as does
 one young girl, from Omaha.
 A kid forgot what it was until it came to him bared and gleam-
 ing.
 He remembered it then—he hasn't known anything else
 since—

The tightly knit elliptical conceit offers a snapshot experience of insomnia, an intermediary state of semi-consciousness “between sleep and sleep” (see the collection's prefatory piece). As in so many other poems in *Astronaut*, “Insomnia” creates multiple barriers between words and meaning perhaps to mimic a disjunction between language and experience. “The lack of concrete boundaries” only marginally separate “the famous mathematician” from the poet who must approximate meaning or experience with words in an attempt “to find the centre of it all” as he says later in “Discretionary Income.” This seeming inability to express full and complete meaning paradoxically enriches the vitality of Henry's language here.

Astronaut also abounds with rich varieties of poetic form which act as an agent or medium through which Henry's peculiar language finds a voice. Several poems formally deceive the reader, including half-dressed sonnets and acrostics, whose visual imagery and alliteration collude to illustrate the faults of observation (another problem for that famous mathematician or for scientists in general). As he says in “Discovery”, “no one is adequately prepared for the sight of the unfamiliar/ for the unfamiliar sight precludes preparation.” The sense of sight is “open to trickery at every corner”; and so he suggests instead “we let the tongue be our usher” into experience. Ironically, the previous poem partly depends upon the reader's visual discovery of “Lunar Calendar” as a well-crafted acrostic, whose left-hand margin runs down the page from A to Z and whose right-hand margin reverses the order. These word and formal feats may resemble Paul Muldoon's linguistic acrobatics which also use complex rhyme patterns as a way into understanding, before, of course, pulling the carpet from beneath the reader's feet; or, in other words, for “carpet” read “wool”; for “from

beneath” read “over”; for “feet” read “eyes”. All apologies to Mr Muldoon.

Henry concludes the book’s first section with “Argonaut Sonata” whose dazzling end rhymes and masterful line control assemble into beautiful harmony, lifting the reader off beyond the stratosphere:

Refusing to practice sensible thrift, I nestle
some wine on board, some Camembert—
a bishop in his bishopric,
properly stuffed and starched and cuffed.

All this hustle and bustle,
all this hoopla and fanfare
—by no means narcissistic—
has attracted something of a crowd. Some seem miffed.

Miffed or not they’re muzzled,
mute in the face of such a dare—
devil who—in this vessel with aquatic
aspirations—sits, stern and abaft.

And the whistle—prepared for this affair,
its blast electric—sends me aloft—

And with this, Henry carries the reader with him in his carefully crafted vessel into the collection’s subsequent sections “Bystander” and “Diviner”.

In “Bystander”, a twelve poem sequence, Henry becomes the chance spectator, witness, and patient Wordsworthian watcher who delicately balances movement and stillness, sound and silence, such as here in “Vessel”:

Because another day brings to light what another day brings,
the anchor gripped for a second then slipped
and nothing of any consequence happened.

Because the motion must be constant,
because the motion subsumes all that comes in contact,
the idea of the ship slides, and, its function forgotten,

the day is no longer a ship but a vessel,
the descent undramatic, slow enough
to go unnoticed by those unacquainted

with the art of the voyage, but this vessel is leaning
that shore no harbour to hope for.

Elsewhere, Henry's language exacts precise, scientific observation and then, in a turn of Heisenbergian uncertainty, calls into question the problematic dialectic between the poet as observer and the objects he observes. Water floats around and then through Henry's vessel-like poems by virtue of his quiet refrains, soft alliteration, and recurring imagery, such as here in "The Old Story":

That the water laps against the boat
That the water laps against the rocks

That each means something different
To the boat and to the rocks

Though "each means something different" to each, perhaps all of the poet's subjects of writing are only extensions of himself, where, as he says in "Self-Portrait in a Late Hour", the "windows hold nothing out. Or in."

Henry concludes *Astronaut* by transforming once more into the poet as "Diviner", the soothsayer and locator of water and minerals. "Diviner" is at once the most formally various section of *Astronaut* and its most difficult. Henry's language can obscure the diviner's vision, yet perhaps this is precisely the point. In the section's title sonnet, Henry evokes incantatory word play through an intricate formal design such as here:

Fracture my brother, in the form of wither
I steer toward the city no frost will abide.
Structure my winter, holster my rumble,
I bear these reins of slumbrous design
Passage to prescience garnered at dawn,
the troops acknowledge the friction of thrall,
presage of pretence clambering skyward.
The traps scorched and stubbled—such weather
no water can assuage the strain of—
I trace paths of dim presence
no mortar can crack, and, tilting windward,
I slice into the curve then crash the return
from keeper to keepsake, the way forward
from station to stalemate only a diviner can navigate.

At first glance, Henry seems to position himself within the boundaries of traditionally Romantic ideals of the poet. Henry's poetry, though, obliquely deconstructs each of these ideals through the shifting sands of language and form. Both are on pyrotechnic display in *Astronaut*, and though Henry lures his reader out on a voyage through the cosmos, this journey begins and ends with language and its dual creation

and fragmentation of Henry's multiple selves.

Stephen Burt, the Yale University graduate student and New York City resident, clearly has eclectic tastes in what he considers "popular music"—as distinct from "pop music". *Popular Music* does make reference to "pop" musicians such as The Who and the lesser known Roddy Frame of Aztec Camera, but readers should not expect a poetry sequence from MTV's Top 10 list. And thankfully so.

This music is radical. By that, I mean to say Burt returns the reader to the roots of the word *music* meaning *any* art presided over by the Muses, including the popular sense of *music* as well as poetry, science, visual art or perhaps anything made or formed that may create thought or wonder. This may help to explain the poet's marginal interest in science and science fiction. He also adapts a few poems from Federico García Lorca and Jaime Gil Biedma. In the third section of *Popular Music*, Burt shows off his artistic skill through a number of clever ekphrastic pieces whose careful enjambment and painterly imagery bring still moments into a flurry of movement and gesture such as in the opening stanza of "*David with the Head of Goliath*, by Donatello":

Mud threaded into hair
Behind him, lips too wide,
Goliath's blackened eyes lose all their focus as we stare:
He floats away on his expansive beard
In which the boy hero of Israel seems to wade.
His spotless sword
Picks at the beaten temples as at weeds
That cling to swimmers' ankles at high tide

Coming off that "high tide", Burt takes the helm as the ship's captain who, in Henry-fashion, navigates his verse across the globe. This poetry heads in all directions at once from Grand Central Station, New York to Herzliyya, Tel Aviv, then North to the UK, and to the Southern Hemisphere before returning to the US eastern seaboard. Burt's poetry travels well, which testifies to his cosmopolitanism. As a reviewer and poetry contributor, Burt is ubiquitous as well. He has appeared in this journal and regularly in the *Boston Review*, *Yale Review*, and *TLS* and so has one foot on each side of the Atlantic.

Burt's sheer expansiveness (in artistic taste, sense of place, and poetic ability) collectively contribute to what this reviewer finds as the most attractive characteristic of this poetry: the relationship between language and the (de)construction of selfhood. As Jorie Graham comments on the book's back cover, *Popular Music* "explores the sensation of selfhood as it presents itself, in all its fractured parts, for reformation". Graham also selected Burt's debut volume for The Colorado Prize for Poetry. Readers of the Pulitzer Prize winning poet will notice some similarities, especially through Burt's experimental for-

mal skills in “Unseasoned” and here in the ebbing and flowing “Ocean State”:

old quarries hope
shapeless as diaries
unform'd ovariform or multi-
form

the gradualism of water has left them their salt

ramage ransack leave no thing behind

In “Persephone (Unplugged)” and the double-sided “Tiresias”, Burt, like Graham, also examines language’s role in the creation and alteration of gender, perhaps because, in Burt’s borrowed words of Simon Frith: “[I]dentity comes from the outside, not the inside; it is something we put or try on, not something we reveal or discover”. Frith here was referring to music in particular, but this statement could extend to science, visual art, and poetic language itself which all take part in the process of selfhood.

Some readers may be tempted to discard this notion as prêt-à-porter post-modernism. Burt, however, accomplishes this exploration into the self with alarming dexterity and ingenuity. *Popular Music* sounds its very best when Burt harmonises his poem's divergent plays on language into graceful self-consciousness. This is a poet who confesses to be "tongue-tied" at the book's opening and who later wonders in "Over Nevada", "How could you ever sort out or payback what you owe/ In that white coin, language, which melts as you start to speak?" Words and images scintillate then disappear and occasionally echo back in renewed arrangement. Take, for instance, Burt's innovatively designed sonnet "Home":

Stuck freeway sprawl from Milford to New Haven, then blinding spackle off Long Island Sound.

On a Subaru hatchback packed as if to elope,
a tangle of bungee cords and patched-up rope
keeps down
the I-frame of a sky-blue bicycle.

Its rear wheel spins; the riverine, uneven
spokes tilt, shuffle and scramble figure and ground:
a girl's reward for moving; a cymbal; a gamble;
a sketch out of *Ringworld*; a heliotrope;
a hypnotism test. A magnet school
physics-club's show of centripetal
force. A gestalt-psychologists working model
of an episcope, or tachistoscope.

Burt has orchestrated here a poem of enormous formal complexity. The sonnet, like the bungee cord, refuses to tie itself down. Instead it stretches and recoils, constantly deferring meaning, and transforms into a multi-faceted, extended metaphor. Also like gestalt psychology, the poem, in an act of accretion and polymorphic synthesis, becomes more than the sum of its mechanical parts. The speaker's sense of home seems to reside elastically somewhere between the internal confines of individual, subjective perception and the fixed, external structures of his environment. Home—the place, the poem, and the word as part of language itself—is an *I*-frame, self-created, perpetually in flux, intermediate, and indeterminate. Similarly, in a previous poem, “The Epistolarians” the speaker acknowledges his dependency on language, communication, and its ironic consolation to the self through linguistic innovation and an act of “making strange”:

as we are afraid
into shrinking into experts on ourselves,
we correspond, and need

such secret languages
as kings abandoned and we made our own.

Both *Astronaut* and *Popular Music* celebrate a new direction in American poetry that may even border on (dare I say it) the international. Brian Henry and Stephen Burt draw from distinct, formalist poetic traditions yet seem to expand upon, distort, and often move beyond rigid formalism by virtue of their stanzaic and linguistic experimentation. This is difficult poetry. Henry and Burt require an unassuming eye and sensitive ear, but the rewards of new poetic experiences far outweigh the demands. Make them your own.