

Book Reviews

LIMBINAL

BY OANA AVASILICHIOAEI

VANCOUVER, BC: TALONBOOKS, 2015. 128 PAGES. \$19.95.

IN HER MOST RECENT collection of poetry, *Liminal*, Oana Avasilichioaei transposes the discourse of liminality into a lavish indulgence in formal and linguistic experimentation. For Avasilichioaei, the liminal is *Liminal*: her collection is primarily interested in the manifestation of the word as a living member of the systems that govern languages. As she plays with these conventions, Avasilichioaei blurs the boundaries between a word, its meanings and its form: she explores the possibilities of redrawing their connections while drawing attention to the physicality of the word, whose volatility and adaptability is, she suggests, not unlike that of the human body.

Liminal is striking in its experimentation with the properties of language—as printed word, communicative device, translation, aggregation of meaning. In the opening poem, “Bound,” Avasilichioaei develops a manifesto of sorts, whose composition is the most traditional (and perhaps accessible) of the collection in terms of poetic style, while demonstrating how such experimentation can reimagine language and hybridized identities: “Our vocation is to meta or to muster the material. Vocalize our vocatives. Visceral and voracious.” “Yet at times,” the speaker admits, “I fail to conference a new confluence of meaning.” Thus “Bound” acknowledges the limitations of personal resistance; experimentation with conventions can subvert them, but the possibility of such play is dependent on those same conventions. Although sometimes stilted by a profusion of punctuation and lack of transitions, the language is typically lavish as it conjures phrases of linguistic beauty and difficult decipherability.

In “Mouthtuned” and “Dishevelled Helmet” of the parent-poem “Partitions,” lines of black and grey type overlap and vie with/complement each other. The reader must navigate her way through the poem, making decisions about reading order and possibility of interpretation that refuse linear reading, while exposing the hierarchy of importance conventionally enjoyed by the black type over the grey.

Avasilichioaei continues her experimentation with conventions of written language in “Mouthnotes”: here the footnotes, structured more like conventional poetry than the “parent” text and taking up more space, again complicate the hierarchies of knowledge created by print conventions. The photographic poetry of “Itinerant Sideline” challenges the definition of language itself, as it creates arguments about the textured liminality of reflective surfaces and obstructed windows through a series of photographs.

In the subsequent set of poems, Avasilichioaei shifts her focus from the form of the word as printed thing to the set of conventions that constitute language systems. In “Borne,” a blend of English, French, and Romanian, the boundaries between formalized languages fade as the distinctions between words of different languages become unclear. Amidst trilingual phrases, the reader must determine what she can and cannot decipher: we are thus reminded that meaning is a personal affair. Translation also gives way to the possibility of poetic conversation across space and time when Avasilichioaei intervenes into the correspondence of Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs. Through judicious juxtaposition of their words and hers, Avasilichioaei demonstrates the new meanings words can take on when their contexts are changed.

For Avasilichioaei, the play of language is an end in itself—an enjoyable, intellectual and indulgent end: although her collection hints at the marginal positions of those who live in/on the border—linguistic, geographic, cultural—such political import is obscured by the difficulty of her experimentation. Taking the time, however, to work through the possibilities of meaning created by her experimentation is well worth the effort. There exists in her poetry an attention to the aurality, visuality and physicality of the word that re-imagines its importance as negotiator of liminal spaces and an agent of liminality itself. No longer simply a vessel of meaning or a manifestation of linguistic or formal convention, the word is brought to life in Avasilichioaei’s *Liminal*, and takes on a life of possibility and limitation, of instability and adaptability—just like the lives of those who occupy the border.

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THE ROAD IN IS NOT THE SAME ROAD OUT.

BY KAREN SOLIE.

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“TO ACHIEVE THIS clarity is inevitably to be misunderstood,” writes Karen Solie in “Rothko via Muncie, Indiana,” a poem that, like a number of poems in *The Road In Is Not the Same Road Out*, treats the murky parameters of a reality at once fantastical and all too real. In this poetic intersection of Rothko’s painting and small-town America, a farmhand’s daughter blames her scoliosis on her own impiety and a graduating class undergoes “a quasi-religious experience of limitless immensity.” Here, clarity is not really so clear and understanding is almost always a form of its opposite. But Solie does not indict the teenagers reaching for Bob Seeger after a “fatal car wreck on New Year’s.” Nor does she paint the little girl who “dons her brace” (23–24), pathetic. Instead, Solie speaks here—and elsewhere in the collection—in a voice full of tenderness and humour, as empathetic as it is intellectual.

Her first major publication in Canada since *Pigeon won the Griffin Prize for Poetry in 2010*, this collection establishes, like those that came before it, a poetics of the marginal. Its poems crisscross the globe between small-town Canada or America, and major cities like Calgary, Rotterdam, Edinburgh. Still, each is particular and attuned to the nuances of place that make Solie’s work so remarkable. “Fables of Reconstruction,” for example, uses the scene of a Toronto construction site at rest to address hockey trades and the intricacies of belonging. “Keebleville” draws out the petty competition between two towns from the voice of one first-person speaker.

The collection is ambitious and, as is always the case with Solie’s work, wonderfully complex. But Solie reigns in this complexity. She is a master craftswoman. Peppering scenes of urban development or of domestic arguments with startling philosophical insights, she creates poems that demand of the reader a sometimes uncomfortable awareness of self. Consider “All that is Certain is Night Lasts Longer than the Day,” wherein she writes:

Leave the child you were alone. The wish to comfort her
is a desire to be comforted. Would you have
her recognize herself buried alive
in the memories of a stranger? (34)

The use of second person here is powerful. Combined with the feminine pronoun of “her” childhood it simultaneously unsettles linguistic gender

norms and yokes the reader together with Solie and with the poem's persona. In this poem and in others, Solie's connections are deft but purposeful. Her sentences, layered with enviable skill. This is particularly evident in "Wrap Party," which begins:

The party planner has transformed the space.
 Subtract trousers and voilà, an outfit goes from day to night.
 And the bartender's eye elusive as inner peace.

As humorous as it is moving, this poem guides its reader through the numbing perceptions of a party-goer-out-of-place. It also gifts us the truism that "There are those you'd rather walk in on in the shower than see dance" (49). Solie's insights are piercing.

The poems in this latest collection are funny, impatient and dark. They are daringly vulnerable: "It was before I was born into / what I think of as my life" (71), confesses the speaker in "For the Ski Jump at Canada Olympic Park, Calgary." Every piece seems to shift and evolve with each reading to reveal lines which, like the colour fields of a Rothko painting, leave room for constant re-evaluation. No preconceived notion about identity or the relationship between a body and its surroundings is safe. This is a metaphysics for the twenty-first century.

The Road In Is Not the Same Road Out is already receiving a lot of critical attention and the verdict appears to be unanimous: these new poems both continue the trajectory established by the poet's earlier work and display enough growth to satisfy any critic. The book is a tour de force.

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