

An Education in Space

by Paul Hoover

Selected Poems

Barbara Guest

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Born in North Carolina in 1920, Barbara Guest settled in New York City following her graduation from University of California at Berkeley. Soon thereafter, she came into contact with James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Kenneth Koch, who, with Guest, would later emerge as the New York School poets. Influenced by Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, and in general French experiment since Rimbaud and Mallarmé, the group would bring wit and charm to American poetry, as well as an extraordinary visual sense.

Guest was somewhat belatedly discovered as a major figure of the group. In part, this has to do with her marginalized position as a woman. But it is also due to a ten-year hiatus in her production, from the long poem *The Türler Losses* (1979) to her breakthrough collection *Fair Realism* (1989). In the intervening period, Guest produced *Herself Defined* (1984), an acclaimed biography of the poet H.D.

Ironically, it was a younger generation to follow the New York School, the language poets, who would give her work its new status. Given their attraction to what poet Charles Bernstein calls “mis-seaming,” a style in which the seams or transitions have as much weight as the poetic fabric, it’s surprising that the language poets would so value Guest’s often lyrical and metaphysical poetry. In her poem ‘The Türler Losses,’ for instance, “Loss gropes toward its vase. Etching the way. / Driving horses around the Etruscan rim.” In an earlier work, ‘Prairie Houses,’ Guest wrote of the prairie, “Regard its hard-mouthed houses with their / robust nipples the gossamer hair,” lines which have their visual equivalent in the Surrealist paintings of Paul Delvaux and Rene Magritte. In ‘Red Lilies,’ we find a more casual tone that quickly deepens to the metaphysical: “Someone has

remembered to dry the dishes; / they have taken the accident out of the stove. / Afterward lilies for supper; there / the lines in front of the window / are rubbed on the table of stone.” Guest is, in short, an independent figure—a “piping reservoir” in the words of poet and critic Peter Gizzi—willing to seek the authentic wherever she finds it, whether in the rupture of experimentation or the attachments of lyric.

In ‘Poetry the True Fiction,’ an essay that extends Wallace Stevens’ concept of poetry as a “supreme fiction,” Guest leans heavily in the direction of the metaphysical:

We say the poem is made of words. And it is true that many poems are constructed solely of words. These are the words that sit on paper without vision. We all have read these poems and we know that after we have read them we feel curiously bereft. Our expectations of ennoblement by the poem had been disappointed by the lack-lustre condition of the poem.

Her proclivity is clearly in the direction of beauty, unity, and transcendence. In Guest’s opinion, however, “words cannot exist on beauty or necessity alone. Words of the poem need dimension. They desire finally—an education in space.” I take this to mean that poems cannot insist on their own beauty. Each poem is a trial, through the grail of change, toward pleasure. The emphasis on space is particularly apt, since, like James Schuyler, Guest is one of the New York poets most attracted to the natural landscape. Yet she approaches that actuality through both attachment and dislocation. Her lines “I / created a planned randomness in which color / behaved like a star,” from the poem ‘The Screen of Distance,’ might well serve as her apologia.

Selected Poems contains work from Guest’s poetry of the 1960s including *The Location of Things*, *Poems*, and *The Blue Stairs*, as well as selections from *Moscow Mansions* (1973), *The Countess of Minneapolis* (1976), *The Türler Losses*, *Fair Realism*, and *Defensive Rapture* (1993). It is only at the turn represented by some of *Fair Realism* and most of *Defensive Rapture* that we see the restlessness associated with language poetry. In the poem ‘The Surface as Object,’ Guest works toward a more overt dissonance without abandoning the green world that makes language possible: “the visible / as in the past / subsisting in layered zone / refuses to dangle / oaths on marsh field / whitened or planned / memorial distance.” Just when we think the poem will stray into its own mirror, we discover “autumn of rippling wind / and the noise of baskets.”

In ‘The Glass Mountain,’ from *Defensive Rapture*, Guest uses the figure of a king to express the postmodern dilemma of unity and brokenness: “O king endlessly / scattering.” The pleasure of her poetry lies in its ability to scatter and re-gather the objects of sense. In her habitation of both depth and surface, Barbara Guest is an emblematic figure of poetry in our time.

Paul Hoover is author of seven poetry collections including *Totem and Shadow: New & Selected Poems* (Talisman House, 1999); *Viridian* (University of Georgia Press, 1997, winner of the Contemporary Poetry Series competition); the book-length poem, *The Novel* (New Directions, 1990); and *Idea* (The Figures, 1987), which won the Carl Sandburg Award. His work has been published in *Hambone*, *Sulfur*, *American Poetry Review*, *The New Republic*, and *The Paris Review*, among other magazines, and in five editions of the annual anthology *The Best American Poetry*. He has edited *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* (1994), a collection of American avant-garde poetry since 1950. With Maxine Chernoff, he edits the literary magazine *New American Writing*.