

Three Miniatures and Two Tales for Barbara Guest

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The title of Barbara Guest's book, *Miniatures and Other Poems*, evokes the aura of essences she writes about as touchstones of art. The miniature in her work is a compression that, in its immediacy, is more accurate than the model. It's a relative of the moment in poetry that Barbara once characterized as a "springboard" that "becomes the distance." It's also related to the tale, which she described in an interview with Charles Bernstein as having "been on a long trip before it arrives on the page."

I take these compressions back to an aspect of the imagination Barbara referred to as "the halo" in a talk entitled "Poetry the True Fiction," given at SUNY Buffalo in 1992. She presented it in this way: "Let us say the vision of a poem has above it that 'halo' you see in religious paintings when an act of special beneficence is being enacted by one of the persons within the picture and that person is given a halo. . . . It is there as a reward for a particular unconscious state of immanence." This halo, she went on, allows the poem "to engage itself with reality." My miniatures make no claims to halos. They're notations and they're in tribute, a few short paragraphs on papers on Barbara's poetry and poetics I have imagined myself writing, some day, perhaps.

The first would be entitled something like "Mapping the Future in Barbara Guest's Poetry." Last year, in memorials, many spoke of Barbara as a poet who was ahead of her time. Mei-mei Berssenbrugge remarked, "There's hardly a day that goes by that I don't regret that I didn't see the prescience in Barbara's earlier poems when I read them, sometimes in manuscript. It was right there in front of me." Her observation reminded me of a theory Carl Jung proposed late in his life: that there is as much of the future in dreams as there is of the past.

How might one approach the future in Barbara Guest's poems, this aspect of her poetic "state of immanence"? As an inherent element in her work that might explain the silence in which it was received in the eighties, which amounted to neglect? It was said the poems were "too difficult," even while her friends in the New York School were changing the line and subject matter of poetry and establishing their reputations. But Barbara's poems were of their own moment, committed to an imagination that, in her words, gives the poem "wings" so that it "may soar above the page," where the poem might have its longer life in an extended consciousness.

In the nineties, young poets were assigned Barbara's work in classrooms. And they got it. And they turned out for her readings. At a memorial event in San Francisco last March, young people in their twenties and thirties composed at least half the audience. Barbara had passed away at the age of eighty-six. But it was a room that was weighted towards youth.

This paper on the future in Barbara Guest's poetry would be paired with one on the past and her map of history. It would look at the Modernist world she embraced through the writings of Mallarmé, Kandinsky, Stevens, and Pound. In "Poetry the True Fiction," mentioned above, she characterized the middle of the twentieth century as "restless" and "open-ended." But it was open-ended within a classical past and Eurocentric view of the world, which was still relatively whole. Columbus Day, for instance, was still celebrated in all the States.

Before speaking further of European influences, though, it's important to note that Barbara, like Stevens and Pound and her New York School contemporaries, embraced American idioms. Her poetics were shaped famously by mid-twentieth century New York life. The jazz artist John Coltrane makes an appearance in one poem. An edition of prose-poems, *The Confetti Trees*, was inspired by the movies and Hollywood. It was also a tribute to the studio heads and directors who, having escaped Europe during World War II, defined American film for many years.

I revisited the "Barbara Guest Memory Bank" which Kathleen Fraser, Lauren Shufman, and John Sparrow edited in the online magazine, *How2*, after Barbara's death. People were invited to send memories and favorite poems. I looked through the pieces for historical references, antique or European spellings, and other Guestian tropes. A cluster immediately presented itself in Kathleen Fraser's Introduction in a sentence taken from Barbara's novel, *Seeking Air*: "Berg changes to Shostakovich. The Cyrillic alphabet just out, crosses in front of, enters the space the bus vacated."

From the next few pages, I copied out: "Palmyra ruins," "driving horses around the Etruscan rim," "only those eyes 'veiled' / saw Syracuse. / Scipio's tomb." Then castles, kings, knights on ponies, Schomberg, Confucius, and the annexation of Egypt follow. It is usual in her work that any note of pretention that might cling to French phrases in an American ear is undercut, as in the following sequence: "grunt marsh weed/ regardez-la/ the untamed ibis." In such arrangements, she intermixes prairie-like plainness, archaisms, and sometimes lovely, sometimes amusing temporal patinas. These include old-fashioned habits of address, "Recognize me, I shall be here, Oh, Nietzsche," which arrive in fresh, complicated moments no other poet could or would, perhaps, choose to construct.

Another paper would be on darkness in Barbara Guest's poetry. For a long time, my reading was dazzled by the unities of the halo, visions of flesh and blood as they engage light, while questions about human suffering remained shadowy. What I would want to explore in this paper would not be darkness as tones of sadness or melancholy in her poems, which are many and varied, but the way darkness is left as part of the poem's "in back of everything," a phrase of Guest's I will return to. I would choose, rather, to look at darkness as inherent in the construction of "the halo" and the poem's reality and blessing. In my view, obscurity is fundamental to Barbara's poetics, to her poetry's call and her readers' responses.

When Kelsey Street Press, of which I'm a member, was preparing to bring out Barbara's manuscript of writings on writing, her first choice for a title of the collection, which was published as *Forces of Imagination*, was *Wounded Joy*. "Wounded Joy" is the penultimate essay. In it she asks: "Do you ever notice as you write that no matter what there is on the written page something appears to be in *back of everything that is said, a little ghost?* . . . It is the *obscure essence that lies within the poem.*" She goes on: "*Leave this little echo to haunt the poem, do not give it form, but let it assume its own ghost-like shape.* . . . It has the shape of your own soul as you write."

Miniatures and Other Poems, a late book published in 2002, is one I read aloud and discussed with Barbara. A number of times she remarked that she had nearly come "to the end of herself" writing *Miniatures*, that she thought maybe she was not going to write any more poems. A dark thought, certainly. And a difficult time. Fortunately, it passed, and Barbara went on to write *The Red Gaze*, her last book, which was published in 2005. From "Pathos" in *Miniatures*:

Making difficulties for herself in the wrong direction.
Fear of the word, haunting of fear --

the word passing through the haunting.

This is the condition of Anna, the twirling, shivering, falling skater of the poem. And there are other lines: "historical legs used up this position / falling down historical legs . . ." They belong to the writing of this book. They suggest that there are words, voids, and compressions, fixed and floating actualities of appearance that might be lenses by which to read the accuracies of the unsaid and unseen, the aspect of totality or ontology she called the soul, without concession to fashionable terms.

Barbara once said in an interview that she had had to learn to use black. The image for the cover of *Miniatures*, one of Barbara's collages, is set in a pure black field and entitled with dark gold lettering. There are architectural fragments: an ionic capital and antique frames and moldings. First effects are of balances of luminous reflections and neutral, softly tinted forms in four vertical panels set in a stately sequence of varying widths. But, as time goes on and one settles into time with the collage, one enters its rhythms of beckoning and refusal. The composition's serenity is not to be entered, after all, but to be contemplated, perhaps waited for. Perhaps expected. Perhaps remembered. The dark blacks and grays have a secondary quality at times, while, at others, they assert themselves as primary structural elements everything depends on for equilibrium. In one panel, an oval enclosure might be a room. There is a ceiling, a coved archway at the top of the oval, a suggestion of blinds and a dark gray. But in place of a floor, there's an assemblage of elegant geometric and organic shapes. No place to put a foot down. In another panel, there's a Christian cross with the bar raised above the center, the form painted in a witty black and white modernist pattern, which is suggestive of a harlequin costume. And so forth, plays within plays and no place to stay. "Restless," as she said of the twentieth century, and "open-ended."

Finally, I'd like to share two memories of Barbara. I have called them tales in order to evoke the combination of accuracy, brevity and magic Barbara attributed to this form, which made it her choice often for writing and conversation.

Lyric Poetry

Last year, reflecting on the vast number of books and articles that have been written on the subject of lyric poetry during the last decade, many of them questioning not only the relevance but the moral appropriateness of lyricism in a violent, destructive culture, I asked Hadley Haden-Guest, Barbara's daughter, whether Barbara had considered herself a lyric poet. Hadley said someone else had asked Barbara the same question and Barbara had said yes, she did. The interviewer had then asked her why. Barbara's answer was: "It's the sound."

The Reading of the Blue Paper Clip

A few years after Barbara moved to Berkeley, when I finally got up my courage to bring her a manuscript I was working on, I went to her house to discuss it over tea, as one usually did. The piece was an early version of a book of prose-poetry entitled *The Woman Without Experiences*.

At that time, it was about a hundred and ten pages. While we talked, the piece stayed in the envelope. Barbara spoke in her slant way about things she liked. At one point she said, "I think eighty-six pages is a wonderful length for a book." When I got home I opened the envelope and drew out the manuscript. There wasn't a mark on it. But a largish chunk had been collected in a large cerulean blue paper clip. I took a quick look at which pages had been pulled out, with an idea of finding some editorial direction. None, of course. Everything had been said.

So the blue paper clip is an object in my poetics pantheon. It reminds me of the way in which Barbara was so amazingly all of a piece in her writing and conversation, transcending stylistic modes and categories. Her extemporaneous remarks were gem-like; that is, they were moments that arrived with long distances in them. Preparing these remarks for this panel made me appreciate our present time, when memories are of the person and her physical presence among the objects, buildings and atmospheres that shaped her poems. Collected in letters and biographical materials, they will bring future readers closer to Barbara's life and art, the way it was supremely centered in poetry on and off the pages of her books.