

Aufgabe

On a Diagonal, Looking Forward and Looking Back: Yvonne Rainer
2012
By Marcus Civin

Poems by Yvonne Rainer
Badlands Unlimited, 2011

This is Yvonne Rainer's first collection of poetry. Published by the artist, Paul Chan, Rainer's poetry forms slender columns, left-justified, sometimes two phrases per line, but mostly one phrase per line, or a word per line. The poems are poems on the page, assertively, directly, straight-forwardly poems. The poems are often some dozens of carefully chosen words distributed over handfuls of lines. I count 7 poems longer than a page. The longer poems include a poem in 9 parts, "Saga," and a poem that is a memorial for Rainer's former New York upstairs neighbor, painted-metal sculptor, George Sugarman.

Here is a Rainer/Sugarman snippet from "For George Sugarman":

the daily work
was everything
that's what I loved
that was my school
the ominous things
eluded the syllabus
intimations
doubts, shoals
melodramas
nipped in the bud
given short shrift
Making Art
was the only measure

Rainer's poems are specifically textured, context precisely observed, highly readable... Part 6 from "Saga," is surviving, it's love, it's loss—yes... but not melodrama. It's a death in the family, unflinching:

He lost no time
courted the first skirt
enacted in quick relief
a synopsis of need
drank liters of Dekuyper
cherry flavored brandy
flooded the house
clung to the cat
mollified his daughter
sat
alone
in groups
alone in groups
talked
and talked
played Schubert's Trio in B flat major
wept

howled
the year passed

Those of you who have crossed paths with Rainer know that since the 1960's she has been writing—moving on-stage with language—writing—creating dialogue for characters—writing—collaging appropriated, projected or scrolling text into dances and films.

Given Rainer's films, it is tempting to read these poems as dialogue, a conversation among related, divergent, and at times contradictory voices. Given Rainer's choreography, it is equally tempting to imagine dancers, hands smacking foreheads maybe, or clumping up together while readers offer poems as voiceover, poems as evocative, short narrative snippets to dance with. A sweaty or previously squeaky-shod dancer could speak these poems into a microphone.

But then these are, after all, poems—singular poems, stand-alone, facing out. They are person-in-public poems, accumulated intimacies, poems to mark not-insignificant occasions, occasions like asking a subway performer a question. A question, from the poem, "Take the R train":

"What's that from?"
Smiling shyly
on the R platform
almost no English
"Italian folk song
O Sole Mio"
"my father..."

before the words are out
"...used to sing it"
on the R platform
the song
my father used to sing
crashes into the station

Rainer shows us she can make wonderful stuff in her notebook, no projected budget, no crew. Action. Action, written: walking, yawning, searching for food, eating, swallowing, balking or pleasuring, balking then pleasuring, getting on the train.

Let's look at the first work in Poems, "1977," 5 lines:

1977

I dreamed of bodies burning at the edges
When I awoke my belly was cold as an abandoned stove
The streets were cleared, trees bent
The air so still, as though just inhaled
When next I noticed it was spring

1977. I wonder, which bodies? In this dream space, are there specific bodies? 1977: Alex Haley's African-American saga, *Roots* was on TV. In 1977, militant anti-imperialists, members of the Baader-Meinhof Gang, Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, Jan-Carl Raspe—DEAD in Germany. (In 1980, Rainer would release *Journeys from Berlin/1971*, a global and personal, psychological struggle taking on a discussion of, among other subjects, Baader-Meinhof.)

Also, 1977, New York City, neurotic-monster Son of Sam Murders... and, in 1977, New York City, something else, something radically different was happening too. Right? I want to read in a certain optimism, but perhaps my optimism is overdetermined. I want to read 1977 as

a productive moment. Just one example: 1977, a collective of 20 women including Harmony Hammond, Lucy Lippard, May Stevens, and Mary Miss published the first issue of *Heresies*, a magazine of Feminism, Art and Politics. And, Rainer, the previous year, 1976, released the film, *Kristina Taking Pictures*. Kristina comes to New York to be a choreographer.

The dream bodies in the poem “1977” are like pictures of bodies printed on paper and cut out; they curl up at the edges, the curl is agitated, singed and becoming flame. In spite of the violence, I read possibility—there are clean streets, crisp air. Yet, with possibility, if possibility, moving forward, perhaps this possibility, this moving forward is a moving forward as if bent, movement marred by violence, moving forward under a strain. Maybe, what I’m trying to say, if I were to say it physically, I imagine myself in this poem and in the poem, I am walking on my knees... In any case, in this poem, the body does notice a new, warmer season... Spring.

How does the body endure? How? Specifically, the action of enduring, in what measure, in what spatial field, in what form, in what context can we mean endurance?

Body: In Rainer’s poem, “Hot Dusk,” in a taxi, “my hamstring hurts.”

Body: In Rainer’s poem, “Indices,” “The impression of your head/ etches the pillow.”

Memory strings together, a succession of knots.

To treat collectively Rainer’s body of poems and the accompanying selection of intermittent images, more from my rough plan: Forty-five poems; 8 images; it seems there are quite a few traveling poems written on the road or enacting moments waiting; there is a good-natured jibe of a toast to old friends.

I read significant, heartfelt mournings. Dates and places are important forms, as is dialogue, as is rumination, as are specific people.

There is at least one rule of thumb, the poem, “December 24, 2010.”

December 24, 2010

Rule of Thumb:
when the partner cries
embrace her
hang on for dear life

There is a reprint of an image of Merce Cunningham, newspaper clipping, March 2010. Cunningham has already passed away and Cunningham is there, arms extended, his white coveralls, eyes to left foot extended, left toe upturned, the body forward and the body back, on a diagonal. Cunningham appears to be doing a kind of soft shoe routine, tap dancing without tap shoes. One leg shoots out diagonally, but the rest of his body doesn’t appear to follow.

Elsewhere, in “Untitled,” the final poem in the book, details seemingly newspaper-picked, Rainer brings out: a ninety-year-old woman (her endurance protest walk for campaign contribution reform), then a 6-year-old boy and a 6-year-old girl (their terrible violence, the boy shoots the girl dead). Rainer puts these three figures together to wonder if: “One of them/ maybe two/ will never look back.”

The cast represented in this collection of poems is large. I... We... She... Her... Me... One of us... You... It is 1950, then 1751, 1996-2008. It is 4 AM, some are going 70 miles per hour. Time oscillates. Read time, read and think of Vienna 1900 or reading and thinking, think of New York in great swaths, time again, the order of the progression of memory.

Rainer looks at what she comes upon, found walking up fast, stopping hard on it, deliberately... commenting, and/or:

Sat. April 3, 1999

All unaware
at the red door
my throat disgorges
memory's groan
etching the moment

her life foreclosed
I bought her
green dumplings
someone passing might think
"one of those crones"
who—me?
more like a multiple
risible and wrung.

If an artist who started out in the 1950's can write a startling first book of poems in 2011, why not another book of poems in 2012 or 2013?

I went back and read some interviews with Rainer in preparation for writing this article. (True confession: Yvonne was my teacher; all of her books are my treasures.) I'm struck now by Rainer's description of her work with friends and dancer compatriots, Simone Forti and Nancy Meehan, in New York, 1960. In a 1976 interview with writer and video artist, Lyn Blumenthal, Rainer remembers that this group played with and talked about "spatial restrictions... Pretty much formal things," for example, the idea, the action, of "moving on a diagonal."

To be risible, which means capable of laughing, and simultaneously to be wrung out, to feel well-used, this seems to me to be a kind of diagonal existence, moving on a diagonal. To look forward while looking back is a diagonal motion, Merce Cunningham represented as newspaper clipping after his death, one appendage stretching forward and other appendages stretching back. Speaking to form--if I can speak diagonally, or write diagonally--that might mean: someone passing might make a judgement ("crones," supposedly cruel old women). After this perceived judgement, the subject pulls the judgement back, keeping, taking on and agreeing with a sense of time passed, age ("wrung"), but significantly adding in agency, action (wringing, like hard-twisting a wet cloth). And, what is eating, laughing, dying? Is it mean? Is it cruel? No, eating, laughing, and dying are what they are. We're moving, moving on a diagonal.