

Horizontal Poetry, Post-tutti

(Dominique Fourcade, Liliane Giraudon,
Lee Sumyeong, Lindsay Turner, Lisa Robertson, Douglas Piccinnini)

Lately I have wanted to single out horizontality, the landscape of the contemporary imagination of place, time, culture, form, to examine it as a dominant if usually implicit figure, a “just how it is,” a period tropism. And I have wanted to review several new or recent books. In what follows I have combined the tasks to see what happens.

The unequaled master of mobile confinement within the realm of horizontal, nonporous relations, a somewhat anguished and excited investigator and chewer of them, is the wonderful French poet Dominique Fourcade, who scours the territory open to a writer outside of what Plato in *The Sophist* called “participation in transcendence,” a vertical dimension.

I think of Fourcade’s book *xbo* (Sun and Moon Press, 1993), and its statement, “I go word by word (who’s that) in the induced text,” which magically (the imagination is magical) becomes, “Ahead I do not see the poem but shining tracks.” This last move, which envisions not the destination but the aesthetic glow of approaching it, is still at the level of the horizontal. The whole business of the rails “is to let them shine.” The poet knows that a poem can no longer be “tutti,” fully orchestrated, building magisterially to a climax. In this and that poem you “can’t tell where you are it’s post-coltranian as is everything today.”

Fourcade writes forward, the rails facilitating a horizontal going. The future is the unseen of the immediate present. The magic lies not in a crowning climax but in the exceptional figure, the shamanistic metaphor, as when “a lone sunflower in the middle of acres of rye alters the sound of light.” Its focus is “where the fire passes through.” True, the habit of wanting a climax still exerts a pull: “the wave of black honey contained in the poem with its bees” (44).¹⁷

¹⁷ Because I reviewed another of Fourcade’s books in the sixteenth issue of *Lana Turner*, namely *Son Blanc Du Un (Blank Sound One Line)*, translated by Peter Consenstein and published in 2023, I have chosen not to dwell on him here.

Liliane Giraudon

Horizontal poets are relieved of the task of maintaining the logic of relevance. Their poems are potentially open to whatever shows up next. So it is with the French poet Liliane Giraudon's brilliant and irritating masterpiece *Love is Colder than the Lake* (published in French in 2016, and in 2023 put out by Night Boat in Sarah Riggs and Lindsay Turner's meticulous translation). Here nothing hooks up, nothing is left satisfyingly finished or explained. "Precise," the speaker calls her work, but "precise" without a bundable subject. It mirrors a life, its messiness in devastating times. It burns with notebookish thoughts of violence, even uncensored ugliness: "stuff his ass with paper // you can strike the matches with your thumb." It's the twilight of the late, out-of-pocket Anthropocene and so love is colder than the lake. What to do? "I could go bicycling // nothing doesn't exist." (It's just an effect of language, says Umberto Eco.)

Love is Colder than the Lake joins Fourcade's books in waking up dispossessed in an unarticulated field and proceeding to fill it with bits and pieces of thought. Art, to paraphrase Jasper Johns, means to take a thing and do something to it, then do something to it again. Giraudon's book doesn't do much more than let its miseries build up:

we are tired
 because we are disgusted
half ray of the minute when
the page supposedly white
is crossed like the lake
 a celluloid bather
here there is no why
....
dream it at night
like drops in the eyes

Clearly Giraudon is a fiercely compelling writer. A few pages at the end, it's true, sound exhausted. They have stopped slapping their body about like a trout with a hook in its mouth

Her advice: “Before reading look at each page / as if it were a puddle.”

In Fourcade and Giraudon’s practice, poems may shift between prose and lines; they seem unable to find a satisfactorily fruitful medium. Giraudon’s short lines hint at, and at the same time snappily protest against, “the decomposition process of the world” (“the true subject of art”). Even the prose is double-edged; it’s subject to fragmentation but in ragged rectangular gatherings:

*He says he’ll come back when everything is finished That nothing will be possible
anymore Since it’s the poet who surveys The spiritual door
opening onto the Third Reich While far away the night begins to
fall Violent Wild*

“Violent,” “Wild”? At the civilizational level, combinatory horizontality tends to smash and be smashed due to the ill winds of history and “its boring / persistence of deadly consents,” its magma of human evil:

*The Furies: ferocious cocksuckers Armed with torches carrying whips Their
faces unseizably beautiful like oysters Their buttocks are flat
Some sleep together Their step is quick Frightens the pregnant
sheep and the grasshoppers We will sacrifice to them today . . .*

A would-be outsider to civilization, the speaker is, in her own fury, a being apart:

*She says she suspected it That she always preferred the margins to this
stamp of the avant-gardes Branded. like a cow. No she
says I prefer not She says You are miles from imagining. What
can excite me*

But in an implicit rebuke to her vain excitement over being an exception, she adds, “repent / the demons are going to smash you to pieces.” Horizontality is the void where togetherness falls away. There go the church, the Nazis, the avant-gardes. What remains is “this inside which stinks and sickens.” Some decency, perhaps; no hope. “Come back Tuesday for the co-optations.”

A coldness of disgust seizes the book. It fails to find a livable territory of its own, it isn’t even hoping for one. “Half wild half lost,” the speaker at her most menacing can only throw a linguistic shoe into the “war machine,” a term appearing here

in homage to the “dark” Deleuze. Giraudon satisfies Mallarmé’s description of the modern poet as “*on strike against society*,” but of course society largely ignores poetry. Whereas “those who eat their excrement . . . have vanquished the whole.” The speaker feels the tremors of the next cataclysm. “*Get out Leave your women and your children / Drown them Cut their throats Go on vacation Get the hell out.*”

In the appendix to *Love is Colder than the Lake* (a long-forgotten Fassbinder title, Giraudon recalls), the poet says that “the instrument I use . . . advances by fragments. A ceaseless stopping is the poem’s rhythm.” The technique is as cold as the lake. “Today, what is important to me is combination. Thoreau was right . . . The heart has no experience. The poem knows about all of us for much longer than we do. And because it still burns in a devastated world, love is colder than the lake.”

A poet adrift. A gift.

Lee Sumyeong

Crowded and standardized living, horizontal stereotyping, is Lee Sumyeong’s subject in her book *Just Like* (Black Oceans 2024, translated by Colin Leemarschall). To the superficial social codes of city life this South Korean poet’s speaker prefers animal and vegetable wilderness. In the following inset, note her peculiar way of speaking, as if she did not know the language well, can’t speak as conventional people do, and has a phobia of punctuation that adds to the difficult twists and leaps of her syntax. From

I greet passersby
because the greetings are identically sized shapes
I think numbers will help

spread arms and exist as a snake
that passed without hesitation and then into dense scrub
vanish

height reaches nowhere

Sumyeong lives in Seoul, with nearly 10 million x 2 elbows to contend with. This predicament shows in the skipping speed of her thinking. Look down, move along quickly. Her poems tend to shift about in search of a bearable position, as if sleepless on a slanting mattress. Bemused, a bit sickened and stunned like an animal that has been clipped by a passing car, they express anxiety and frustration, though mild of temperament, free of sharp exasperation. They are alive with her quirky comic imagination, her flung-off hyperbole, despite her almost overwhelming feeling that urban life is too much for her. This odd mixture (preceded by Stevie Smith) is her identifying note. Puzzles and troubles always, but also truth and wit, and thinking that seems provokingly irrational at first blush but proves wily.

Quirky fictions of alienation, the poems require the reader to be tumbled by them. “Will I keep following the gymnastics / in becoming something slippery // I do not leave gymnastics / and I blurt out command . . . Gymnastics stand what with having collapsed” (“Person doing Gymnastics”). “Slippery” she is; here, hardly coherent. Rigidity, commands – these put her off. The more so because what appears to be erect has in fact collapsed. One is not to be fooled by regulated forms; she knows how unhappy they are assy use:

— Forms, unite

running forms

will perhaps
resemble the walking of straw
resemble the crying of straw

(Your Form”)

“It would be good,” she writes with pretended sincerity in “This Truck,” “to follow the truck hangs down from the truck and becomes the truck.” Here sameness, has no resistance to mutual incorporation with its like. Each vehicle is desingularized by its contact with the other. Generic resemblance messes with the particular *isness* of things. Similar objects merge into the icon that comprises them. The multiplicity of the just alike is concentrated into one— “good” if manyness scares you. “This truck” becomes “the truck” becomes “truck” – a “just like,” virtually

a “one,” in the logic of Charles Pierce, for whom just-likeness is affirmed when objects produce the same response pattern for perceptual recognition.

The speaker’s preoccupation with the rhetorical figure of redundancy (etymologically, a surging up, abundance) betrays a fear of crowdedness and the suspicion that where there are copies the authenticity of any one of them, or of all, may be in question. In schematization, objects lose connection to the Ground. A Sumyeong population has none that the speaker can perceive. And she hasn’t one either. Sumyeong is relentless in representing precisely this ontological rootlessness, the sense of appearances coming out of nowhere. The same quality of a vacant *representamen* is distributed through everyone and every set of similar objects. The speaker has next to no defense against it; she’s surrounded by it and self-limitingly quick to register a stereotype.

In the same poem, she says “a bread gets baked or bread turns stale” – two prototypical states that exclude other conditions (battered, French, eaten, etc.). For her, enough has been said about bread in her reductive magnification of only two of its states, its beginning and end. In their collective witness, the poems present this automatic stuffing of immediate objects into a superseding abstraction as distinctively an urban effect.

The pointing pronoun “this” in “this truck” suggests that the speaker has to concentrate in order to see an object. She realizes that she was mistaken, for “the truck becomes the truck / went and missed the truck,” which is language blurred at urban, at traffic, speed. Her perceptions are shaky, apt to be illusions. Untrained in seeing immediacy, she’s surprised by her mistake, jolted into raising “boring head” (we note the missing particularizing article) and asks where the truck is “going. Where “exactly” (a nice touch) “This truck” (she has a realist’s bead on it still) “speeds along” and “moves the avenue” constantly aside. It’s dynamic singularity is now a menace. She seems wonder-struck that “the avenue does not break.” Its confident maneuverability in a crowded urban space points to what she woefully lacks as a person, an assured mobility in a crowd. Her telescoping of the multiple into one is a defense against uncontrollable disorder.

Sumyeong reacts to the reign of duplications with a non-duplicability of her own. Whereas “without changing expression / in two minds / will bake transparent

snacks” (“All the Worlds Leave”), the poet’s singular, *beset* mind is uniquely tart. Oh, the relief of madly fancying that “no one is here, I alone / become width, become height” (“During Which”) – this as opposed to the redundancy of “men spread and women spread and men and women spread. They have a meeting and are angry and while having a meeting they are angry and are crowded and they crowd and divide” (“Residents”). Another instance of “factory results,” as in the poem of that name: “What flows from the factories is a hyper-precise leveling out.”

So, then, a mimicking redundancy is one of Sumyeong’s figures (“In the middle of the city there are factories. / Factories extend in every direction”). Another trope is sentential incompletion, sometimes combined with parataxis: “I connected to. It is Tuesday and,” she writes, both incompletely and unconnectedly. Articulation is laborious, like a heavy freight train’s hissing and puffing as it starts up, an ordeal: “It would be nice to shout the coal stuffed in the mouth / there being so much coal / that the progress of the answer is suddenly underway.” A tasty bush in the mouth would be better: “People tear from bush and put in mouth” and only in that way “grow in height” (“Line”). Still another trope is flat contradiction, going nowhere: “that which is unable to approach does.”

Cities shatter one’s sense of unity. They suck up one’s vitality:

a person whose ankles are all scattered
a lawn whose leaps have all vanished

They rub one’s personhood away in nonrecognition. One could get discouraged. For instance, become “just like” an undifferentiated carp. “After bringing both hands together [before a dressing mirror in a shop where the assistants ignore the speaker] all the turns’ differences / disappear and I will become carp with neither head nor tail. / Head and tail will not be distinguished. / In doing some turn” (“Tundra”).

Priceless talent, serious truth. “I fight with an omnipotent hedge. The hedge is level” (“Line”).

Lindsay Turner

In *The Upstate* Lindsay Turner's speaker seems to pass endlessly through northern South Carolina (the "Upstate"), observing the absence of vitality, beauty, even people. Turner's method is to write, without apparent method, often line after paratactic line, like counting roadkill. Throughout, her voice shows emotion or even inflection. She's like some self-commissioned observer who doesn't want to snap to, quite, if it all lack lucidity. But it is already the lucidity.

The Upstate is the gem among the books selected for the University of Chicago's 2024 poetry series. I stress again that it is wholly arresting without performing a single dramatic gesture or playing a keyboard of bright tones. A complete lack of enchantment bars metaphor and stifles any effect of lyricism. With the surest of touches, Turner uses a variety of horizontalist techniques to insinuate that less is, well, less; listen, you can *hear* that it's less. You might think that the observation of landscape and rurality would be quickening, but not so here. The speaker's detachment is not a gift of "hands off" but rather an empty container, like a basket ready to hold picked fruit where, however, there are only stones. It's a bit later in the book that the economic conditions in the area begin to account for the depressed feeling of the style, but I like to think that basic existential doldrums contribute to it also.

By means of her skillful deployment of techniques, which imply a Great Lack in the Upstate, the poet all but identifies herself as the fount of lack. But she is a master of nuance. Nuance by nuance the *less* shows. The blow-by-blow experience of the stanzas, the *art*, is more compelling than the depiction of the bummed-out "out there," the social and natural appearances. It belies any impression that the art itself is infected with a want of a subtle vitality.

One of the techniques for producing a horizontal levelness is a dis-gathering parataxis:

The red bush looked like it felt to return to life
The dog came back with ticks on her face
Inside you're being all sorts of people

The woozy grammar created by omitting "ready" before "to return to life" is a specific technique (contiguous with parataxis) of turning theme into syntax. It

allows the alternative meaning that the bush, especially in being red, looks ill at having to “return to life.” It looks ill from the start. Either way, the grammar creates incompleteness (less). And if subjectively “you’re being all softs of people,” then you are not a person: you’re just “being” persons, as in a one-actor play.

Syntax that is less, subverted, is illustrated as well in the lines,

drove through where the paper mill
suffer the anxiety and the election
of the fools

Lacking a specific location in the description, the paper mill is potentially anywhere and everywhere, an American staple, a signature of industrial capitalism’s gushed pollutions. Again saying less in order to point to less, the discourse slips from the cut-off mention of the paper mill to a condition of anxiety. Over what? Anxiety may not always disclose its cause or causes, but the failures of foolish governing play into it. The triplet of lines is unique at strategically folding in a lot in a small space and letting it generate chaos. It is Turner’s original signature in these poems.

A later return to the paper mill also holds back from a full articulation:

in the air the paper mill
released it all into the air

– released it, as it were, incontinently. There is something deadly in the circularity of “in the air” and “into the air.” The smoke stack of the mill is imperial, oppressive, the malign opposite of a spectacle of lack. The plume itself, its toxic look and foul odor, is withheld from mention, as if unmentionable.

Grammatical omissions, as in “how could we and survive,” and runaway motley syntax, as in “planted the birds are thousands these days,” add a feeling of both existential danger and ontological craziness, as if the blueprint to things has been crumpled. They raise the question whether, in William Carlos Williams’s sense, anyone is driving the car.

Wall Street and the dicing effect of digital capitalism add a further dire note:

at the moment of peak growth, unexpected
the phone takes any voice and turns it to pieces
next spring, ten more minutes, it's almost done.

Capitalism's impersonality, its abstraction from situational qualification, is also
impugned, evoked in the deliberately vague generalities of the following:

what you need to understand is
it's big things not people
the bright formal nothings
go rising up the hill

it's things and not people
it's braided with pleasure
phthalates and paraben [which respectively soften and bind]
circling like drones.

Add to such sharp wit the shock of the word "pretty" in

And then I walked home quick
whose neighborhood bliss of ignorance white glass traced side
mirror smashed
pretty like that.

Burlesque has a brief moment in the funny note,

the trees
Are a rainbow of green,
All the colors of the green-bow

Add these add up and they form a fair starting list of Turner's sophisticated
ingenuities.

The powerful use of direct address makes a late appearance in the following:

at the end of the workday, winking

sinister, Isabella, there is actually a prohibition against you
being true to any of the worlds, a partition
sturdy in its gorgeous velvet glory.

Here, for personal pathos, a named individual comes into the poem like a sudden pinning down of a protagonist, whose working-class situation pins her down anyway. This Isabella who is excluded from all “the worlds” is left without any recourse to safety or pleasure, not to mention the dubious luxury of what is “gorgeous,” “velvet,” or connotative of “glory” – words that you immediately feel are not only irrelevant but objectionable, engulfed in privilege and vanity. They bunch up against her. For this woman with the flowery name (borrowed from Shakespeare, Turner discloses), the end of the workday, having had its way with her, seems to wink at her sinisterly. The social field is smashed up and money has everything to do with it: “Whose lives are rubble Whose rubble Never mind / For your money Whose What is drowned exhausted / is fished out Is asphyxiated by the air” (a recall of the paper mill in “The Capitals”). The syntax gasps and deteriorates. Where avant-grade work often demolishes, Turner’s poetry inspects the demolished with a nonetheless advanced art, for all that it doesn’t substitute symbols and abstractions for facts.

The vital piece in the closing pages is the four-poem “The Capitals,” which vigorously arraigns the subject, avoiding the tired talk about it. It’s clever and empathetic and, by way of complement, accusatory writing, invigorated by a more definite injection of imagination and tone than is deployed in the earlier poems. Turner writes:

. . . your money holds multiple people in a space for a while
They could dwell and multiply and need your money
Your money has no border so it makes one where it goes
Otherwise you could pay to drink champagne by the border
In a leather booth beneath the big sky turning pink
In Late June it is cold in the capitals but people flock there for the skies
In late June it is cold but people have flocked anyway to make you money
In late June it is cold but your money has gathered all the people there
To make you more
How is it still light out

“How” is of course explained by the entrenched divide between the haves and have nots. The frivolous fantasy of drinking champagne at the border suggests that the speaker is well aware of how futile it is to try to teach fairness to capital/capitals. The heavy strumming verbal repetitions spell static. Whose money is it, anyway? The answer is first the capitalists who have enough money to command “multiple people,” and then, emerging without any joy, the money of the people themselves, who work “to make you money” so that they can at least get a decimal of it back.

It is thus that she engages with the epigraph, C. D. Wright’s insight that “it was not regional it was systemic.” And thus that she gives thrust to the three poems entitled “Accomplice.” One is the Isabella poem; the other two more obviously convey the guilty feeling of one who deplores wrongful governing but is not a radical warrior against it: “reading /Arendt at the gym I dig deep / and would bury it all like a dog if I could.” Again, in a poem of the same title, the small penultimate piece, she writes:”

ACCOMPLICE is silent
someone walks by outside

then: rotten to the fucking core
and out the other side

The fine bitterness of this little poem (which is Turner at her most provocative, difficult best) lament and despises a lack of commitment, which is also rotten complicitness. It may account for the pull toward passivity in the book, which may be a questionable holding back or, on the contrary, fictive evidence of why it’s questionable to do so.

Turner writes as far into the disheartening inside of the Upstate as she can get and still be its poet. But she is roused enough, summons enough impatience at the lack of militancy in the public, to pretend to urge upon people an optimistic (as it were “vertical”) vision of the future: “Everybody’s thinking there might not be much else left soon.”What to do?

Get it tattooed on your calf or your forearm. The only being on the rock outcrop, some things present in their outlines while the others sink into

the sea. The other things dissolve in toxic fog. The other things are sold in pieces so small you couldn't recognize. Everybody's thinking it. Speculated on all you ever loved. Told to be itself properly or it couldn't exist. We all did it."

A stunning riff. Gambled, speculated, smashed, sent up in smoke, bordered, winked away, "love" now has no "proper" stamina. Everybody is an accomplice. Daring nothing more than to take ink into themselves so as to possess the aura of seemingly permanent art.

Byung-Chul Han, in his book *Psycho-Poitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (translated by Erik Butler, Verso 2017), speaks of the neoliberal middle-class "boom of emotion today": "the neoliberal regime deploys emotions in order to bring about heightened productivity." More up front (I think) is the selling of emotion through advertisements of the good life, the best possessions. The Upstaters are evidently an economic rung below the middle-class people who have hope and money and pride. One with them in the poems, Turner herself displays no emotion. *Upstate* is a truly remarkable book, whose success lies in conscience and deft invention that is not ostentatiously performative, flashy like emotion.

Lisa Robertson

Lisa Robertson's elegant, urbane, technically innovative poetry was once tensed between vertical (i.e., transcendental) "myth" ("I'm not done with myth yet") and the contemplation of her own thought and observation of her surrounds. In her latest book, *Boat* (2022), the "outside" consists of a woody retreat in Provencal, complete, it seems, with a primitive "hut," not unlike a classical Chinese poet's mountain refuge. But her mind is a major wanderer; the world is with her. And since "myth" is now dormant, the new book is horizontal through and through (again like the poetry of the Chinese hermit poets). Its core is what Deleuze, among others, simply dubs "life," a special immanence, as Deleuze describes it, within the immanence of world. The latter is just there, like Everest; it doesn't have an explanation, and life doesn't either.

At the psycho-biological level, immanence is vitality, that which Nietzsche misleadingly called "the will to power." In the immanentist perspective,