

AND INVENT, SADLY, ALGEBRA: THE POETRY OF THOMAS LUX

by Monroe Lerner

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One of the imprecisions of speech has to do with the way we speak about things made to be used: we say someone has completed a poem when we mean someone has completed *the writing* of a poem.

This is only a linguistic misdemeanor. It would be foolish to war against the imprecision that exists because nouns and verbs borrow from the same identity bank. However, it's worth noticing that poems are completed by reading and not by writing. It's especially worth noticing because so many of our poems are directed into the sphere of the self and because they doubt that much within that sphere can be understood. In other words, contemporary poetry is hard to read because it is occupied with the difficulty of its being (and by the difficulty of being of its author and its audience). Thus, the achievement of poetry is not in the architecture of the poem but in the architecture which reaches through the poem from reader to writer, a sort of internal public

structure.

Tom Lux's poetry is a good example of this kind of architecture and a quote taken somewhat out of context from "Poem Considering A Future" in Lux's new book, *The Glassblower's Breath*, can serve as a good illustration of the central equation of this architecture:

it's the same
always, two people

going in opposite directions
board separate trains

and invent, sadly, algebra. . .

This algebra exists in the impulse of a language that regards its unsolved terms; the poetry arises in the recognition by speech of the limits of speech. This needn't be so strange or difficult a proposition. After all, architecture requires a recognition of physical limits — gravity, for example. If we look for a moment at the poem from which I've just quoted a few lines, this matter of limits should be apparent:

POEM CONSIDERING A FUTURE

The common nominator, the precious: zero
relinquished by zero

equals zero.
The dumbest leaf

on any crippled tree,
the whimsy of fruit, grass, buds, —

it's the same
always, two people

going in opposite directions
board separate trains

an invent, sadly, algebra. . .
No other choice: let's move back

to the forest, drop down
on our four knees

and pray with the deer.

The poem begins with the proposition of its limits: that our speech, our naming, can finally speak only of itself. The lines "zero relinquished by zero / *equals* zero" can't help but recall Alan Dugan's great poem, "On Zero." Though the treatments here are different, there is a great deal of sympathy between Lux and Dugan. It has to do with temperament, not poetic method. While Dugan explores the great empty circle of consciousness, Lux works over the emotional zero of speech. What is shown is the circular situation of a man who speaks because there is "no other choice," not even the violent and arbitrary alternative of silence: "Let's move back / to the forest, drop down / on our four knees / and pray with the deer." In Dugan's poem, the limits and pressures are created by measuring a mind against its attempts to explore the logic of an image. With Lux, the limits occur in the logic of the situation. The meditation on zero is a dramatic situation and the history of thought becomes the story of thought, the irony of speech an instrument of our animal existence.

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All this high-toned talk is a little jarring when the object is the work of Tom Lux. I've heard Lux dismissed as just another belated domestic surrealist or as a joke poet. In some ways, this is both true and in keeping with his philosophic enterprise. Think of Diogenes walking around in a tunnel looking for an honest man, or of

Descartes reducing all thought to the one thing that can't be doubted. Both the reduction and the comedy act operate in Lux's poetry; but they operate in the voice of a dummy. The speaker can't understand; or better, he thinks not by pursuing the logic of a statement, but by pursuing what comes next — the tone of a voice and its undertone. And because tone of voice is so important in Lux's poetry it's especially difficult to discuss his work. One can't simply unpack the images or examine the equipment.

Lux's first book, *Memory's Handgrenade*, was published in 1972. The explosive ambitions advertised by that title embarrassed the book. How melodramatic this self-proclaimed terrorist must have seemed to someone unfamiliar with Lux's work. What astonishing moxie! Yet it was with exactly this kind of posture that the poems survived and even rescued the title. One poem begins:

Tonight I'm sleeping on the roof because
each night
when I sleep in bed
I inevitably fall out of it.
The bed is only 2 feet
from the floor . . .

Its project is to measure the speed of sleep:

I'm sleeping near the edge
of the roof.
It's a test of my subconscious, that blind
swimmer with a candle in his mouth.

If I fall off, it may be possible
for the first time
to measure the speed of sleep,
how fast and how deep we fall.
If I don't this

is where I'll sleep every night.
I think I'll feel comfortable
for which one of us has never fallen
a thousand feet, or more
asleep.

The speed of sleep and how fast and deep we fall is exactly what is measured by the brilliantly counterbalanced anapests and iambs in the two lines in the third stanza that describe the project, and by the poem's deft phrasing and internal rhyming which hears in the rhyme of "this" and "is" a shift to a different tone, the fetchingly simple question which closes the poem by embracing us. Lux's ability to hear a new tone of voice in his words as soon as the first note insinuates itself is what encourages these ludicrous assertions and allows the discovery of such wonderful resolutions as the one which closes this poem.

The grace and accuracy of Lux's speech are also what makes possible the vocal displacements and strategies which place the reader suddenly in the center of the poem while Lux moves quietly offstage. A good example of this displacement occurs in "The Fire," a prose poem which begins as a deadpan tall tale: "I'm watching the fire and I'm watching the firemen." It is about the heroics of a midget fireman who is celebrated by the townspeople. The poem ends, "This makes him one more man to honor in our twisted stories. I remove my hat, respectfully. In it, there is another fire. A very tiny fire, burning like the diamond embedded deep in your memory." The conclusion gives this tall tale of heroism to us. First, we are asked to accept the twisted story as one of ours; we do, simply because we've read this far and because we laughed at the absurd circumstances it described. When the speaker tips his hat — "respectfully" — we're delighted to be recognized by this conspicuous dandy. We approve and discover that we are at the center of the poem and are illuminated by the light borrowed from the original fire.

In this sense, *Memory's Handgrenade* turns out to be an afterthought.

So far I've talked about the relationship in Lux's poetry between reader and writer. In some ways, this is an oversimplification because writer and reader are housed in the same person during the composition of the poem, and once written, there is only the poem and the reader. The writer has become another reader. In practical terms, this means writers and readers have the same access to a poem. The situation is fundamentally dramatic, a voice performing in the theater of words. The longest poem in *Memory's Handgrenade*, "The Day of the Lacuna," especially appreciates this situation. The epigraph, taken from a prose poem by Charles Baudelaire, outlines the theme: "You see, my dear angel, how difficult it is to understand each other, and how incommunicable all thoughts are, even between people who love each other." In the poem there is speaker and object, voice and creature of the voice. It's a melodramatic thriller. The title even sounds like a best-selling espionage novel. The plot, however, concerns the voice as agent or hero which wants to do its job, to deliver its message. This is the source of the conflict because the message is loss or sense of absence and it must be delivered to the absence. It is like Orpheus trying a second time to cross the Styx. As result, what we get in the poem is a posture; the voice is continually trying to characterize itself. It wants to name its function, its job. This in itself is characteristic of Lux's poetry. I can't think of any other poet so occupied with occupations. These are lines from other poems by Lux:

I imagine, proudly, that I'm a supplier
of bizzare needs.

●
Occupation: nominal bloodletter.
●

Please I'll be delirious
married to a chainsaw.

●
People say, look, here comes Fish Man.

●
I own a gas station.

●
Is this a resume?

In "The Day Of The Lacuna," the profession of the voice is heroic and like Orpheus the hero must call out his lines across the distance of the loss. The opening lines establish the dramatic setting for this voice: "You limp across the first horizon / you see, across any / horizon. It's all over."

The voice goes through the next 10 sections taking on and off its masks. Because there is no immediate narrative framework and because the voice moves through so many transformations it is difficult to provide an overview of the poem. Also, the voice is continually convulsed by Lux's savage wisecracks:

I don't like to be called a liar
more than 100 times a day.
I'm sensitive . . .

When I put on my hat
people think I'm an acorn . . .

I can't stand this honesty!
When I say that
the haunted flute
is torn from my lips . . .

I'm an escapee. Everyday,
when I'm ready to go to work,

I tie my sheets together
and climb out the window . . .
On my way home I climb
back up the same sheets.
They're muddy from dozens
of footprints, dozens of escapes,
dozens of returns.

Lux, in this Orphic posture, plays the music of hyperbole, doubletalk and wisecrack. Truthfully, it gets irritating witnessing this incessant self-portraiture. One wants Lux to finally adopt a figure or narrative circumstance and stick with it. Can't this fellow keep a job? Finally, the frustration of this voice accumulates and appears suddenly like a returned Eurydice:

And the woman, don't forget her,
on the other side of the lake.
She's yelling something.
You can't quite hear her,
but you don't think she's saying goodbye.
You're too far away to read her lips,
but you don't think
she's saying goodbye.

There's an additional line in the version of this poem in *Memory's Handgrenade*, but Lux has erased it. There's no need to go into it here, but anyone interested can consult the fall, 1973, issue of *Iowa Review* where Lux, Norman Dubie and Merle Brown conduct a written conversation on Lux's work and where Lux announces the deletion. It's a good change because the above lines could not be improved on as a conclusion to this poem. Suddenly the voice breaks into a pure speech and the echo between the goodbyes contains the speaker, the woman and the reader. It rings; the repeated words, the haunted syntax, the sharp vowels going in one ear and out the

other enclose the poem in mental space.

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Lux's new book, *The Glassblower's Breath*, travels even further into that same space. The intimidating explosion of a compounded abstraction is exchanged for the very particular craftsmanship of a transparent image. Lux has given himself a job in this book. The other day in a radio interview I heard the photographer Henri Cartier Bresson say he considered surrealism a discipline and not a technique. *The Glassblower's Breath* practices that discipline. Technique is another matter, a working matter related to the needs of each poem. "Working Title," one of the poems from the book, gripes about the conditions of this job in a kind of John Henry worksong that invents its anthropology and monuments:

WORKING TITLE

There must be a better way to lay
these tracks. I mean
the sledge hammer, the heavy spikes . . .

And twice, on each blow,
we hear that relentless swish:
first — this one's almost inaudible —
the backward lift and arc.
The the dropping of it. The arms

are saddened: lifting
the sledge is awful, the dropping
of it, hard, is worse.

There must be a better way: work,
excessive woe and rue,
and in sleep no dulling of it . . .

Here's the life — late afternoons
 rolling eggs across the freeway,
 and now, as it darkens, hunching

down to wait, like a rock, one rock
 in a circle of rocks, defeated
 and grinning.

The precision here is stunning. There is good old American know-how in the laying of these tracks and the cunning way the switches are installed. The exchange of myths in the sixth stanza introduces a Sisyphus out of Kafka who drives home after work to Stonehenge. It's an appropriate enlargement of the labor of making verse, but it's the way the stanzas collaborate with the hammer that amplifies that relentless swish. Holding the arms at the end of the second stanza increases their weight when they are lifted in the third. Lux frequently enjambes one stanza into the next. "Hunching" at the end of the fifth stanza enjoys its solo verbal identity before both introducing and naming the sixth stanza. Disrespectful to sentence and syntax, Lux's idiosyncratic stanzas are essential to *The Glassblower's Breath*; they are as provisional as the glass bubble becoming the vase and as formal as the vase which memorializes the bubble. Like a bubble, the stanza is a break unit. There was a lot of talk several years ago about the breath unit as the measure for a line, which mostly wound up as a lot of huffing and puffing because the lines reproduced talk instead of speech. By speech I mean the language we write in. This "speech" is figurative as must be the breath which shapes it. Surely the lines in this next poem are not measured by how much breath we push out of our mouths as we say these words out loud:

HISTORY AND ABSTRACTION

The dates carved on bridges

and public buildings — 1932, 1951,
19—, and so on: bland

abstractions, bland history.
I like to face history
and abstraction with a positive

condescension. Here's the facts:
technology reached its peak
with the electric chair, nature

poets can't enter the forest
without weapons — this is the truth.
The inexorable boredom of history,

The flat kiss of abstraction . . .
But why do I insist it's too late
to refuse permission

to operate? It's not, it's not
irrevocable, my flesh
is not weightless!

— And, I can be glad, glad
for the small plane of skin
beneath this woman's chin,

and glad for the dead
glassblower's breath still caught
in the red vase behind you.

The “positive condescension” for the “flat kiss of abstraction” is this poet's license to operate, to celebrate. The poem “Lament City” concludes:

We are alive. Our fingertips
are alive and we love something

even if it is only a spirit
with cloth wings. We don't care
we love it so much!

Throughout the book, high spirits are evoked from the soberest circumstances. It's as if Lux needed to test his exuberance against the fiercest conditions; and he does because he has thrown out everything else. However, Lux doesn't want the consolations of philosophy. He tells his lover:

Listen: the long gift
you've handed me, the huge ribbon
of joy, thank you

smooth bone joy! It's simple,
believe me: I can name
your every pore and cell!
I don't need to see your breath
on the mirror to know you're here . . .

This faith in vital signs is the basis for Lux's strength as well as the celebration in these poems. Many times over it earns him immunity for his ignorance and most of the time for his cleverness.