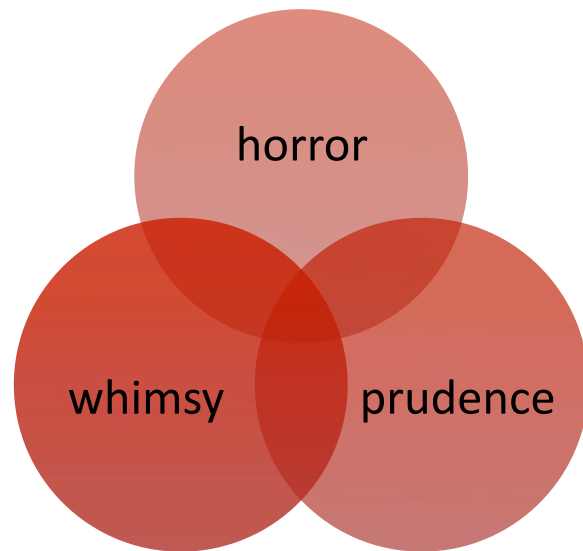


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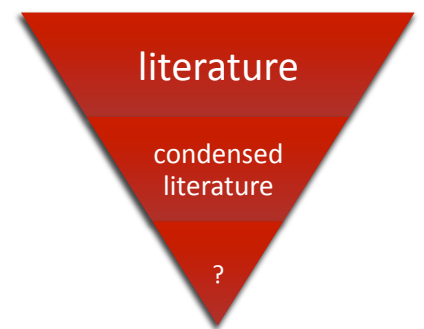
Nightboat Books



The Book of Interfering Bodies	lucky coat anywhere	Discipline
Daniel Borzutzky	Michael Burkard	Dawn Lundy Martin

Are books... stupid?

Stupid: stoo-pid: lacking in sense, tedious, inane, pointless: “This is a stupid party.”



We had several volumes of Reader’s Digest Condensed Books in our vanishingly tiny library when I was a kid. These fascinated me, because I didn’t understand what they were. I knew what condensed milk was, but condensed literature? It didn’t make any sense. How could you take a novel and condense it? I could see how maybe you could summarize it, but these weren’t summaries. I didn’t

read any of these books, and later in life I realized I had grown averse to their decompressed versions as well. My queasiness arose from the obvious question: if a novel could be successfully condensed, then why didn’t the novelist write **that** version instead of the one so weighted with superfluity that even an editor for Reader’s Digest could tell what belonged and what didn’t? Could prose possibly be

that baggy? I didn’t see any Reader’s Digest Condensed **Poems** on the shelf.

Of course, condensing was and remains everywhere, so necessary as to be functionally invisible. The *New York Times* Metro section isn’t New York, a newsletter isn’t the news. Yet some still assume that poetry is the report of the thing and the thing itself. This, in turn,



... this is a corner



... and this is paint

Let's
see
how
well
you
do
with
that,
reader.

assumes that just as there can be a superfluous literature, there must also be a superfluous literacy.

When I ask if books are stupid, I know it isn't the most felicitous way to begin a review. But each of these smart new titles from the redoubtable Nightboat Books largely depend on prose verse, and place explicit literacy front and center in their litanies of complaint. *Implicit literacy* indicates that while the author obviously can read books, they aren't going to be so ungracious as to tell you which ones; *explicit literacy* drags actual titles into the compositional fray. Borzutzky checks Cixous, Baudelaire, Benjamin; Burkard regularly includes Tranströmer; Martin, Fanon and Žižek. They aren't showing off. We require a different

preposition. They are showing... **out?** in that they see no value in pretending literacy is something they do as opposed to something they have. Showing... **down?** in that even when they value their literacy, they know it doesn't magically redeem either them or the facts of the world over which books sit like a skin of fat floating on warm milk.

Each poet makes a good case for sometimes including text that isn't strictly necessary to those aspects of their books that can be summarized. Relative to most volumes of poetry, these are long books, full of redundancies. That isn't a complaint. Thinner, more "disciplined" versions would contradict, if not the essence of the argument, its effect. If each poet accedes the risk of presuming

anyone can sagely determine the difference between the essential and the redundant, they must likewise admit that the irresolute cannot be represented in abbreviated form. Exhaustion requires plenty of time to establish itself as inevitable; you cannot start in a corner and then declare yourself painted into it. You actually have to paint.

Word/Balloons:

Colorful!

Playful!



It came. Words smashed out of the sky and from the mouths and off the pages and from the flesh of the bodies and the words hit the readers and were destroyed like more bodies and the fields of the nation were littered with bodies and dead. Carcass love, they called it. Carcass economy, they called it.

Daniel Borzutzky

From "The Book of Non-Writing"

(Well, no, words didn't, but Borzutzky knows this perfectly well; he also knows that bodies are getting destroyed, and words are getting spoken, economies determined: he offers absurd causes to depict absurd conditions. Clearly, the facts themselves aren't getting the job done, if the job is derive from the facts an ethos appropriate to what those facts demand.)

While they equally hold this practice in common, each poet retains idiosyncratic styles and anxieties. Borzutzky, driven mad by illogic, immorality and pettiness, tries on various languages of authority, but the muscular forthrightness of his prose quickly belies the authoritarian claim to sense. The first poem in the book, "Resuscitation," begins with a narrator's bloody but plausible report: "I fell / I tripped over the horse corpse and its dead bones cracked / I was stuck between the horse legs and they came with a cleaver / Chop off the legs, they demanded". The persistence of the narrator's unnamed tormentors, whose commands come in the form of assigning tasks so difficult they become paradoxical, eventually unravels the poem itself. The syntax remains strong, but it's a skeleton on which the narrator can only hang tatters, a motley that can flag tone, but no longer fact: "You turned on the machine and typed in the code and when my mother and / father disappeared there was only the sound of rain in your rat body".

This is a harsh estimation of how poor and potentially treacherous language can be when confronted with a concerted effort to break it, and Borzutzky doesn't qualify so much as annotate the deficiencies of language and character that make such treachery possible, perhaps inevitable. He describes many apocryphal books: of Flesh, of Holes, of Graves, of Decomposition, of Rubble and Expectations and Echo. The grimmest of these is the Book of Broken Bodies, which "is itself a broken book" even if "the images and photographs are more or less clear". As with "Resuscitation," matters quickly decay into the graphically surreal, but Borzutzky concludes with a placid, inexorable reminder: "Yes, the Book of Broken Bodies is a substitute for another book that the authors were too scared to write. Nevertheless, in its aesthetic and moral failure, the Book of Broken Bodies says more about the sky and the fields and the alleys and the sewers than all of the other books combined."

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Having thus painted himself into a corner as if in retreat from horrors – we do tend to find the most smallest and narrowest places to hide – Borzutzky has little choice but to climb the walls. He anticipates criticism in “Budget Cuts Prevent Me from Writing Poetry” thusly: “You say I wish to create a universe that is an insane asylum // But I am only one American and the planets are all on Quaaludes”. His narrator threatens self-destruction to avoid being called a poet and then resists being called an anti-poet as well, for he is the “apropos of nothing” – yet, although it is sad to know even as it is sickly pleasurable to read, that speaker’s all-encompassing insanity is fit for everything.

At first, it may be difficult to see what Borzutzky’s ruthlessness has in common with Michael Burkard’s often sweet-natured confessional style, but both are poetries of the too much that is too little. Borzutzky’s excess runs to rage, but Burkard is content to narrate confusion. Well, maybe it’s unfair to say he’s content; he just sees the virtue in imprecision. He sees the trade-off between shapeliness and sincerity, and he chooses the latter out of an understandable distrust of the former. If a sound bite is analogous with language that lies in its very form, Burkard uses sounds that always bite off more substance than they can chew. In “displaced,” he writes “I should have been Elizabeth / and

an only child. Had my mother / had her way. Instead my father / named me (and had his way with her). // I know I shouldn’t / but I’m unraveling in fours: / space, time, time, space, / jetlag and numbers of siblings displaced. // My mother asks me / if I would come live with her / when I come back...”

There’s something of Huffy Henry here, of Berryman’s seesawing guilt and gloating, of notes on napkins. Or at least there would be, were this poem meaningfully representative of *lucky coat anywhere*, which, in many telling and important ways, isn’t. The book shows skill, but not style, which is altogether to its credit. Even though it is laced with poems apparently designed to inspire undergraduates to barking frustration – tell me, one can nearly hear them shriek, what makes this a poem? – it’s also shot through with poems that would meet the standards of the most mirthlessly conservative reader. What happens between these (though I don’t mean to say Burkard’s limited to only two “types” or “kinds”) better describes the overall effect of constantly experiencing the moment one moves from being seasick to having sea legs. It’s a weird instant: what seemed quintessentially unstable becomes solid, even though you know it is not. In Burkard’s case, the reason it is useless to ask him to commit to one style or the other is the same

reason it is nonsensical to ask whether any given wave is a peak or a trough. Well, just wait a minute, and your question will stand revealed as mandating an error; one becomes the other. What seems like excess very quickly becomes hardly sufficient. So when Burkard didactically notes that “If a poem begins with / lithium or some other / bipolar remedy, you will / walk into the poem and you / will walk out, / as simple as that,” he knows that you “will later be / poeticized when least expecting / poeticization”. Don’t worry about language and its inadequacy: the degree to which it succeeds or fails is outside the range of your control. You can no more bend it absolutely to your will than you can command the sea to still.

If Burkard and Borzutzky can sometimes read as if the language’s failures make for nothing more than a big adventure in your head while the world does or does not fall apart around you, Dawn Lundy Martin never loses sight of the fact that all the sweeping generalities of the world are actually and always experienced by individual lives and bodies. While I respect Borzutzky’s surgical exploration of language’s pathology, and I admire Burkard’s holistic treatment of a fractured self, it’s Martin who has the best medicine, even if it is bitter.

At one point, aware how stark her

Someday I want to know the woman in the kerchief. Someday I want to know the object and the source or the other shadow up front. Someday I want to give my halfway hellish greeting cards to miracle workers. I am asking you for change he says. Maybe I should put a blue towel in this.

Some ideas occurred to me. I am just trying to write some things down. Like Chris' knee touched my knee. Like: hey, Jimmy's hand came out of nowhere for said Mason Dots.TM

Michael Burkard, from "It's Not Too Late"

(So, this passage above: it's sliced from a narrative sequence, but one in which the branches and the roots and the trunk are of equal length and width. If narrative is a path and a path can be mapped, Burkard's is exclusively dendritic. As with the superscript of the unspoken trade mark, the path of one meaning (spoken) is overlaid by another (recalled) and another (referential) and another (directive) and another (distracted). Choose one, and the others instantly appear.)

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poetry can be, Martin writes, "Pardon me if I move slowly around the edges and am fearful of ordinary lives. A system of diagnoses says, you're ok, you're not dying." I can see how the term "ordinary lives" could provoke defensiveness. Who is Martin to decide what does or doesn't count as ordinary? That, however, is the kind of question only someone with an ordinary life could see fit to ask. I take Martin to use "ordinary" as an ethical marker, not an ethical value, positive or negative. An ordinary life is simply one free enough of terror to speculate without caution. An extraordinary life, by comparison, is one in which not dying is the same thing as being ok.

I find that dichotomy bracing and restorative. If books represent literacy and literacy always accompanies the risk of vanishing in its own powers, then Martin restores a sense of scale to madness without which loss becomes purely abstract. "A medical text might fixate on what's working in the body and what's not working in order to determine who is alive and who is dead. We know better." And what does that better knowledge look like? "Forgetting is a way of misremembering the present," and thus "In finishing, one forgets."

Just as it seems like there should be a more sophisticated gradient of wellbeing than ok or dead, there

ought to be room for multiple ways of explaining or inhabiting one's experiences. This is what those people blessedly free of poetry often use language for, and they are allegedly able to do so without falling into the tar pit of language's bleak history and its suffocating potential. However, it's also dangerous to assume that because of its imperfections (however radical they may be) language is lethal in and of itself, rather than lethality's capering handmaiden. Confronting the threat of failed or absent speech, Martin asserts "What we didn't know then is the quality of sound when it was silence and that disturbs us now, especially me, the silence of what might have occurred if it were —"

She follows this exploration with a contemporaneous legend of its failure: "—or if, fuck, I don't know, something different, or something spoken that wasn't." This is like a burial and an exhumation that happen in the same act, but it's a remarkable moment because it enacts the balance required to indict meaning without sacrificing its possibility. Martin could have powered through and willed a knowledge her wishing begs for; had she made something up, there is no way the reader could have guessed. Likewise, she could have quit entirely, and written nonsense into the place she wants sense to be so as to remind us to suspect language, as if every speaking

person does not absolutely propagate the truth that we cannot be absolutely trusted, not in what we say, what we intend, what we want.

But Martin doesn't do either of these things. She says she doesn't know. She does not pretend to know. She doesn't say she cannot. She just reports that she doesn't.

Paradoxical as it seems, this gains my trust more quickly and thoroughly than might anything else. And yes, I am aware that the passage isn't happening at the moment I read it; I know it is made, not found; past, not present. I still value it, because by leaving/placing it there, Martin compromises every other moment in *Discipline* where the reader does rely on the force of her assertion. All three poets here distrust magic, but Borzutsky and Burkard require a measure of that confidence we grant the professional disillusionist. False belief plausibly engenders a panicked rush to perfect distrust or maximum credulity, but these, too, are absolutes. They can elaborate our sense of what to avoid, but they don't tell us what we can do. I may be feeling atypically optimistic this evening,

but I want to believe something is possible, rather than believing something is inevitable.

The problem of condensed literature – the very thing that repeatedly drew me to that shelf full of books that weren't what they were – matches the flight-or-fight reflex provoked by discrepancy itself. The Metro section is a part of New York, a literal form of knowing it; the newsletter is the news as much as it is not. I think Martin finds the most circumspect way of addressing

this, but Borzutsky and Burkard are no less interesting for that. Nightboat Books should be celebrated for the moral intelligence and the formal innovation of its list, but don't forget: that's true even though I said it was. No new news here, but the review isn't the book.

Happily inspired by the Vanessa Place

inevitable

inexorable

infinite

ineffable

insane