

STEN CARLSON AND ROBIN CLARKE

On Ben Lerner's *Mean Free Path*

Mean Free Path, by Ben Lerner. Port Townsend, Wash.: Copper Canyon, 2010.

The closing poem in Ben Lerner's *Mean Free Path* alludes to a beginning, "the new construction going up," but quickly enjambes against an ending:

the new construction going up
is elegy.

Such collapsing of distances (between beginnings and endings, living and dead, love and loss) is one of the book's major concerns. Where, the book asks, does elegy begin or end? Where the love poem? What does an instant of writing pretend to signal about a beginning, middle, and end to love? To grief? These questions drive and give shape to Lerner's book, in which elegy and love poem—each the flip side of the other—are made to collide.

In the collision of love poem and elegy, the book's speaker emerges both terrifyingly post ("A star survived by its own light") and rigorously present. The poems in *Mean Free Path* burden themselves with the post-/ante-fact of having always survived the death of others

Barbara is dead
Until I was seventeen . . .

as the condition for expression. Likewise, the subjects of these laments are not, as in traditional elegy, fixed in some eternal past which—by virtue of staying past—lends pathos to the song. Any consolation available in Lerner's elegies must be sought, not in the contemplation of some permanent principle,

for example, does the poet begin to express a spontaneous feeling when verbal expression is always, on the one hand, already mediated by very un-spontaneous commercial discourses, and, on the other hand, analyzed, re-combined, and deployed in the name of sometimes nefarious political ends? If poetry's material—language—is endlessly appropriated and systematized within such discourses of *use*, how does the poet, in turn, use that language to express lived experiences of desire and loss?

Combine was the word I was looking for
Back there in the trees. My blood is
Scandinavian Modern. I kind of lost it
But enough about me. To return with a difference
Haven't we tried that before? Yes, but
But not from the air. Unique flakes form
Indistinguishable drifts in a process we call
All these words look the same to me
Fascism.

In *Mean Free Path*, "fascism" is brought to the stage as a numbing, normalizing, totalizing force *within language*. Again and again the lyric "I" assails the reader with rhetorical questions and assertive answers that seem to echo the speech-modes of fascist authority. Amidst the speaker's critical awareness of the problems of such authority, and his deft moves to avoid them ("Authority derived from giving it away/Is how I define *aura*"), the impossibility of writing a love poem or elegy *without them* emerges as a central theme of the book.

Caught in the nervous simultaneity between old and new, living and dead, and trapped in the double bind of both needing and refusing his own lyric authority, the speaker repeatedly tries to *think* his way out of the problem. And thinking, of course, produces its own dilemma: discursivity is at odds with song; critical thought pulls the poetry dangerously close to prose. The rigorous conceptual *work* of high theory that gets done in *Mean Free Path* does so against a desiring, singing body, and the violence of this collision enacts one of the book's central dramas. A kind of thesis creeps between the cracks in this song. Or is it the other way around?—the holes in this argument emit a kind of music.

There must be an easier way to do this
I mean without writing, without echoes
Arising from focusing surfaces which should
Should have been broken by structures
Hung from the apex in the hope of deflecting
In the hope of hearing the deflection of music
As music

Discursive consciousness threatens the speaker's capacity to feel, or to sing, because thought would relegate the dead to the past, and use that pastness as material for song. The desire to find another "way to do this . . . without writing" presses upon the speaker's well-reasoned impulses, and this pressure breaks open a space—path—external to theory where a new voice emerges neither as logical proposition nor lament but as *deflection* of both.

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Fitting for a book that ends with a beginning, the opening section of "Mean Free Path" begins with an ending: "I finished the reading and looked up/Changed in the familiar ways." Which is to say the book begins squarely within the temporal conundrum discussed above: it has survived its own reading—a particularly unaffecting, "familiar" reading at that. What to do with so much familiarity but to

begin the forgetting. The little delays
Between sensations, the audible absence of rain
Take the place of objects. I have some questions
But they can wait. Waiting is the answer
I was looking for. Any subject will do
So long as it recedes. Hearing the echo
Of your own blood in the shell but picturing
The ocean is what I meant by

∞

You startled me.

That leap between stanzas, over the glyph, from "I" to "You," in this opening poem enacts a gesture that repeats 17 poems later at the end of the book's first section:

You dream
The donor's dreams. The donor's breath
Breaks your lines across their prepositions
Halved and polished to display the crystal
Back-formations. Go in fear of abstraction
But go. Be gone by morning. There is nothing
You don't need a shell. Just cup your hand
Nothing for you here but repetition.

Among the many powerful re-renderings from first utterance to last, the turn from "I" to "You" is perhaps the most affecting. Lyrical subject is himself transformed into object: speaker becomes spoken. The authority of the first person pronoun has dissolved somewhere "between sensations." We've seen the lyric "I" hailed by the fascist one. Here, we are brought to the lyric subject's disarming recognition of his own smallness. Dispiriting as this may seem, it is, to our mind, *hopeful*: shrunken to the simple hand producing its own echo. The "I" becomes—we can no longer say object—but—tender recipient of a readerly inquiry: what will become of this lyric and the body that speaks it, and how is its fate bound up with our own? Instead of "I'm speaking," here at last we can hear an echo of the post-structuralist question "What matter who's speaking?" *Who* does not matter, and not because the author is an irrelevancy, nor because literature opens a portal to universal truth-n-beauty, no matter the source. For Lerner and now us, "who" speaks matters less than what modes speak (through) us. Excising lyric authority, Lerner's "I" registers and relays-with-a-difference discourses that are, in fact, speaking somewhere.

This is, ultimately, how the poet resolves one of the problematics of the book: how, in *elegy*, to affect something other than a recorded, mediating voice—a voicemail, say, for the dead—and instead to reckon with the present tense of death. How poetic speech can be *undone* by mortality as one is—or might strive to be—undone by love. The possibilities for some kind of utterance equal to the conditions of its saying open up even further in the alternating "Doppler Elegies" sections of the book. Where "Mean Free Path" is full, "Doppler Elegies" is full of holes.

I didn't want
to wake you, I

sell windows in
civilian life, I can sleep
anything, the way some people
here, in the terminal

The stanzas in "Doppler Elegies" involve a kind of hyper-enjambment wherein the movements across line breaks *record* the losses this elegy/love poem struggles to express. In the turn from "sleep" to "anything" above, one hesitates over the gap that, in a different poem, would be resolved with a preposition. Likewise from "people" to "here" the silence between words evokes all manner of absences this book is *about*. As the speaker is thrown into the blank spaces between subject and object, temporality and topography, activity and oblivion, the reader is activated into such spaces of her own. The missed connections across line breaks and caesuras in "Doppler Elegies" suggest the concept of Doppler effect itself: waves whose frequencies distort and refract as matter moves closer or further away from an observer.

"Effect" thus becomes *Elegy*: a song "for the distances collapsed." A song which refuses to erect monuments in place of the dead, but instead, like the book as a whole, lets its own delays, what goes missing or appears in the wrong place, stand for the palpable absences—themselves set in motion—the dead leave behind.