

What Human Direction(s): A Review of Jessica Baran's *Equivalents*

Equivalents, by Jessica Baran. Wilson, Wyoming: Lost Roads Press, 2013.

It would be deceptively easy to categorize Jessica Baran's *Equivalents* as a latter-day aesthetic remix of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*: the small blocks of smartly enjambed prose-poem text that comprise two of the book's three sections are heavily reliant on observation, presented in the rhythm of declarative sentences that do not necessarily accrete any kind of linear, narrative logic. And, like the more intriguing moments in Stein's work, this text couches its readers and its speaker in immediate, easily apprehended sensory detail—what can be seen, what can be heard, what can be touched. However, in the universe of *Equivalents*, these details are not only points of interest or negotiated perception, but genuinely suspect: "The lake," Baran's speaker tells us on the first page, "is open to questioning." And so observations about the raw, natural world begin to accrue, juxtaposed with experiences from staid sub/urban surroundings. Titled after a suite of photographs by Alfred Stieglitz that focused on the sky and spanned a decade (1925–1934), this book posits itself as observer, critic, participant, and interlocutor of/with humanity's conflicted relationships with art, artifice, and the natural world.

The first section, "On Dailiness," locates the speaker and her audience "somewhere in between, in the soft, daily middle: everything that is effortlessly expendable." This conflation of malleability and expendability with a sense of routine and repetition creates an attachment between the human invention of time, by which we measure our own finitude, and a sense of irrelevance: we may believe ourselves to be sovereign over nature, but in reality, our departure from this world creates no discernible void in the natural world that will indubitably outlast us. Perhaps as a solution to this terrifying sense of insignificance, we do our best to appropriate the aspects of nature we find most favorable, while discarding the rest. The ultimate result

is desperately uncanny: "The comforter makes a bed of sponge-print blossoms—nature in all season, poly-blend. An anthem to dailiness." Where our evolutionary precursors might have once used actual foliage as bedding, we have re-created images of aesthetically pleasing plants onto synthetic fabric, sewn together into a blanket that we as a culture have tellingly christened a "comforter," for all its tailored and constant availability. Baran holds this up as an example of our inexorable drive to move past nature—to crystallize it into a relic which neither threatens nor awes us, a possession we can prevent from getting in our way—and this tendency, her poems tell us, creates the dailiness of our lives—the constant saturation of comfort that ultimately dulls our keener instincts and sensibilities, perhaps ultimately including our own collective sense of self-preservation. "Why go away," she asks rhetorically, "when you can see it all here?" This question is underscored by the fact that the text opens with the appearance of an arrow, which carries connotations of forward trajectory and human progress (or, at least, our propensity as a species towards what we think is progress), while also serving as an artifact that reflects the human proclivity for dominating our natural surroundings through violence.

And yet, even as our lives are desensitized by this constant current of sanitized comfort, *Equivalents* takes a more nuanced approach than to simply damn the human craving for artifice and the frequently anesthetizing results it offers; Baran deftly ties such threads to the human drive for revision. While we may be guilty of hiding beneath grotesque sheets printed with false flowers, we also know how to forgive: art and artifice have taught us that, as well. "Foolish articulations are not to be regretted, but re-edited. Say them again, but better next time." The promise of potential improvement allows us to cope with damage and imperfection—and even, possibly, to genuinely improve our own existences. And yet, our definitions of progress tend to prove troubling, as evidenced by "the neighbor, [who] burns his leaves without conscience," committing the transgression of eliminating natural beauty (brightly colored autumn leaves, which nourish the soil as they decompose) and replacing it with pollutant smoke, so that his yard—in which he presumably takes pride—will resemble a stylized version of the natural world.

Indeed, the human desire to revise the natural world is portrayed as such an irresistible force that, by the time Baran's speaker has begun to meditate on an emergency kit that is missing its intended supply of holy water, the message of the first section seems clear: we are living overly prepared lives that have become entirely drained of

divinity—a lifestyle so regimented that the natural element of a rainbow is regarded more admirably when it fails to exercise unilateral agency regarding its own natural shape.

The second section, "On Dissonance," begins to tell us a bit more about how to survive in the world that Baran has revealed to us. "How is it," the speaker asks, "that someone / else was studying failure so closely, seeing also its productive side." And so Baran's interrogation of the human relationship to nature and art/ifice deepens: what is positive about our ability to divorce ourselves from the rest of the natural order that created us? The most obvious answer in this section is delivered almost immediately: cases in which nature goes awry, such as cases of suicidal impulses: "A woman died in a bed next to yours. Starved herself in the night," begins one of the only (and very short-lived) narrative threads in the entire text, followed by a litany of barely effective, artificial distractions implemented by those around the speaker to help cushion her from the trauma of an associate's death. Such distractions are questionable in their ability to help the speaker process what has happened, or to alleviate any suffering she may have as a result of this experience; however, they suggest a recognizable human desire to move forward, to protect the natural function of being alive. In this way, Baran and her speaker suggest artifice may actually be helpful in the preservation of our overall natural order, when individual or isolated natural impulses may fail. And, rather than merely providing shallow distractions from the uglier or more threatening parts of the natural world, or serving as an intensifier for the more beautiful aspects of it—art/ifice, at its best, feeds human curiosity and intellectual appetite: sometimes, we "like how it resembles nothing [we've] / known before"; we like the questions it causes us to ask.

However, "On Dissonance" provides further vacillation, refusing any easy answers: "Living with symbols is no surrogate," Baran tells us, even as she employs them, and this contention is given teeth when readers experience several consecutive images of funerary artifice that, while clearly intended to distract and console a bereaved individual in the face of a loved one's death, fail to achieve their purpose. "Expressions of condolence empty into a paper cake box and fill it with the nothingness they are . . . Black balloons, black streamers—it's hateful, you know it; it's all grotesque." When a rabbit appears a few lines later, sprinting across the night, the undissected image of its vulnerable, white body speeding against the ominous, unlit backdrop of surrounding night captures all the sublime beauty, terror, brutality, loneliness, loss, and fear that human beings feel in reaction to death.

It is at once more decisive, and more dissonant, than the baked goods and condolences and horrifying décor that fill the rest of the piece; the immediacy of nature is again proven crucial to human development.

"On Dissonance" closes by returning readers to the arrow that began the book—a barometer of human progress and harbinger of human fallibility: "Spurred by the idea of progress, that it's a straight-arrow line to the end . . . you scraped off the filth. Clearing the way is what you thought you were doing, but instead you simply polished a mirror. There you are again. Clouds rush by behind you." Our enchantment with the arrow and all that it represents has clouded our collective judgment; we become so absorbed in our notions of progress and our divorce from nature that we fail to recognize our true location—that we have isolated ourselves from the natural world in negative ways, but also that we haven't left it as far behind as we might have thought. Our confrontation with such realization, Baran seems to be suggesting, is cyclical in nature.

It is this idea that ushers readers into the book's final, much shorter movement, "The Panorama," the only section in which the lines are obviously delineated in traditional poetic fashion. Baran seems to embrace artifice most fully in this final panel of her literary triptych; her line breaks, now boasting the dimensions of traditional verse, seem intended to replicate the experience of viewing the panoramic mural that inspired them. In reading the long, prose-like lines of the earlier section, a certain narrative rhythm is established; in much the same way that photographs of the sky, with finely replicated detail of reality, allow viewers to forget that they are not actually looking at the sky, so the earlier, prose-like lines in this text function by rhythmically mirroring internal, conscious narrative. As readers acclimate to such rhythms, likely not terribly different from their own thought processes, they are able to forget that they are reading poems, and rather come to view reality through the lens of Baran's language as reality *qua* reality. Like the less-delicate brush strokes of a painting, however, these more sharply-broken poems that end the book seem designed to remind readers that we are, in fact, experiencing an artificial, stylized version of reality.

This aesthetic choice suggests a certain amount of support for the human tendency to view the natural world outside of its own context; as Baran's speaker curates the mural for us, this large-scale work of artifice is elevated to the status of an important, even positive experience. The hand of the artist can give its audience "a view," or insights into our history and our future—and, according to Baran's speaker, it can also refute, dismantle, or "take away" such insights, as

well. This ability to record and analyze our own actions and identities, ostensibly for the sake of collective human progress, seems, finally, to approach a certain kind of redemption, even balance: artifice, when we remember that it is such, helps us consider what kind of place we *want* for ourselves in the natural world—not only in the here-and-now quaalude-calm of dailiness, nor in our dissonance-inspired angst, but also in the future towards which we continue to irresistibly catapult ourselves. This is, ultimately, the core of the project that Baran has so painstakingly and meticulously composed for readers to navigate. “It could be gold / or terror—you don’t know,” she tells us, “but it seems like the only direction.”