

Ken Babstock. *Airstream Land Yacht*.

Patrick Warner

Volume 21, Number 2, Autumn 2006

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds21_2rv08

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Warner, P. (2006). Review of [Ken Babstock. *Airstream Land Yacht*.]. *Newfoundland Studies*, 21(2), 402–406.

Crafting characters that mutely accept any strange occurrence permits Safer to overpopulate her novel with melodramatic plots. Conveniently enough, Ruth acknowledges that the freezer solution is “a bit cliché to be sure but [she] can’t think of anything else at the moment” (63). The characters accept all, and the readers are meant to follow suit. Readers, though, yearn for some explanation of the characters’ credulity. For all of the details she delivers within these plotbursts, Safer keeps her readers from forging strong connections to her characters, by relying on fantastic, brief plots and narratorial exposition for characterization.

Catherine Safer enjoyed writing this novel. Readers cannot help but sense the sheer joy that must have come to Safer from the process of brainstorming, of drumming up improbable plots. Writerly pleasure is also evident in the way Safer inflects characters’ speech with eccentricities of dialect. For instance, listen as Mrs. Miflin introduces Judy to the other boarders: “*This here* young lady goes by the name of Judy and is living with you now thanks to Social Services who couldn’t find anyone else who’d have her *being as she’s what you’d call* a delinquent.... Judy eat *them peas*. I got no patience for fancy eating diseases in this house. I made a nice trifle for dessert, and I’m not bringing it out until *them plates is polished*” (11, italics mine).

Readers will also find fascinating Safer’s occasional play with the narration. Notice, for example, the shift in voice in the following passage: “Mrs. Miflin is waking from her madness or perhaps scraping the bottom of it but no matter. There is a fury boiling in her. Memory is alive in vivid colour of each wrong done her for the last few months beginning with *that damned Judy coming here to live*” (127, italics mine). Within this excerpt, the straight description by the narrator is infused with discourse identifiable to readers as Mrs. Miflin’s.

Catherine Safer obviously has a galloping imagination and many stories to tell. Readers can look forward to Safer’s next novel. Having achieved some success with *Bishop’s Road* (which was a finalist in the 2005 Amazon.ca / Books in Canada First Novel Award), Safer should have the confidence to limit the number of stories she attempts to relate and to devote more time and space to the artful development of her narratives.

Martha Wells
Memorial University

Ken Babstock. *Airstream Land Yacht*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2006, ISBN 0887847404

IN *AIRSTREAM LAND YACHT*, poet Ken Babstock builds on the successes of his two previous collections, *Mean* (1999) and *Days Into Flatspin* (2001). Readers familiar with his work will recognize immediately the author’s distinctive touch, as in these

lines from the poem "Aurora Algonquin":

I, or the vodka, stood recalling Mr. Marysak explaining
in Geography, rock's rust-red tint as proof of iron-rich

seams when the pinned up cowl or hood of stars
didn't collapse exactly but popped or blew a stitch;
a familiar seepage in weak-lit jades deepened, altered course

to crimson, and fell in successive tides from directly overhead
till that night entire became a darkroom developing
its notion of a thing outside the visible: pure in deed, and fed.

New readers will note his exuberant approach to language, his ease with form, and the vigour and threat in his diction. And yet, in this new collection, Babstock engages less viscerally with the sensory world; instead, he directs his energy toward consciousness and questions of perception. These are poems in which the rubber of thought meets the asphalt of fact, where fact is not what it seems and thought is more fixed than in flux. Time and again in this work, Babstock advances a position and then circles back to take the measure of it. Rhyme is both the anchor and the forward momentum in many of the poems, particularly those in the book's first half. The poem "Windspeed" develops around a series of half rhymes that ripple outwards from the words "descent" and "air." The poem "Tarantella," an hilarious exercise in brinksmanship, is structured around finding half or quarter rhymes for the word "bordatella." In rapid succession, we get the rhymes, "rubella," "Nutella," "with Ella," "mortadella," "umbrella," "this fella," "and tell a," "*l'angoscia delhora della*," "Danny Aiello," and so on for another twelve lines.

"Sometimes making is just play, only that" says the speaker in "Found in a Sock Monkey Kit," the poem which follows "Tarantella." The converse of this statement is, of course, that play is sometimes more than just play. What Babstock does with rhyme both in "Windspeed" and in "Tarantella" offers a gentle introduction to a more radical technique: the use of spliced narratives and stream of consciousness. In a Nutella shell, he wants to see how far apart he can move the electrodes and still make a spark jump between them. The stream of consciousness he employs in "State Your Needs" shows the author pushing meaning to extremes and running the risk of alienating dedicated readers. As if anticipating their potential discomfort, however, he quickly follows up with a love poem, the beautiful "Marram Grass"; then in quick succession he offers one of the book's strongest pieces, "Palindromic," in which he takes a chilly New Year's Day walk while musing on the year just ended. Reading these crystal-clear quatrains, it occurred to me that this is how Joseph Brodsky might have written had he been a native English speaker.

Section II of the collection, "Stream," takes the movement established in the first section and drives it harder. After the exhilarating syntax of the opening poem, "As Effected By Klaus Berger's Haircut, Whose Brainwaves His Father Recorded Inventing the EEG," we get "Engineer and Swan," a sonnet in rhyming couplets that left me scratching my head. He then softens the blow with "Pragmatist," before going full throttle for the next few pieces as he works his way up to "Subject, with Rhyme. Riding a Swell," less a poem than a language experience signalling the onset of a brain tumour. Again, as if sensing he has gone too far, he rounds on himself in an utterly charming poem, "The Brave," which begins as follows

That's not what we liked. It wasn't for us.
It was pinned to a stream. Ear-marked.
The *arriviste* mashed up with the avant-garde.
We didn't go for that. That wasn't us.

and goes on to lampoon both potential detractors of his method and the method itself: "Where / was the spit, the spark, the goatish / smell of the real?" "It's about cutting out rot. About rigour. About / the men in acumen...." I found it hard to read this poem without hearing a broad Yorkshire accent. Change the "us" in the verse quoted above to 'uz', and I think you'll hear the metaphorical Doc Martens of English poet Tony Harrison striking hard on the boards. In the next poem, "The Minds of Higher Animals," Babstock further takes the measure of his approach and seems to admit to exhaustion, of wanting "one end or the other end of this circus dead," a sentiment that reaches its full expression a few pages later in the poem "Ataraxia."

As a book, it is arguable that *Airstream Land Yacht* actually ends at around page 56. This is not to say that the book's second half is lacking in strong poems. "The World's Hub" may be Babstock's finest poem; it shows what he can do when he transcends his self-consciousness about feeling and enters the subject of his poem, unleashing on it the considerable language his ruthless experimenting has won for him. "Hush a Mask" and "A Birth in the Stern" are also noteworthy, as is "The Largest Island off the Largest Island."

It is tempting to read the whole of *Airstream Land Yacht* as a palindrome. If it does function within this structure, it does so only in the loosest sense: the first half driving abstraction hard at the concrete world to watch sparks fly, and the second half reversing the trend and slowly returning the concrete world to its place of primacy. This is not to say that playfulness and experimentation are not present in sections III ("Land") and IV ("Yacht"); they are, but they are no longer in ascendancy. Rhyme is used less frequently as a superstructure. The image making is sharper, and the poet's metaphors and similes are more closely tied to details of the physical world: "Whale / flukes northeast, once, like greens / spooned from a stew" and "Washers stare like squid from a silted / jam jar" (from "The Largest Island off the

Largest Island”); “Sand flea’d kelp wigs blacken; braided / and crisp” (from “Jerome’s Rock”).

The last half of the book also contains a few missteps: I found the poem “The Materialist” unconvincing and somewhat pat in its conclusions about the meta-physical. As well, perhaps as a consequence of keeping sentiment so much at bay, poems which move toward an embrace sometimes skid unchecked into the sentimental: the conclusions to both “Franconia” and the “Compatabilist” come to mind. On the subject of influence, if the acknowledged father of this collection is Wallace Stevens, another must surely be Paul Muldoon, whose stylistic presence is felt throughout. Sometimes the resemblance is uncomfortably close. Take these lines from “As Effected By Klaus Berger’s Haircut, Whose Brainwaves His Father Recorded Inventing the EEG,”

and take up a place
in the burgeoning
Town

of Burgeo, or Burlington,
or some other coven
of bourgeois ease,
where we might both ease

our gripes out to pasture
and await the immanent
blow to whatever
cranial region induces

the shiver that precedes
the blackness
that’s like blackness
in a Greyhound’s

window. No sound, just
the dimensions of that pane
delivering a bust
of you to yourself. “Have made I myself plain?”

Still, in a collection where achievement so often rises to meet ambition, these are relatively minor bones to pick. Muldoon as guide is probably a good choice if you’re going to try to walk on air. Babstock is a poet of such virtuosity that it is easy

to underestimate what he is doing in any one poem. The peaks are so high that there is inevitably a sense of letdown between them. *Airstream Land Yacht* is a mesmerizing read, and it confirms Ken Babstock, once again, as one of Canada's finest poets.

Patrick Warner
St. John's, Newfoundland

Wade Kearley. *Let me burn like this: Prayers from the ashes*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2006, ISBN 1897174020

SOLIPSISM: THE VIEW that the self is all that can be known. Existentialism: a theory which emphasizes the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining his or her own development through acts of the will. Baroque: highly ornate and extravagant in style.

I doublechecked these terms in the Oxford Dictionary in order to decide whether or not they are essential to an understanding of Wade Kearley's second collection of poetry, *Let me burn like this*. I do. Certainly, if you don't want to hear a solipsistic, willful poetic voice, and see/feel/taste a multitude of baroque images of Eros and lamentation, then this book is not for you. Asking Wade Kearley to quiet down and pare down would be like asking Dylan Thomas to write like Raymond Carver or Shakespeare to create a sequel to *Waiting for Godot*. It shouldn't be done.

Having dispensed with this caveat, I would like to say that it's refreshing to read Canadian poetry that speaks accessibly and authentically, with passion and compassion, about deep human experiences of longing, loss, rage, tenderness, fear, and aging. In its convictions this poetry harkens back to the moving and vigorously masculine poetry of Irving Layton, Milton Acorn, and Alden Nowlan, and in Newfoundland, Al Pittman and Percy Janes. Many of Kearley's poems echo these poets particularly in the placement of humans in the wilderness. In "Alpha Male," a hunter at night feels his failures like "wind-fallen tree trunks,... antlered shadows." A couple of dream-like poems outline the travails of rock climbers and the strange falling death of a young man: "I remember someone whispering / strange jagged words, telling me / to let go. Maybe I fell then, / broken at the devil's foot." Other poems revel in the confidence of a boy who lives in the natural world: "As a boy on this cape I defied rogue waves" ("Concert at Cape Spear"), and "I calculated the parabolas of flight, / mastered them on my swing set / until Grandpa plucked me / from the sky at supertime" ("The Bell Island lightkeeper"). My favourite wilderness poem is the sexy fantasy "Seasonal Labourer":

... I want to lick your unhaltered shoulder.
I want you to forget the foreman, forget