

Anselm Berrigan, Three Books and a Poem

01/02

Having in mind many great publications that, since the pandemic began in March 2020, have not had a chance to circulate in usual ways, I put the following prompt to an array of heavy readers: List three poetry books that stood out. Define “poetry book” as broadly as possible. Define “stand out” not at all. Choose one poem from any of these books and write one hundred words about it – a brief annotation, recommendation, question, observation. Six responded with these soundings. e-flux journal has also reprinted each of the poems the contributors chose to write about. We thank the writers and their publishers for permission to do so.

– Simone White

Claire Meuschke – *Upend* (Noemi Press, 2020)
Akilah Oliver – *the she said dialogues: flesh memory* (Nightboat Books, 1999/2021)
Cliff Fyman – *Taxi Night* (Long News Books, 2021)

On “--oOo--” by Claire Meuschke

In her early twenties, poet Claire Meuschke and her brother discovered a transcription of an interrogation of their grandfather, conducted in 1912 at Angel Island off of San Francisco, a West Coast port of entry for immigrants to the United States. Meuschke kept a copy of the interview on her desk for a number of years, writing poems with it nearby and never intending to make a “project” out of them. She ended up with a body of work that goes together without trying to go together. The book changes forms, incorporates odd materials, and assembles itself through idiosyncrasy, developing an ethos out of finding a zone where elegance and mess combine to handle difficult histories, public and private. This poem is one of many titled “-- oOo --,” which is a symbol from the transcript, some kind of 1912 typewritten piece of graphic. It includes the lines “circle around the head to bring out the / head-like qualities of the head / share air between here and the outer air.” For me, that’s enough to take the whole ride. But *Upend* also came out in the spring of 2020, and became my companion across the rest of that evil year. The book telegraphs nothing while working through layers of complex feeling and revelation. You have to read every word to get to know it.

-- oOo --

[pre]two bored and diligent angels crown a
virgin

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rolling her eyes

what's happening in your DNA
happened seven generations ago
and will happen seven generations after

in a bowl of water I watch
a dried mushroom enliven

circle around the head to bring out the
head-like qualities of the head
shared air between here and the outer air
like Buddha with an orb behind the head
in repose
personal paradise
I don't put anything on my head
planets don't follow me around when you
look
happy to have a head

words are empty space
stars cut sight
words are the central figure
surrounded by space
stars cut sight

words represent themselves as well as
the cut around the circumference of their
heads

in 1850 California
the state funded bullets for volunteer
killers
the price for an Indian scalp
was at least 10 dollars

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This poem excerpt appears by permission from *Upend* (Noemi Press, 2020), 46. Copyright © by Claire Meuschke.

Anselm Berrigan is a professional bum and/or vice-versa. His most recent book of poems is *Pregrets*, published in 2021 by Black Square Editions. It talks to you willingly but may not be easy to talk about.

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