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Little Maps: A Valentine

In Islamic architecture, the interior of a mosque is strangely empty. The shapes of the exterior are round, inviting—the arch, the dome—but otherwise, just an expanse of floor, an interior without structure. The experience in the desert, for both artists and pilgrims is similarly one of removing external contexts; the singularity of sand and sky—like being at the mountains, or the ocean, other sites of pilgrimage—removes fluctuations of thought and dares one to focus.

Similarly in poems of Jean Valentine, there always seems to be a narrative, a real emotional situation, but told in outlines, seen in the dark. In “October Morning,”¹ she writes:

October morning—
sea lions barking
on the off-shore rock

Autumn evening—
seals’ heads nosing through
the pink Pacific

I gather myself
onto my day raft, your voice
lost under me:
first other tongue.

It's easy to say you get lost in Jean Valentine's poems, but you don't. You get found. Each stanza here places you in time and space, allowing the physical description that follows to be anchored. If she "turns," she swerves not into the unknown, which for her is always a linguistic space, but into a real and concrete lived space where it seems to matter less whether linguistic structures assert themselves or, as they occasionally do, disappear.

Here, she gathers herself on the abstract "day raft," but by leaving the first half of the phrase "your voice / lost under me" on the same line, she implies that the raft is the voice of the other. She finishes with an otherwise awkward construction that here functions sonically: "first other tongue."

In tarot cards, the last card of the major arcana, and also the first—the culmination of the journey and the beginning of the next journey, a card without a number—is "The Fool." It is best to come to Valentine's poems a little dumb, a little empty-headed. In the "House and the World,"² she begs for some release:

All this anger
heart beating

unless I'd come inside
your blind window
and stay there like you

She knows, though, there is more than the blindness, the insideness of the angry one. She wants

the cello part
carrying us the whole time

and all the other strange experiences that the poem promises are yet

to come: the “tipped groin,” the “flying whitehorn hedge,” the “cup.”

Many poems traffic in disruption, new syntactic systems, so that perhaps in the heat of the erotic moment nouns might not always appear at the beginning of sentences, or contain sentences that could dissolve, but in Valentine’s poems, the fragments are not meant either to mourn the lost whole, nor are they meant to function as a small collage bit—a new form of postmodern veracity. Think of them rather as a jigsaw, perhaps a jigsaw with a few missing pieces, even a lot of missing pieces. Valentine is a writer of poems of personal experience the way Jane Cooper was, the way Eleanor Ross Taylor is. In this sense, though she is revolutionary in terms of craft and technique, she is nearly “old-school,” by which I mean “confessional.”

In her earliest work, her rhythms unfolded as long phrases, usually repeating themselves, imitating the lulling sound of the waves, or a mother’s voice, or the individual consciousness drifting into sleep. In her poem “September 1963,”³ she writes, “Tears stay with me, stay with me tears. / Dearest, go: this is what / School is, what the world is.” And by the end of the poem, she eschews epiphany and goes for the drifting:

Glad, derelict, I find a park bench, read
Birmingham, Birmingham, Birmingham.
White tears on a white ground,
White world going on, white hand in hand,
World without end.

Claudia Rankine wrote, “The languaged self, then, in order to keep itself human, in order to cohere, has to fragment. The “*I*.” exists in time and is married to biological, personal, historical,

and cultural meaning. Not to realize this is to commit a blink of omission.” Valentine’s speakers have the same porous identity. They are real, they are her, to be sure, but also they are us, they exist in the world of commonality and universality. Rankine notes further, we cannot do with the totally hermetic or symbolic in art: “The “I” ultimately has a responsibility to the “you.” It recognizes we are always being broken into by history.”

The idea of “autobiography” in Valentine’s work is the introduction of alchemy: the secret experiment which preserves the individual experience against the grid of the poem. In her poem “The Pen,” she asks

who taught me to know instead of not to know?
And this pen its thought

Lying on the thought of the table
A bow lying across the strings

Not moving
Held ⁴

The pen, thought of, but by misplaced possessive, belongs to the thought of itself — language devouring itself, the object and thought, too — Plato undone by Valentine.

What is lying on the thought of the table: the pen or its thought? Or is “thought” used the way it is in the previous line, as in: *that which the table thought* —

Or perhaps: “*A bow lying across the strings*” is lying on the thought of the table.

And if *lying* instead implies prevaricating?

I trust, always to be brought to the moment of music. This music—the music vibrating through the body of the poem upon its completion, the music of strange dreams and wise totem animals, though it could be also that music of absolute potential energy: the moment the violinist lays her bow on the strings but has not yet begun to play.

In “Child,” Valentine writes:

you are in a blind
desert child

your “too-muchness” is written
in the Torah

child it is written
in the pit

written in the black fire
on white fire

deer star
black star

third star
who sees ⁵

Each line exists singly here. In bare observation of Valentine’s words whipping by and disappearing into the wind, it seems the individual line, and not the phrase or sentence, is the unit into which she seems to be placing her words. Like Sappho whose fragments assemble tantalizingly close to a picture, her poems seems to hover at the edge of “closure” but make adamant refusal of arrival. Yet these poems

are filled not with intangible concepts, but with simpler things: a pitcher, a pen, a blue dictionary propping a window open.

There *is* an embracing of the notion of emotional truth to be adduced from poetry, but there is a definite rejection of the poet as guide of the reader to that place, as if one is being led by the hand half-way into the forest and then left there.

Yet the child in the desert is blind. The desert is blind. The three stars know there is a space language can't go.

The writing of the poem degrades from positions of authority (the "Torah") *through* positions of lack of material authority, but perhaps a very deeply personal authority ("the pit"), and into the alchemical place—a place governed by nature and its chaotic processes, beyond the ego of the personal and beyond the "separate" life of the personal—the white fire. The black fire.

The "final" space entered is a space in which the primary emblems of our mythologies—the stars one might follow in the desert expecting to arrive eventually—and why not?—at a child—are revealed not as emblems for an external myth, nor as shamanistic amulets for the internal myths, but as something of a conflation of the two. As Hans Hofmann has written, "Art is magic. So say the surrealists. But how is it magic? In its metaphysical development? Or does some final transformation culminate in a magical reality? In truth the latter is impossible without the former." To read Valentine is to find oneself in the layered drama of her poems, but safely held in a recognizable world. You think you don't have a map, but your own life is your map:

In "Little Map," she writes:

The white pine

The deer coming closer

The ant

In my bowl

—where did she go

when I brushed her out?

The candle

—where does it go?

Our brush with each other

—two animal souls

without cave

image

or

word ⁶

When Valentine travels outside the language—into an instinctual region—*where* can she be said to have gone? Plato may ask us to accept that there is a cave, that there are those who are capable of leaving it and experiencing the true light, but neither he, nor anyone after, can ever offer anything other than a subjective confirmation of what's always known.

In the beginning of the map, we are given the most primitive of maps: individual, localized images, which do not immediately have referent. As in the question of Hofmann's backgrounds, the lines drawn between the deer, the pine, the ant, are dependent on the viewer's experience—the "fragments" are given as whole phrases, and without the *incomplete* quality of the fragment.

The *ruin* becomes a *rune*.

In the earlier poem “Silences: A Dream of Governments,”
Valentine explores further a fragmenting of experience:

Then
the plain astonishment—the air
broken open: just ourselves
sitting, talking; like always;
the kitchen window
propped open by the same
blue-gray dictionary.
August. Rain. A Tuesday.

Then, absence.⁷

It's the absence that makes the mosque. Inside, unlike in the church, there are rarely pillars, rarely rows of chairs, no altar—rather alcove, galleries, prayer niche; space for bodies, for smoke, for intention.

There's something of space for intention, as well as Hofmann's interest in spatially de-centering “context”, in Valentine's line “August. Rain. A Tuesday.” It is the image given through the word—the deer, the pine; the lizard, the road; the dictionary, the window—the moment when the word struggles between the “word” (“representation of”) and the “of” (can there even *be* a “subject”?) that creates the wish in me that writing could be as “plastic” as canvas and paints in contemporary abstract color-field painting.

In these paintings one needs no referent for “comprehension.” Syntax neither determines nor undermines the meaning. The painting's language liberated from “form” (Though, as cubist painter Georges Braque notes, all language gives “form” to silence) casts out into “unknowable.” The painting, however, at least, has a

“picture-plane,” bordered by frame and existent in dimensional space. The canvas gives a literal “stanza” to move around in.

Within that “stanza” phrases can be articulated, re-articulated, appear and disappear—as they frequently do.

The most stunning of arts are not those which fix together seamlessly, but those radioactive ones, those with dangerous half-lives, those which degrade just before our eyes.

As always, the space *between* is the story.

Valentine uses a statement by Joseph Bruchac as the epigraph of her book *Growing Darkness, Growing Light*: “I . . . like to deal with the relationship between growing darkness and growing light, the dusk and the dawn, those times when there is a chance to see transition . . . The dream is a connection, another transitional time . . . In dreams we sometimes can see resemblances of where we really came from, whether we can explain it or not.”⁸ There is something of Nadezhda Mandelstam in the work that Jean does, though rather than walking around for years with the poems of someone else living in her memory, one gets the sense that Valentine is remembering her own over the course of long time when everything extra spills out and we are left with the richest distillation.

Where does the candle go—

Valentine will come to the real world and say—why then go into lands of dreams, half lands? It isn’t that these poems occupy the place of *half-light* in the space between the “dream” world and the living world, or in the moment of “the luminous room”, but rather that these places—“daylight,” “luminous room,” “dream-state—” are all *tropes* for a living “reality.”

. . . deer star black star third star who sees —

Her work turns on the thought not on the word. It is this essential notion—the act of restoring past experience to present immediacy, to “this-world”—that makes reading a Jean Valentine poem such an active experience. And since her poems turn so much on the thought, the rhythm of that thought becomes the rhythm of language. Fraught and freighted with silences, Valentine’s poems are a sonic pleasure. “Fears: Night Cabin”⁹ begins with short truncated images:

Snake tick
black widow
brown recluse

The brief overture is followed by three separate images, each perhaps representing one of the “fears” of the title. Each image has a separate lineation, each has separate rhythm of language:

--The truck last night on 79
dragging a chain

--A Cloud
rounding slowly
at the window

--The wick unlit
curled cold in the kerosene lamp.

The first line of the final couplet echoes the sounds of the opening, while the second with its opening hard consonants, gives way quickly, the word “kerosene,” to the closing image.

With the most delicate of images, for example, from the final

poem of *Little Boat* — “And what we had / gave way like coffee grains / brushed across paper . . .”¹⁰ — Valentine constructs a barely shimmering world, not really luminous at all, but rather occupying that space of the half lit interior of the mosque where one does not really have to strain to see, but merely wait until one’s eyes adjust to the darkness and open space. Sound and sense do push against each other, but meet here in the halfway place:¹¹

But to you now I offer — forgive me, River —
What I could never then, give over.

¹ Jean Valentine, *Door in the Mountain: New and Collected Poems* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 13.

² *Ibid.*, 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁰ Jean Valentine, *Little Boat* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 64.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.