

TURNING REALITY ON ITS HEAD

a review by Grace C. Ocasio

Pat Riviere-Seel. *When There Were Horses*. Main Street Rag Publishing Company, 2021.

Maureen Sherbondy. *Dancing with Dali*. FutureCycle Press, 2020.

Currently, **GRACE C. OCASIO** serves as a Gilbert-Chappell Distinguished Poet. A three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, her second full-length volume of poetry, *Family Reunion* (Broadstone Books, 2020), received honorable mention in the Quercus Review Press Fall 2017 Book Award Contest. She also placed as a finalist in the 2015 Aesthetica Creative Writing Award in Poetry and was a recipient of the 2014 North Carolina Arts Council Regional Artist Project Grant. Her first full-length collection, *The Speed of Our Lives*, was published by BlazeVOX Books in 2014. She has published poetry in *Rattle*, *Court Green*, *Black Renaissance Noire*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *Minerva Rising*, and many other journals. Her chapbook, *Hollerin from This Shack*, was published by Ahadada Books in 2009. She is a member of the Carolina African American Writers' Collective.

Although the subject matter in Maureen Sherbondy's and Pat Riviere-Seel's latest poetry collections is dramatically different, both poets seize upon memory to reshape reality. For her part, Sherbondy taps a wide range of surrealist paintings to forge new realities. New realities emerge in Riviere-Seel's work through a painterly precision of words. In fact, some of her poems prompt this reader to imagine how they would appear as paintings. Each poet tackles universal themes like death, unfulfilled wishes, and the transience of human experience with aplomb. Clearly, both are reinventing the wheel, so to speak, as evinced in how their respective language succeeds in altering our perception of reality. The way each poet reformulates reality educates for us Salvador Dali's own words: "One day it will have to be officially admitted that what we have christened reality is an even greater illusion than the world of dreams."

In *Dancing with Dali*, **Maureen Sherbondy** presents an impressive array of poems based on surrealist artwork from the likes of Frida Kahlo, René Magritte, Nikolina Petolas, Max Ernst, and Salvador Dali. In a very real sense, Sherbondy's poems based on surrealist paintings, especially by the aforementioned artists, stand as a tribute and testament to the oeuvres of these artists. Sherbondy's statement, "Nothing is as it should be" from her poem

"Journey," represents an overarching theme of the collection – whether she unveils specific images associated with a painting or catalogs personal incidents from her life. Sherbondy's exploration of surrealist artwork is exhaustive. Her highlighting of Dali's art in particular sets the pace for other surrealist works that she thoroughly examines within her poems.

"Summer Wasteland," the first poem in the collection, is a referential piece, evoking for us Dali's brand of surrealism. Sherbondy's admission, "No coffin / exists for the headless woman," should immediately conjure Dali's *Playing in the Dark*. Sherbondy explains further about the headless woman: "Her giant head floats / between two places / facing its body / with closed eyes." What are we to make of such a description? If nothing else, we can orient ourselves to this vision, this new reality, which may seem so at odds with what we deem as normal. But we are not left bereft of meaning. Sherbondy interprets for us the significance of her image of the head and trunk dislocated from each other: "We turn away / from our own end." No matter that we may find this brilliant insight to be unpalatable, it snares us with its truth.

In "Frozen Clock," a poem based on Dali's "The Persistence of Memory," Sherbondy delves into her past, remembering her mother and father, articulating that "As a child it seemed / I could freeze the hours." Who

among us has not desired to freeze time? The yearning is always there to dismantle time, as when Sherbondy muses, "My mother would remain forty, / moving as fast as a NASCAR race car" and "My father would continue mowing / the lawn through summer's wilting grass, / his shirt drenched in Saturday sweat." In the act of remembering, we long for something else, a chance to part ways with the most troubling facts of our past, wishing to summon only the most enriching and life-affirming aspects of our life experiences. It is not lost on us that Sherbondy recalls endearing memories of her parents. By evoking positive memories, we allow ourselves to live on, embracing our futures. It is, in fact, Sherbondy's "persistence of memory" that wins out in the end as when she asserts, "the only thing frozen in time – / my father's heart and body stopped / and still beneath this heated ground." This last image of the poem lingers with us. We understand that the place where a dear friend or cherished family member lies buried is hallowed ground. We realize that this imagery of a final resting place unlocks for most of us memories of a departed loved one.

One of the most thought-provoking poems in Sherbondy's collection, "Museum of Lost Wishes," reminds us of the stuff that lost dreams are made of. Sherbondy's employment of the imperative creates momentum for the poem just as a runway

provides the means for an airplane to launch. The poem begins, "Enter the museum of wishes; clutch / a star and let it burn your hand," and at once, we are drawn into this poem, responding on a visceral level to its language, wincing at the prospect that a hand could be burned by a star. And yet, through the vehicle of imagination, Sherbondy effortlessly guides us like a docent into a world beyond the mundane. The invitation to enter this world offers us the rare opportunity to glean truths about the diminished status of dreams. The "star," though it entices us, must be dropped, too bright in its promise to be real. Curious is the image in the second stanza of the janitor who "gathers crumbs / of disappointment." To whom do these disappointments belong? The poet doesn't tell us. The janitor appears to exist as a neutral agent, simply doing his job. But the job concerns us as we reflect on our own disappointments.

Further into the poem the poet asks, "What will you learn here?" This rhetorical question, like the many others in Sherbondy's collection, tests us. Will we walk away from the poem resolved to remember how and when our dreams were torched? The poet's additional commands, "Release / all that you once desired; spit honey / from your tongue," cause us to contemplate whether our dreams really matter. The directive to "spit honey from your tongue"



COURTESY OF MAUREEN SHERBONDY

lends a sense of urgency to the message that anything good or hopeful must ultimately be surrendered. The last two lines of the poem, "That janitor will return to sweep away / any clues or crumbs you left behind," come across as a stark warning. If our unfulfilled wishes are doomed to fade from our conscious awareness, how will we ever muster the courage to pursue our unknown future dreams?

The final poem, "The Tactile Memory of Clay," aptly closes the volume by revealing how a childhood memory morphs into an arguably life-changing moment. Sherbondy confides, "As a child I dug clay / from a stream with my bare / hands, then shaped the lump / into figures – ." The act of molding clay as Sherbondy describes it seems simple enough, yet we discern that this act is not merely physical but creative, an act of discovery, the author as child becoming a creator. In her second stanza, Sherbondy details the more banal, administrative aspects of

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ABOVE Maureen Sherbondy at the Nazim Hikmet Poetry Festival as the winner of the NC Poetry Society's Poet Laureate Award, 24 Mar. 2019

teaching and hints at the sense of futility that may arise: "Most days, lessons vanish, fly / out open windows, away / from twenty pairs of ears." However, the tenor of the poem drastically changes in the last stanza. Here, Sherbondy conveys how a student reaches out to her, saying, "My friend said you helped him become / a better writer." The poet confesses that her palms "open up like flowers, / as if his words dug up that old found / clay, set the familiar shape inside / my patient, waiting hands." From a craft point of view, we can appreciate how Sherbondy's poem flows in a circular direction – the ending circling back to the beginning. More importantly, we perceive that the poet has undergone a metamorphosis. She once again becomes a creator, only this time she creates knowledge that flourishes in the minds of her students.

Reading Sherbondy's collection helps us reconsider how we regard reality. Her mind-bending images capture our imaginations in the most delightful of ways.

While Sherbondy strikes a tone of resignation as regards the inevitability of loss, **Pat Riviere-Seel** seems more defiant in *When There Were Horses*, thumbing her nose at the notion that lost dreams can't be redeemed. Indeed, resilience is key in her collection. The poet makes a stunning statement in "Wander Until You Find the Trail Back," a poem from the collection's second section ("What to

Tell, What to Leave Out"): "Getting lost may be the last / best thing that ever happens." When we read Riviere-Seel's poems, we feel as if we are on a journey. She doesn't so much lead us as show us her path, pointing to the gems she finds along the way.

The collection's first poem, "Into the Night," is full of images that we can easily envision in paintings. This poem possesses a distinctively dreamlike quality. It begins, "The chestnut mare rests her chin / on my left shoulder, nuzzles my neck // with her velvet nose as I stroke her forehead. / We walk a dirt track side by side." Riviere-Seel's portrayal of this moment instantly transports us to this pastoral place. Her sensory, tactile language, as when the mare "nuzzles . . . with her velvet nose," lets us know this setting is a place of serenity. Riviere-Seel regales us with exquisite details about her interaction with the mare: "She lifts my left ankle // with her hoof, breathes out / stars that swirl around us while we spin // through an unexplored galaxy" (an image that might evoke Van Gogh's "The Starry Night").

Anything is possible in this landscape of the imagination. When the poet says in her next line, "I try to read each star's wish," we intuit that she reaches for the unattainable, grasping for infinity. In a very real sense, the dream is grounded in the reality of the poet remembering being twelve years old, riding a horse. She further divulges,



COURTESY OF PAT RIVIERE-SEEL

"I wake to a peace I have not known, // the mare and I still bound, / traveling down an unremembered road." Here the poet accomplishes what we may believe to be impossible: she weds the dreamlike scene to reality, creating a new reality, teeming with promise.

Like "Into the Night," the poem "When There Were Horses" exhibits a painterly quality. We might imagine the first three stanzas as a triptych, calling forth our knowledge of Rembrandt's genre scenes. The first panel would consist of the sketch that unfolds in the first stanza: "I miss the hammocks, / the teenagers swinging between trees, / high pitched laughter, urgent talk." The second panel, based on the second stanza, would showcase how "Riders still gallop horses across the field, / into the woods." The third panel would be, from the third stanza, "a black Mercedes parked beside the gate" around dusk along with a "field" where

"a man / and a woman lay on a blanket." Viewing the first half of the poem as a triptych helps us to think of the poem as one with moving parts, with various players inhabiting the same space at different times.

In the second half of the poem, the poet becomes more philosophical, suggesting who the man and the woman are: "Maybe they are lovers who / will wait until the sun sets, / then shed their clothes, offer / their bodies to God, desire unbridled." We, like the poet, are curious about this couple – who they might be and what they might mean to each other. Her supposition moves us beyond the initial idyllic image of the couple to one that is far more edgy. In her penultimate stanza, the poet reminisces:

When there were horses stabled here
there was a cat that asked
for love the way cats do
running figure eights around
your legs, arching her back.

Even the cat assumes a space of importance in this place.

Our perception of reality changes in the final stanza when the poet shifts her focus from the cat to herself, announcing, "I loved like that once." We understand, through the illustration of the cat, the simplicity of such a love. According to the poet, "The man / said he had always loved me." And yet Riviere-Seel suggests that securing love is an uncertain prospect at best:

. . . Maybe
he had. Maybe he never loved me.
It no longer matters what is true.
I head back to the house, searching
for the car now lost in darkness.

Rather than bask in disappointment or her sense of loss, the poet defies the law or logic of

disappointment, suggesting that she will overcome the loss with the determination to move on with her life into the unknown.

In the succinct and powerful, "Everything Is Saying Goodbye," Riviere-Seel turns the title's statement on its head, implying that "goodbyes" do not necessarily indicate the end of relationships. The poet vividly portrays one couple in particular: "the woman / sporting the long black ponytail / hugging the man who steps / out of his white Corvette, arms wide." If body language is a tell-tale sign, then we might conclude from the description of the man that the relationship is in progress as his arms sprawl out "wide," signaling that the man is at least receptive to the woman he's saying goodbye to and certainly not hostile toward her. Most likely, this couple is on affectionate terms. We may conclude, then, that in this instance the couple's departure from one another is temporary, a brief pause in the relationship.

Riviere-Seel provides one final example of how "everything is saying goodbye" in the guise of two horses later in the poem: "The white stallion and the chestnut mare / graze opposite ends of the paddock." She further details the nature of the horses' interactions: "They do not know regret – a summer / galloping together, nuzzling neck / against neck." Animals are both creatures of habit and comfort, never questioning their circumstances, unable to process their lives as humans do. Yet Riviere-Seel anthropomorphizes the horses when she declares, "If they should turn to face each other / they would love each other still." Contemplating this final image of the poem,

we must acknowledge that the horses are not ordinary but extraordinary beings who have at their disposal the ability to alter their fate. In the end, we identify with them because they remind us of ourselves.

Coinciding with Sherbondy's connection between art and poetry, "Reflections," the last poem of Riviere-Seel's collection, was inspired by a work of art. Visually, this poem possesses perfect symmetry, the first and second stanzas containing seven lines each. The sense of symmetry is no accident since the poem is a palindrome in form: each line of the first stanza mirrors each line of the second, which reverses the line order of the first stanza. Furthermore, the poem itself is a work of art, similar in appearance to a reflecting pool. Beyond the artful form is the poem's meaning. In all its immensity, this poem seems to stand as a metaphor for the entire collection. We see this in phrasing such as "how enormous our dreams," "within the infinite," and "magic becomes reality." Have we not explored with the poet how what we perceive as reality may be an illusion, even a distortion? Whether or not the poet intended to have the final poem serve as a thematic bridge for the entire collection, this poem performs a dual role: it allows us to look back at all the other poems, finding a resounding message amplified in the final poem, and it closes the volume succinctly and resolutely.

We learn, we discover when we visit the texts of Sherbondy and Riviere-Seel. As a result, we grow in our humanity, equipped to tread over the unplowed landscapes of our lives. ■

PAT RIVIERE-SEEL's books include *The Serial Killer's Daughter* (Main Street Rag, 2009), which won the 2009 NC Literary and Historical Society's Roanoke-Chowan Award, and *Nothing Below but Air* (Main Street Rag, 2014), which was a semifinalist for the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award. She received the Charlie Award from the Carolina Mountains Literacy Festival in 2017, and she was the poet-in-residence at the NC Zoo in 2012. She taught poetry classes for fifteen years at UNC Asheville's Great Smokies Writing Program.

ABOVE Pat Riviere-Seel giving a reading for her [new website](#), 2021