

THE CONSTANT

VELOCITY OF

T R A I N S

The Constant Velocity of Trains
Lea C. Deschenes
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A NOTE ON LEA C. DESCHENES' WORK

BY ILYA KAMINSKY

Lea C. Deschenes is a poet of large, far reaching ambition and the lyric that speaks to us intimately, and movingly. The reader of this collection, if this reader is attentive, is able to stand next to her “together /briefly lit before the world / takes what it takes.”

I say she is an ambitious poet because it takes a great deal of bravery and ambition—in the best meaning of that word—to attempt to “build a ladder to the face of god.” And, yet, on the same page, we are told: “I no longer pray for anything / save the gift of understanding.” This is the sort of ambition I wish more young poets would aim for in our age overwhelmed by irony.

I say that her address is direct, yet intimate, because she is able to write “Avoiding other things, I thought I’d write / to you.” When she does write, what she offers is a “stuttering light.”

Still, I say she is an ambitious poet because in the piece called “Omens for Agnostics” she is able to place Eden and IKEA in the same stanza, finding profane in the divine, and “light” in detail. “When you pray to nothing” she tells us, “it is for peace.” Yes, it is a good ambition.

And, yet in this public tone, one finds much directness, intimacy. In a poem that is written “in Lieu of Making a Scene” she says: “I confined my cruelty to watching you / anticipate blows that never landed.” This directness is arresting, it has a much needed “animal bite.” On another page, the author says “but lets meet by the wall / so we leave together. // I’m bringing a shotgun just in case.// I won’t wear a veil.”

Strange, how such different things as ambition and intimacy can come together on the page, often in the same line. And, yet, nothing strange: I am large, Whitman told us, I contain multitudes.

In this collection, containing various interesting directions and impressive sequences, I find myself most drawn to her quieter lyric

pieces. I recommend such poems of hers as “Kismet,” “Correspondence #2,” “Omens for Agnostics” “Explanation to the Sky,” “Poem in Lieu of Making a Scene” and “Mother of All Sorrows”. I find these pieces of particular interest because their author is able to strike a certain quiet argument with herself, a certain lasting contradiction, from which the lyric voice arrives. Argument with someone else is a rhetoric, Yeats said, argument with one’s self is poetry. This book of movement, of trains, velocity, wheels and, sometimes, strong fists, seems to work its best magic in the moment of stillness, when the author is able to say: “I came here on my own two feet. Slowly.” And so, when the readers “ask nothing” Deschenes “hands it over. // Which is much harder / than it sounds.”

By the end, this collection becomes a book of prayer. A strange prayer. perhaps, private, individual, and sometimes desperate. And, yet, it is here, it is ours: “We fall for you. We show you / how it is done.”

This first book of poems contains wisdom. Which is no small thing for a new poet to bring into the world.

—*Ilya Kaminsky*

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*When you set out to look for the Way,
At once it changes to something
That is to be sought in your self.
When sight becomes no-sight,
You come to possess the jewel,
But you have not yet fully penetrated into it.
Suddenly one day everything is empty like space
That has no inside or outside, no bottom or top,
And you are aware of one principle
Pervading all the ten thousand things.
You know then that your heart
Is so vast that it can never be measured.*

—**Daikaku** (1213-1279)

INVITATION

Let us stand together
briefly lit before the world
takes what it takes—

Make a wish
upon freshly lacquered dark.

THE GOD BOX

THE GOD BOX

Centuries-thick Latin scrollwork
encrusts impassive marble sides.
Shalt nots border its lip like a nursery frieze.

A priest placed me in its basin
shortly after birth, poured water
over my still-soft head, shut
the lid, prayed
I'd stay inside that crib,

forever and ever, Amen

a puppet my only company, mustard seed planted
in the matted stuffing of its split side, sprout
starved in ritual dark, deprived of sun and dirt.

Not even the flies could find us.

I was bored with the puppet in an hour.
After that, I waited.

When I was old enough, I carved a window
with my teeth and leaped outside, leaving
the puppet behind.

THIEVES' DEN

When the money changers
bought the temple wholesale
for six magic beans and a few beads,

and the basket passed around
started filling with dollars instead of devotions
because people moved like anthills,

and the sermons became infested
with expensive lice,

and those gathered together prayed
for misfortune to smite everyone outside
churches built like fortresses,

and the lepers were escorted by
armed men off the property when
they begged for alms

and the Samaritan got sued
because the robber had
more cash and a better lawyer,

and the Pharisees toured
the talk-show circuit with books
winning popular acclaim and best-sellerdom,

and Mary was denied federal funding
for becoming pregnant
out of wedlock,

and the Magdalene died
when the whole crowd wound
their arms up like trebuchets
for the pitch,

and god disowned his capital letter,
disgusted with the celebrity machine
that wanted more sex and violence,

and disowned his son
because his PR agent was an asshole

and Jesus' body double, who did
all the important engagements, started
to believe he walked on little people,

and disowned the temple
because he wasn't interested
in shilling for vacuum cleaners
or computer software,
or oil reserves,
or foreign wars,
or hatred...

It became time to search
for homegrown miracles
thrown together from scratch.
It became time to stop waiting
to be told about evil
by some future prophet.

It became time for whole new books
of martyrs: St. King,
St. Shepherd, St. Nameless
found dismembered in a dumpster.

It became time to overturn
the tables lining the aisle.

BABEL

We came to build a ladder to the face of god,
umbrellaed by a broad expanse of sky.

We bore ten thousand transcripts of one prayer,
rough stones stacked in common purpose.

Do not blame lightning for striking
our highest construct: We own this sin.
The blameless sky, a milk-tongue thunder.

Mistaking god's reflection for our own
we pulled our burdens close as breath, each stone
ripped from mortar for solitary pillars.

We forsook unity for the illusion of transcendence,
forgot all prayers converge upon a single star.

We left as splinters from the point of impact,
speaking to the wind and to ourselves,
god no longer part of the equation:
each unique, alone in our ivory turrets.

I own only one stone, not enough
to build upon: One note-tied brick
thrown through a stained-glass window.
A dry weight in the throat.

I no longer pray for anything
save the gift of understanding
tongues.

TRANSITIONAL PHRASES

Overcautious with lapsed words,
our fluency crumbles into clumsy timing.

Our pirates tan on the Lido deck.

Our Komodos brush their teeth.

Our swordfish fence air.

Our dodos haunt beaches.

Our bottles drown their rescue notes,
lizards slip tails, birds-of-paradise forgo display.

Only the dormant volcano—aeons gone—remembers
how our society split into these islands.

We pause after each word,
smiling with bad accents.

Our people
are tourists.

