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# POÉTICAS

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# [RESEÑAS]

*Office of the Travelers Aid Society, 1909, New York City - Courtesy of Travelers Aid International*



Sirkin, Jeff  
*Travelers Aid Society*  
Veliz Books: El Paso, 2015.

## TRAVELERS AID SOCIETY

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Early in Jeff Sirkin's *Traveler's Aid Society*, the reader is presented with a poem entitled "Orangutan Short-Circuits Wires, Builds Ladder to Flee Zoo in Adelaide, Australia," a lyric which builds a Frank O'Hara-esque meditation from its headline premise, culminating in the following lines:

Once again I find the cat  
supplies are dwindling  
along with the cats  
and across the world  
our hero the orangutan

sits on the precipice  
asking herself no doubt  
what freedom means  
when the other side of the wall  
as always is a parking lot.

One can see in this image the key themes running through Sirkin's book, namely dislocation and willful disorientation. While the title poem of this collection refers to a hobo publication and pertains to homeless human beings, it is this image of an orangutan entering a space where they can wonder

“what freedom means” that presents the spirit of the book in its rawest form. The engaging and loose tone of the speaker, which brings to mind O’Hara, is tempered by what it notices; rather than O’Hara’s riffs on cosmopolitan conversation, Sirkin’s speaker conducts their meditation with a generosity able to reach out to this orangutan image “across the world” and bring it to an intimate moment of reckoning with what is on “the other side of the wall” of human and creaturely experience.

The world of these poems continually reckons with the immediacy of headlines, seeking out the human element behind history and the passing moment. The title poem, in fact, starts off with a “Dad” character reading off headlines to the speaker:

The hill falls, the daily paper  
shrinks.  
In the kitchen Dad laments the  
collapse  
of state funding for public  
institutions  
and calls out headlines over  
morning  
cereal. “Smog Alert in Effect.”  
“Streetcar  
Called Waste of Taxpayer  
Money.”

This scene presents a dialogue of indirectness; the father and son are presented discussing the news objectively. Yet, there is a heat beginning to build in the diction of both the poetic lines and the headlines: “laments,” “collapse,” “Alert,” “Waste.” An undertone of emotion begins to build in this first stanza, which is answered by the speaker in equally indirect and meaningful terms:

I remark on the efficiency of the  
shower drain, the empty gates  
at the shuttered airport terminal,  
my research  
plan for the Historical Society  
library.

In these lines, one can see the “headlines” tone subverted and made to serve the speaker’s sensibility, which is able to note “the efficiency of the / shower drain” as well as detail their “research / plan.” These lines seem to test the effect of a headlines tone on day to day life. Between these two stanzas a dual call and response begins, between father and son on one side, and between city and personal life on the other. What gathers around this back and forth is a social consciousness imbued with personal insight.

As the poem continues, the speaker details their research into hobo culture and the changes made over time in the city of Cincinnati, mixing historical fact and discovery with the feeling that:

The museum laughs. The archive  
pleads for mercy. I make an offer  
to the stationary loop  
of the evening commute.

Here, we return to the ideas of dislocation and willful disorientation. While the first two stanzas present the “dislocated” dialogue between father and son, this stanza seems to point to the speaker’s attempt to “read” the narratives they have uncovered in their research. To “make an offer / to the stationary loop” is a willful move, and also a telling one; the speaker’s disorientation, evident as the museum and archive “laugh” and “plead for mercy” respectively, is further conveyed in this gesture of address to the city. The speaker is trying to read the city, in a way, both its past and present. In their “research” into the past, the speaker can be seen as attempting to read the present

moment as a social and personal headline of sorts.

This reading of moments as “headlines” occurs more intimately in the poem “For the Record.” In this poem, the feeling of watching and listening to Elvis Presley’s ’68 Comeback Special is evoked for the reader on the level of pulse and sensation:

Bound in black leather  
beating time solid  
with his foot

he cries gigawatts  
into the frozen light

voice scrambling  
against the dance

of electrons “trying  
to get to you”

the image arrives a taxi  
and sometimes a hearse

This first half of the poem describes closely the material matter of song and performance; the human element, here, travels but is not fixed to “gigawatts” and “frozen lights.” This transference of meaning and experience is further charged by the taxi/hearse parallel of the image, the implication being that performance (and, in a way,

meaning) is both a means of getting some place and of ending up somewhere. The poem here ventures into the terrain of music in more than one way: in presenting the taxi/hearse parallel, the speaker is asking for the image to be read for its simultaneity of motion and stillness, which is parallel to the way music asks for a fine distinction to be made between hearing and listening. In this poem, then, the act of witnessing this performance is an act of dislocation and willful disorientation. Because “money speaks / for money,” the speaker states:

...we convince  
ourselves the city  
swirling around us  
  
is the Elvis we seek  
or seek to become

This juxtaposition of song lyric and sensation creates its own dynamic loop (as opposed to the “stationary loop” of a previous poem). The headline of the moment is a text both written and read via experience. Freedom, then, means hearing and listening, means the “seeking” and “becoming” that ha-

ppens between a song’s beginning and end.

This collection returns often to this idea of “what freedom means”: Is freedom the ability to “lament” over the morning headlines? Or is it being able to conduct research into displaced and marginalized communities? Or is it, as in the poem “Another Repair,” the disorientation of talking car repairs with a mechanic with the news on in the background (“a bad plot device” the speaker notes), and asking “Will I make it home?” Whatever answer the reader arrives at, what is clear throughout these poems is that freedom means motion, both as fleeting, ephemeral concept as well as engagement on a physical level. The headline can be returned to as a grounding metaphor: A physical text representing a momentary yet urgent history. It is exactly this urgent history that Sirkin delivers to us poem by poem.