

Martha Collins. *Field: Contemporary Poetry & Poetics* #94 (Spring 2016)

THE DOCUMENTED I

Philip Metres, *Sand Opera* (Alice James, 2015)

Susan Tichy, *Trafficke* (Ahsahta, 2015)

The documentary, the historical, the political vs. the lyrical, the immediate, the personal: Philip Metres and Susan Tichy have been successfully balancing these modes for some time, Metres in his first full-length book (as well as several chapbooks), Tichy in four previous collections. But the connection is both deeper and more difficult in their new work, as each explores an identity with ancestral roots that reach uncomfortably into the present—an exploration that seems increasingly to require the taking of innovative risks. Some of the forms of experimentation are quite different, if not opposed: a number of Metres's poems are, in contemporary poetic parlance, erasures that leave out much of an original text, whereas Tichy, noted for the elliptical nature of her earlier poetry, seems to have been led by the abundance of her historical material to become more of a putter-inner than a taker-outer. But both books are juxtapositionally polyphonic, with multiple voices of history and contemporary events jarring against one other. In both, the difficulty of reading is part of what allows us to participate in the process of discovery that is behind the writing of these informative, challenging, and remarkably original collections.

While his first full-length collection included poems about his Arab American identity, Metres takes on the subject fully here; as he says in the notes, the book began “out of the vertigo of feeling unheard as an Arab American, in the decade after the terrorist attacks of 2001.” He adds: “I’ve found myself split—between my American upbringing and my Arab roots, between raising young children and witnessing the War on Terror abroad.” The split is echoed in both the techniques and the subject matter of *Sand Opera*, which is divided into five sections. Three of these are sequences that juxtapose specific voices and situations; interspersed are two sections of more random

poems called “recitatives.” The polyphony within the sequences is perhaps what is most operatic—and also most remarkable—about the book.

This is particularly true in the first sequence, the “abu ghraib arias,” in which three “voices” are heard: American participants in the Abu Ghraib tortures, Arab prisoners who were their victims, and the technical language of a “Standard Operating Procedure” manual. Most of the poems in this section (and some others in the book as well) use some form of erasure, a technique that is also behind the title: as the half-title page demonstrates, “sand opera” is what is left when you erase, or redact, or obscure selected letters in “Standard Operating Procedure.” An erasure “proper” leaves a great deal of white space on the page; its formatting opposite is redaction, commonly seen in government documents that have been censored with large black bars. Metres uses both methods, creating a kind of tension between aesthetic silence and political silencing, and in addition uses the technique of lightening parts of a text, creating a “gray” area in which words are both present and absent.

The erasures have various effects, sometimes overlapping. The first of the several “blues” poems spoken by Americans leaves the reader thinking about what might be missing even as it creates new “meaning” from the remaining text:

four Iraqis at the gate
all of them missing
their hands or their
_____ story

The subsequent section supplies a piece of such an Iraqi story in black and gray type, which allows us to read both a complete “prose” version and a shorter one:

In the name of God I swear to God everything I witnessed
everything I am talking about. I am not saying this to gain any
material thing, and I was not pressured to do so by any forces.

These prisoner sections, all titled “(echo/ex/),” also include some words from Genesis, which become a kind of fourth voice in the sequence, juxtaposing creation and destruction: “I saw myself *on the face / of the deep* *And the darkness he called Night* / *And Graner released / my hand from the door.*” The resulting equation of God with the man most centrally responsible for Abu Ghraib is one of the more dramatic effects of Metres’s erasure, but it’s not the only one. The prisoner voice becomes increasingly grayed, erased, or redacted as the sequence continues, until only punctuation is left in the last section—but the silence of course speaks volumes.

If the first sequence highlights the book’s central tension between Arab (prisoner) and American (perpetrator), the other two sequences bring the conflict closer to home. The second, which juxtaposes the poet’s young daughters’ lives and the burgeoning war in Iraq, shifts the focus from sight (central to the first section) to sound, taking its title, “hung lyres,” from Psalm 137 (“By the rivers of Babylon . . . we hanged our harps”) and visually referencing the ear in the “@” that provides a title for each new poem. Even a daughter’s voice marks the shift (while also doing other things): “*it’s ‘ear-rock,’ / not ‘eye-rack.’*” The juxtapositions here occur within poems, and can be quite startling: “When the bombs fell, she could barely raise / her pendulous head, wept shrapnel // until her mother capped the fire / with her breast.” Even more unsettling is a poem that conflates Barney the Dinosaur’s song with a prisoner’s cell. Reading in the notes that the poem references the use of the song in the interrogation of a Guantanamo prisoner only increases the tension and irony of the poem, which ends:

. . . this is the being without

silence / *from our imagination* / in wave upon
wave / in a shipping container & *I love you*

in a box of shock *you love me* / in a cemented
dream / *we’re a happy family* /

with a great big hug and chains that leave no mark

Won't you say you love me too?

That we're able to listen simultaneously to the tender evocation of children in a "happy family" and the horrors of interrogation is one measure of the power of this central sequence.

The final sequence becomes even more personal, alternating between sections of testimony by Mohamed Farag Ahmad Bashmilah, who was tortured in various U.S. prisons, and prose poems in what appears to be the voice of the poet himself, a teacher of poetry and an Arab American: "*My son, you are Arab, be proud of it, my Dad would say.*" Both voices are foreshadowed in the second and fourth "recitative" sections—the former in fragments that surround Bashmilah's "overlaid" drawings of his interrogation sites, the latter in more personal poems that celebrate the poet's experiences even as they are haunted by the Iraq war. Juxtaposition remains central to these individual poems: missing parts of statues in an Iraqi museum suggest actual bodies; a post-911 computer game "fast-forwards" to a drone operator aiming at Afghanistan; love poems come up against war ("as if the body erotic / could shield against the camera's scalpel"); an Iraqi recipe contains an invasion:

Skin & clean a fat, young sheep and open it
like a door, a port city hosting overseas guests

& remove its stomach. In its interior, place
surveyors in exploratory khaki, a stuffed goose . . .

Such juxtaposition is perhaps the most striking poetic feature of *Sand Opera*, but it isn't the only one. The three sequences develop their own strategies, and the recitatives include subtly altered versions of various forms, including a sestina, off-rhyming couplets, and the ghost of a pantoum that includes completely reversed lines and redaction: "*They could not make son hit the father*" becomes "Father ___ hit son make not could they." Again a father and son: "*My son, you are Arab, be proud of it, my Dad would say.*"

As emotionally complex as Metres's evocation of his heritage are Susan Tichy's restoration and contemplation of her own ancestors, from Scottish clans to Maryland slave-holders. While a number of white poets have dealt with race, no one I know has delved so determinedly and deeply into her own ancestry, partly in reference to oppressed "others"—first indigenous peoples, then African slaves—but also on its own terms.

Bookended by a short section in which she introduces her ancestor Alexander Magruder and a postscript in which she addresses him directly, the two central sections of the book are dense with history that takes us back and forth between Scotland and Maryland, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, with brief excursions into earlier times and the present. It's a lot of geographical and temporal territory, and sometimes the density makes the going is a bit rough: if you don't know your Scots history, you may have to work a little on a first reading. But it's a process that reflects Tichy's own, and one that brings with it the realization that none of our personal histories is as simple as we might wish.

Whereas Metres's prosodic forms are various, Tichy's are insistently the same: *Trafficke* alternates large portions of prose with smaller sections of page-centered verse. This is reminiscent of the Japanese *haibun*, but the distinction between prose and poetry is not as clear here. While the documentary business of "history" is largely relegated to the prose sections, the verse also includes quoted material, and the prose of the final section is as stunningly lyrical as anything in the book. Moreover, both prose and poetry are effectively varied, ranging from the carefully quoted and formal to the conversationally compelling. Collage is an ever-present method in both. Quotations (ranging from a few words to whole sections), etymologies, sans serif sections in which Tichy references herself more directly than elsewhere, lines of poetry ranging from ballads to Ezra Pound: all contribute to a varied texture that effectively contrasts with the sameness of form. But the contrast between dense prose and elliptical verse more or less defines the process of reading, which involves taking in an enormous amount of material on the one hand and slowing down to ponder on the other.

The first two poems introduce both methods. The first is the only poetry that isn't centered on the page, but its opening lines introduce a number of poetic strategies Tichy will use:

Literate 500 years
For me there is no New World

coir' a' chladheamh, milord
broomrape reddendum recite

Or scratch, hide, seek
erase-sketch-bird-invent

This forest, mine this noise
I tracked until it turned and showed its teeth

ransack deceive predator
in the narrow passes

Thirty-one miles of metal shelves
hill path in

The fragments of language, including the bit of Gaelic and the trios of single words that seem as semantically random as they are grammatically diverse, suggest but do not quite divulge a context. But they invite us to make connections, most centrally between what turns out to be the wonderfully apt metaphor of “This forest, mine this noise / I tracked until it showed its teeth” (suggesting the geographical territory Tichy has explored) and “Thirty-one miles of metal shelves / hill path in” (suggesting the immense amount of her primary research). Almost all of these lines will be repeated at least once in the course of the book.

The second poem begins with the sharply contrasting clarity of prose: “I was born and raised in Maryland My maternal grandmother’s maiden name, Magruder, went back to the 1650s, when one Alexander McGruder, of Perthshire, Scotland, arrived

And there was more: As *Magruders* we were also *MacGregors*.” The introductory section focuses on those MacGregors, with only hints of complexities to come.

The long second section begins and ends with Alexander, but it includes a great deal of the early history of Maryland, which is intertwined with both the Scottish and English background that explains its complexities, and the more sparse but important history of the indigenous people who had already begun to disappear (“before the arrival broke out amongst them // measles smallpox indemnity”), and whose “Old-Fields” the settlers were therefore able to use for their own planting of tobacco.

Puritan Catholic Susquehannah Patuxent
who owe fidelity
two rats nibbling eucharistic bread
two pledged to the hindering

The ghost of a ballad stanza in this summary of the historical “parties” is no accident: bits of actual Scots ballads appear throughout the book, and connect the poet-researcher to her “literate 500 years ancestors.” Geography literally “grounds” the narrative throughout the section, providing descriptive passages and giving titles to three of its four poems, from “Meadow” (“*The soil of an huge and unknown greatnesse / Very well peopled and towned though savagelie*”) to the indigenous “Old-Fields” and back to the Scottish “Heath.” But it is the intertwining of histories, with its parallels and contrasts, that most centrally sets up the first rounds of confrontational “trafficking”—of peoples as well as well as goods—that the book will continue to explore in its even longer third section.

Like a well-plotted novel, the third section of *Trafficke* reveals and develops two central aspects of history that have been only hinted at in the introductory section, where, trying to imagine where her ancestors lived, the poet holds “something like a jigsaw piece, unable to find a place on the map to set it down” until she comes to “southern Maryland, the slave-owning tobacco country . . . a part of the state my parents never spoke of without scorn.” Picking up chronologically from the second section, Tichy moves from Alexander’s successful acquisition of property to his will, in which appears,

amidst a catalog of other material possessions and indentured servants, “1 man negro named Sambo.”

That apparently casual but effectively ephiphanic reference introduces the subject that powerfully dominates most of what follows. As in the earlier sections of the book, there is much to be learned from Tichy’s extensive research and careful analysis of various aspects of history (the “*mulatto bastardy*” resulting from white women “intermarrying” with slaves, the complexities of manumission); but what is most moving is the exploration of the Magruder ancestors’ slave-holding.

The treatment of slavery occurs in two sections, covering several generations, the second picking up in the late eighteenth century; sandwiched between is another excursion into Scottish history, by way of a nineteenth-century Magruder who mistakenly “took as given . . . Alexander Magruder’s descent” from the much-romanticized MacGregors. Again using careful research, Tichy demolishes the assumption with which the book began: that the Magruders “were also *MacGregors*.”

The discovery of an inflated and fictionalized ancestry is an apt counterpoint to the more extensive treatment of the Magruder slaves. Like earlier parts of the book, much of this history, whether prose or verse, is delivered in a collage of quotation, fact, and implicit or explicit commentary on both history and methodology. Here, almost at random:

Slave ships carried two men for every woman: *preparation toward a Natural and experimental history*. Biafrans, Angolans, Nigerians, Ibos, Ibibios, Efkins, Mokos. Born in Africa, born in Barbados. Skilled in the art of tobacco; or not. Tracing descent from women; or not. In clans or lineages; or not. Had first to find, or make, a common language. Shocked into labor, underfed, *to make them more industrious*.

a Negro Quarter is a Number of Huts
And cultivate at vacant times, the little Spots allow'd them
(edge-stained, water-stained, upper margin illegible)

The reference to “clans and lineages” is one of many implicit and explicit connections made between slavery and Tichy’s own ancestry; among the book’s many often-repeated lines are some that apply to both, including “great iron fetters for men’s feet, small iron fetters for men’s hands.”

Among the most moving parts of the book’s third section are listings of slaves themselves, copied (apparently) from lists of escaped slaves (“*a likely, bright, Mulatto lad / a swaggering walk and very black / pretends to have an uncle, calls her wife*”) and wills (“Clem, my blacksmith / Nanny, my servant, / my carpenter, Old Basil”). To come upon these longish lists, after the complex histories that have preceded them, is to arrive at what seems to be the emotional center of *Trafficke*—or, as the title of one of the poems has it, the “Purpose at My Booke.”

The journey to those lists, and then to the final section of *Trafficke*, is, as I’ve suggested, a complex one, but it’s well worth the effort. The final section, a prose poem in eight short unnumbered sections, achieves both sublimity and, in its direct address to Alexander Magruder, a poignant intimacy. Like virtually everything else in the book, this poem is almost impossible to excerpt. But here is a moment—one that evokes one of the first lines of the book, quoted earlier:

Alexander, I tried to escape you, but you have made good on the family promise: survive, come back, gather by night where the day is dangerous. Your animal has tracked me down, your signal fire ignites in my eyes when I close them. I come when you call, back over a continent not fully mine, all the way down to the landing that bears your name: there a woman half black, half Indian, coughs into her hand an idea, and I have to watch.

As we do, while we read this wonderfully rich and challenging book. And re-read it, until Susan Tichy’s history becomes our own—as indeed it is.

Martha Collins