

Robert Fernandez, selected by Robyn Schiff

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF ROBERT FERNANDEZ

Hyper-awake and hyper-precise, *We Are Pharaoh*, by Robert Fernandez is an extravagant work of visionary bearing, and as the heir of works such as Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Johnson's *Ark*, and Plath's *Ariel*, its keening rages and ravages and rises mysteriously. Experiencing these poems can be unnerving, and becoming implicated in the dynamo of power, history, death, afterlife, and dust that radiates from the Pharaohstate we join as we pass Go here is a strong undertow indeed; but Fernandez promises in the opening poem "Polyhedron," "*Speed and seeing* are the only prerequisites." You'll need the Ferrari on page 12 to keep pace, and the light of "The body, sentient candle,/ dripping sparks" on page 31 to ask "What illuminates the morning better than the souls of the dead," "to see / the energy we eat" and to witness the revelation later: "Lately, all the eggs hold a dot of blood and lately in films a sophisticated sorcery flows over the ceilings and I see it."

An egret, a heron, a flamingo, a toucan, and a vulture: this must be Florida. "The clear light of the overpasses / and the pale light of billboards/ veils us": This must be Miami. If the effulgence is more neon than you're used to, remember the climate is tropical and the Deco facade stylizes the rays of the sun against a backdrop of real sun. Think tomb of King Tut, think Futurism and ocean liner, and be careful. The atmosphere is glamorous and raw—a heavyweight title fight, but faster, swifter, more soulful: "The jai-alai sling of involuntary memory." And in regard to more hell-bent blood sport: "The cock will not be bled / without the ringing of the bets behind it." One does not simply read this book; one confronts it, undergoes it, and with luck and concentration and the right reading conditions, is transformed by it. My advice to you as you contend with this volume: "*Find the wheel.*"

—Robyn Schiff

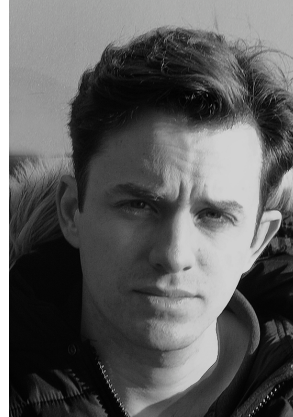
HELL ME DOWN ROBERT FERNANDEZ

We take stock of the forearms:
They are like red snapper, slick
And sharp; they are like glass.
You see I am falling through

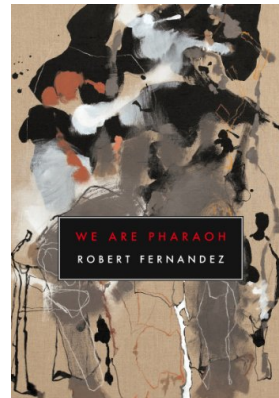
My pleasure like an intimacy
Of mirrors rubbing against
The face and you cannot uncut
The stomach: it is a die.

Here is the heat because we must begin.
Red rainbow spread like a hawk's gills;
Red rainbow tied off in its black holes
Which dot the ceiling because it is enough.

A nurse raises



Robert Fernandez, photo by Nick Twemlow



We Are Pharaoh
(Canarium, 2011)

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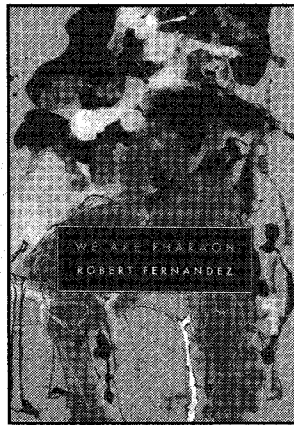
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WE ARE PHARAOH
Robert Fernandez
 Canarium Books (\$14)

by Elizabeth Robinson



nerability and an interest in peeling back the superficial skin on presence, “a wound folded back from either side of the flesh that has opened me.”

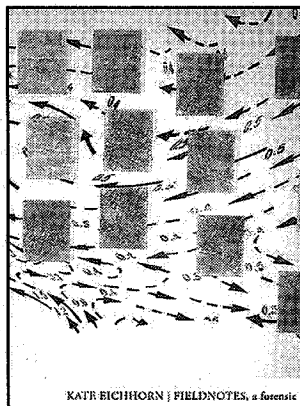
Fernandez keeps this circuit of language aloft with considerable erudition and allusion. His poetry sheers through the contemporary tendency toward the glib, but there is plenty of humor here as the poetry negotiates the poles of desire and doubt sharply, often painfully. Indeed, at times the profusion of halos throughout the book seems less a sign of the holy and more an ironic squint brought on by the glare and aura of a sun that impedes as much as assists vision. Does the radiance of the sun act as a mask, as a predatory stomach “ribbed with

The poems in Robert Fernandez’s gorgeous and challenging *We Are Pharaoh* unfold in a densely intertwining engagement with one another. The poet wrestles page by page to give witness to a world that wants to offer up blur and surface more than depth. The terms of this world become a matter of urgent conjecture, an ethics that achieves an almost metaphysical quality, as the eye gazing outward spills “dis- / information into the luminosity.” This work concerns itself as much with doubt as with assertion—within which Fernandez’s almost obsessive lexicon retains a fascinating mobility and slippage. It’s always interesting to consider the recurring terms of a book’s vocabulary and in this collection, “sun,” “eye,” and words for vision and witness are central. With surprising frequency, “halo” and “soul” also appear, as do “face,” “mask,” “smile,” and “horizon.” The reader encounters many stomachs and mouths, forms of hunger, as well as “thirst,” all of which can be read as varied tropes for desire. This desire attempts to carve a site or right for itself in an obdurate, often violent world—a place of stones, bricks, and vultures. “Wounds” both indicate vul-

light,” or as a bright array “fanning to structure”? Fernandez refuses to settle the question, instead averring that we are imprisoned where “Universal Coincidence / spreads its bars filling all space and light.” Later, he writes, “we endeavor to end in a fuck-all of resolution,” yet this book thrives on the restlessness of pressing, multi-directional interrogation. Hence, the reader must attend to the plural first-person “we” of the title. It forces us to ask if the speaker is always multiple and in what ways the gaze of the reader is conjoined with that of the author. Multiplicity advances itself as revelation: “it reveals itself in a cluster of pulses.” Those (im)pulses vie with each other for authority; self-obscuration, ruthless hunger to survive, or even a fragile sense of alliance are all possibilities. Clearly, any pharaonic claim to divinity is deflated here, but the author still advances the claim of poetry to make queries so cogent that their necessity incises the horizon and finds something beyond itself, even if it is only “the figure and its rhythms // desperately put forth.” ♦

FIELDNOTES, A FORENSIC
Kate Eichhorn
 BookThug (\$18)

by Megan Burns



In *Fieldnotes, a forensic* Kate Eichhorn thrusts the reader into the action of the text before the title page is even reached: screen shot directions position the reader as director in the shaping of this narrative and the “Investigator” and the “Archivist” dialogue while a myriad of visual cues are interspersed to represent the “Anthropologist.” These characters occupy the external framework of the story, while the internal framework revolves around the Anthropologist’s field work and notes. As in a crime scene, Eichhorn presents the Anthropologist through clues that have to be interpreted and deciphered. Layered over these two concerns is Eichhorn’s own dissection of language, especially in how it tells

the stories of a culture and its fears.

One of the early examples of Eichhorn’s labyrinth of thought emerges when the Archivist states: “I was a subletter: A body conducting a series of turbulent departures and arrivals.” The tenant reference cloaks the deeper meaning of “sub-letter,” or that which lies beneath the surface of language, and the reference to a body complicates the multiple meanings that the text inhabits—from a body of work by the author, to the bodies uncovered in the field, to the missing body of the Anthropologist that prompts the Investigator’s questions. The tension between the Archivist and the Anthropologist extends far beyond their confusing relationship that is revealed piecemeal throughout

the book; their roles as assigned by their professions seem to embody what they stand for: collector and preserver and ethnologist and handler of the dead. While they both examine the path and preserve history for the future, the Anthropologist tangles with narrating the dead’s experiences, saying: “I craft these freshly dug statements / to investigate our consumption of fear / repatriate the impossibility of war.”

Through the voice of the Anthropologist, Eichhorn is able to express her own concerns about language and how words

FROM THIS WORLD TO THE NEXT:

Kristen Evans on
Robert Fernandez



Canarium Books 2011

"We have opened our lives / upon silence and the bridge," intone the voices in the last poem of Robert Fernandez's *We Are Pharaoh*. We're left suspended in this liminal space, the threshold between the complicated knot of language and the more tangible, every-day furnishings of the waking world, throughout Fernandez's first collection. At first read, the strangeness and opacity of Fernandez's lyrics appear to exist outside, or even just beside, conventional understandings of time and place or an embodied speaker. Despite, or perhaps even because of, the richness of their language, these poems cannot be picked up, dangling, from thumb and forefinger. Rather, they invite you, sure as a light bobbing through a bog, to meet them *out there*.

This is not to say Fernandez's poems lack heart or empathy or desire, any of the recognizably human features of poetry. In a book concerned less with bodies than with their individual parts, less with eyes and arms than with the tenor of the soul, the speaker is at times achingly direct:

I remain a believer...

I am best when I am with you

panic, gauze-white scepter buried
in the center of me...

but today I am proud,
spilling off in countless directions

today I watch
as the souls come trampling across me

Much like the speaker in this poem, the voices in *We Are Pharaoh* spill off in countless directions, negotiating the territory between "I" and "we" more often than the intimate relationship between "I" and "you." At times, the intimacy and intensity of the second person address is openly eschewed and can even be read as an accusation of intrusion: "Moored, you are / too intimate in us" warn the speakers of "Lauds," and as a new initiate into Fernandez's world, you can't help but agree. In this world the collective past, the ghosts in the machinery of our histories, supersedes the value typically placed upon personal, intimate spaces between individuals.

Fernandez imbues these collective voices with the powerful task of longing, raising questions about selfhood and identity, the treacherous passage from this world to the next. Behind every "I" stands an implicit "we": the omnipresent voices of the dead called into being through language-as-prayer. Often the departed "remain faceless and beyond [reach]", although they can also serve as guides, as "[w]hat illuminates the morning." For intimacy in these poems is a spiritual endeavor, visible primarily in the shared histories of the living and the dead, their implied synchronicities.

To a large extent it is this slippage between the singular and the collective, the unity and the fragmentation of time, that casts the collection in its otherworldly light. In a recent interview with *THERMOS* magazine editor Zach Savich, Fernandez situates his work in terms of the uncanny:

Dread (or a sense of uncanniness) is arguably a more productive starting point [than the sublime] for thinking about one's shared finitude. It presents itself in the poem as an experience of our exposure to a groundless and irreconcilably unfamiliar world. One takes up residence in the unknown and unknowable, sustained by supports/activities (e.g. language) that are inherently uncertain, at risk. These supports, which bear the burdens of the past, provide only a temporary ground upon which a work or world might be situated.

It's impossible not to see the tension Fernandez identifies between the knowable surface of the world and its impenetrable depths as one possible framework for approaching the haunted landscapes and speakers of *We Are Pharaoh*. The visual surfaces of Fernandez's poems are at once lush and abstract, betraying their own unknowable magnitude through the materiality of language. Fittingly, the collection has a number of recursive images and colors that serve as visual anchors in an otherwise placeless place: dizzying beams of radiant light, eyes set in stomachs or walls, the reds of blood, the golds of crowns.

Even when we touch down in a world that more closely resembles our own, as in "The Pines," Fernandez asks the reader to negotiate familiar landscapes, while also, in many ways, refusing to provide a clear picture:

We recall, looking up at the violence of spinning sky--
recall a violence that took place in sound alone.
Skilled, we see our arms unlock, souls trained
on fresh estates. We flee from mountains
from pavilions building across the eyes
in thirst and scarcity.

exit full screen mode.

Like "The Pines," the poems in *We Are Pharaoh* ask us to imagine the unchecked desire of souls departing the violence of living in a burst of static. Fernandez invites us to project our own desire onto a landscape he offers to build with us, as we confront our own understandings and struggles with the past. And, with Fernandez serving as our guide into the underworld, we do not have to do so alone.

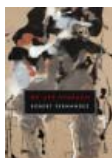
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THERMOS interview: <http://thermosmag.wordpress.com/2011/06/20/a-conversation-with-robert-fernandez/>

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We Are Pharaoh

Robert Fernandez
Carnarium Books, 2011

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Stepping Sideways

Eric Rawson

A poet's first book is uniquely exciting. It can not really be disappointing; unless the author has established an unlikely reputation in journals (think Amy Clampitt), the first book comes with no strings attached. It stands or falls not in comparison to the author's previous work but only—only!—in comparison to all previous poetry. Presumably, first books present material written over a long time, the best work culled from what might be the equivalent of several later books. For this reason alone, it is foolish, despite retrospective evidence, to predict the course of a poet's career from his first book. For every *Harmonium*, *Satan Says*, or *Some Trees*, there are countless overstuffed volumes languishing in the libraries' out-of-circulation depositories. On the other hand, first books serve as gauges of the condition of poetry and inevitably speak to the immediate future of the art and, for this reason, deserve special consideration.

So what are we to make of *We Are Pharaoh*, Robert Fernandez's first book? Fernandez takes us on a tour of a world where the "vowels wear dark halos, of which they are ashamed" and the "passage of cups does not limit / the range of potential outcomes." In other words: where conventional syntax and the hope that a shared grammar signifies a shared reality are quickly whittled away, and we step sideways through language limited mainly by the temporal act of reading itself. Take, for example, the title poem:

I should have said the iris
In its network of evictions

I should have spoken
More softly

We no longer fear,
We are no longer—

Our throats
Are inadequately sexual

...

We who eat at the table,
Speak at the table, see

At the table,
Are painful

Dilations and constrictions. . .

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The Cold War
The Cows
We Are Pharaoh

This evocative poem strikes me as representative of the "exploratory" style that defines poetry in the early twenty-first century. This sort of poetry displays a fierce intelligence and a heightened transnational awareness, exploring the relationship between syntax and semantics, and challenging the putative bargain the author makes with his reader to delight and possibly to instruct. The poet covers his tracks in writing, erasing, and revisioning the poem, so that it becomes difficult for even an attentive reader to trace the history of thought or to find a stable emotional position. What remains on the page is the slightly surreal map of a factitious terrain: effect without cause: a melodrama of the imagination. Whatever this poetic experience provides for the author, it can be exhilarating for the reader—or downright irritating, if one does not feel moved to wander through the boundless garden of the author’s imagination.

Fortunately, Fernandez writes smart poems with great care. He has a superior ear (a rare treat worth reading for), as in this delicate passage from “Polyhedron”:

The eye is present if the rain is out,
threatens to bend not only reeds

but pitch, guitar, eggs of the macaw.
Not just the river but the shadow of the river travels.

The way Fernandez throughout *We Are Pharaoh* echoes Stevens (“bacchanals of vision,” “vocables are stones entire,” “the drawing of a duration like a fan of water”) lends his work a rich lyricism much lacking in the recent past and, like Stevens, redeems an impulse to solipsism. Fernandez’s work promises that in its essential music poetry can reconnect us, who find the essential in nothing, despite an abused and fractured language.

Eric Rawson

Eric Rawson lives in Los Angeles and teaches at USC. His most recent book is *The Hummingbird Hour*.

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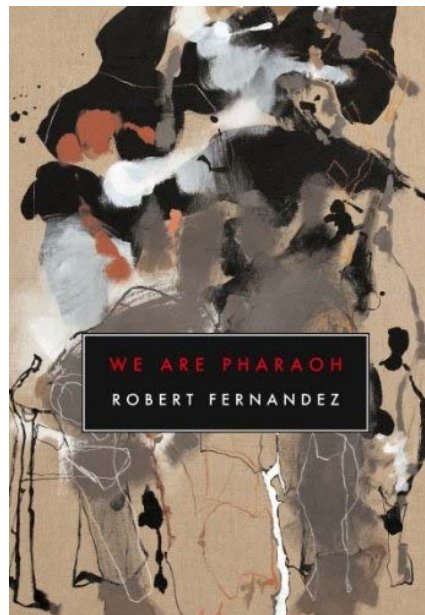
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THE VOLTA: FRIDAY FEATURE

We Are Pharaoh by Robert Fernandez. Canarium Books. 2011.



Reviewed February 24, 2012 by Caroline Davidson.

Robert Fernandez's first book *We Are Pharaoh* reads like a thinly-veiled body in

ROBERT FERNANDEZ'S FIRST BOOK, *WE ARE PHARAOH*, READS LIKE a thinny-veined body in motion, on the verge of bursting open. Comprised of varied formal arrangements, from prose blocks, to couplets, to lists and fragments, this work circulates words like blood cells, utilizing them in distinct syntactic patterns, so that certain phrases and images reappear throughout the body of the book. These poems explore sensory depth ("opening the doors/of the senses") as well as the interconnectivity of organic circulation, surface construction of the body, and the larger, external landscape it inhabits ("Stomachs ribbed with light/blood orange horizons tapering to cinema"). We see the surface of the body in constant motion, but it is indirect. We see veins, arteries, joints, and muscles moving, yet the continuous living changes of the body's systems are masked by the skin, by textured surface. Such is the experience of reading *We Are Pharaoh*.

"You work construction," states the speaker in the first poem of the collection. This refers to the literal construction of the poem on the "billowing page," the tensions and balance necessary to create a solid figure, a functioning unit, one that combines multiple perspectives and features. Fernandez explores the complex interrelation of process and form (bodily, as well as external foundational structures), and causes the reader to question the materials that are meant to exemplify external solidity or permanence (pyramids, planks, paintings, et cetera). The reader is also led, via the symbol of the "Pharaoh," to question authority, power, and hierarchical religious and political systems. Conceptual authority, seemingly permanent, solid, and unquestionable, is presented in these poems as

puzzling, shifting, and fluid:

Let it be said that when we speak
the inscriptions of the muscle
speak through us in glyphs
of red jade or pearl

Let it be said that a fragrant mask,
as of sandalwood or cedar,
carries the slits of its eyes
over the tops of the trees
into the onrush of light.

In this excerpt from the poem “Departures,” how we speak is cryptic, it is “masked”; it is through muscle “inscriptions,” surface carvings, the body’s external movements, “[t]he throat-rod and its glyphs.” These are dynamic and textured surfaces—masks in motion that veil and encompass multiple senses, and the idea of a consistent “I” or perceiver of an object. Here, it is the mask that directs perception, not the wearer of the mask.

If a dynamic, functioning, but masked bodily unit is too limiting of a metaphor, the list poem entitled “The Root,” may function as an “ars poetica” for *We Are*

Pharaoh. The poem in its entirety describes a diffuse root system “being active.” In such a system, there is no dominant, primary root; instead, the system branches in all directions. Its purpose is foundational—to anchor. Thus, the poems in this collection stand as roots that are “foundational, fanning to structure,” but they are also “hostile, dormant, couched in retreat.” They refuse to conform to one particular strain of logic. They “cluster, spore, sprawl” in their “design and concurrent enaction.” Formally, they refuse to narrowly enact one particular, dominant perspective, or present a singular speaker. However, this “sprawl” is also an engaged sprawl—an exploration of the boundaries of lyric structure, a deep pleasure in language’s technical possibilities. Although the materiality of language as a painterly medium is employed in many of these poems (“Souls surfacing/in cameos of hard art”), instead of focusing heavily on paintings or photographs themselves, Fernandez uses ekphrasis as a tool to create his own dense imagery. This form of ekphrasis questions the ability of the “language” of painting to convey stable meanings:

I became tonal blocs, the tall
grey one in
perfumed black suit
a host of death’s heads, cameras,
rubies surrounding me.

The speaker here imagines himself surrounded by flashes of death, and yet one can also picture a red carpet, cameras, and perfumed suits. This hint of mimesis.

however, does not allow the reader to rest, because of the strangeness of the speaker becoming “tonal blocs,” an image that exists in another version of reality. The “real” images are closely pressed against those less grounded in reality, which causes the reader to question the perspective of the shifting subject:

One figure fleeing,
 swallowing a negative;
one with a flash of daylight in his head,

 asking for another.
A beach of primary whites,
 comets, distant lines

of clouds. One comet
 cracked in the skillet;

Here there is a definitive “figure,” but what is the “negative” he swallows? The beachscape seems real, but what is the comet? The sky lowers down to the domestic without warning. For Fernandez, the senses are a guide—thought is given agency, moving as a series of imagistic explorations. Thus, the language is rooted, but sprawls, and not into spirals of text that empty of meaning; rather, this work stretches lyrical boundaries, using the backdrop of a painterly perspective, the arrangement of which may skew perspective and reality: “That which arranges itself in backlight acquires a knotted sense of its proportion, an added set of

repercussions.” The speaker is aware of the “knotted sense” and “repercussions” these explorations of lyric arrangement may provoke, especially in a reader who expects familiar versions of reality, transparently deployed settings, or a narrative that one might comfortably paraphrase.

These poems build upon one another, but refuse to accumulate into a cohesive, unified field wherein the reader can arrive at any “ah-ha!” moment. The systematic circulation’s purpose feels opaque, emergent, and continually in action. The structural foundations of the human body circulate and sprawl over the page, with bits of language often repeated: “blood,” “lobes,” “jaws,” “ribs,” “neck,” and “throat.” This repetition of somatic language across different poems forms within the book an opaque circulatory system, one that mirrors the functionality of the above-mentioned diffuse root systems. For example, early on the speaker “clips the water from the throat,” then later, “a mandrill clutches the throat in the billiard hall of Pele.” Sometimes “rags” are “piles of bread,” sometimes “rags” are “hands.” “Beaks” exist on vultures, then on nurses, and then, “[a] challenge appears. It wets its beak.” The meanings of these words complicate with each repetition, suggesting a desire to both contain and magnify their purposes, but perhaps one should allow the strange assemblages of surface material to expand one’s sensory perspective:

I was bleeding, I wanted
to stand and show you that in my chest

were compartments, riots of boys

scratching at their necks

The language here contains the assembly of a singular mass into bodily compartments, creating an image that, although wild and unnervingly visceral, is still “rooted” in physical sensation, exemplifying the futility, present through the book, of attempting to unify the senses. Fernandez is conscious of the multi-directionality of his language, of his forms (“We split silence’s red liver/ And became conscious of our art”).

One could read this book as a critique of political organizations, of historical, linear time, of “passing epochs” and the “Failure of Systems.” And if the phrase, “We Are Pharaoh” refers, in part, to a mobilized mass that makes up an epoch, if the “pyramids” are “pyramids of limbs,” then Fernandez is calling our attention to the terrors of our world. However, despite the moments of postmodern disillusionment and fear, (“Instead of daylight, I see/ cinder blocks, motels, pavilions/ drawing themselves into the earth/ I see a poisonous midnight and think/ *swift, lethal fragments*”), there is still a “dominant impulse: to survive.” And to survive is to construct, to remain in motion, to circulate like blood cells, to rebuild.

Fernandez finds pleasure in the material that makes up the world’s surfaces, the multiple surfaces of the body, of language, of society. Surfaces are rich and strange, they constitute this “hummingbird-red universe,” where humans wear “masks of light and intellect,” and where there is “sunrise planted/ in an acre of

your back.” So much circulates. So much touches the senses. In this textured meshing, one finds a deep appreciation of language as sensual, exploratory material—a satisfying, “sentient light.”

* * *

Caroline Davidson is the poetry editor for Timber Journal and is an MFA candidate at the University of Colorado-Boulder

(The Volta | Friday Feature)



Book Review

We Are Pharaoh

Poetry

By Robert Fernandez

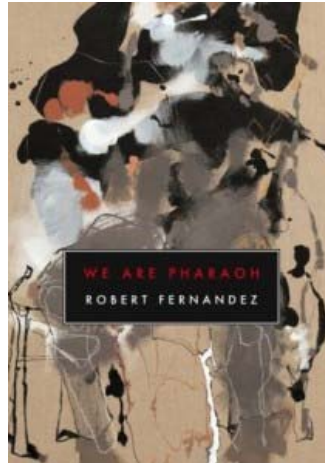
Reviewed By Vanessa Villarreal

Canarium Books (2011)

136 pages

\$14.00

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Robert Fernandez's ambitious debut, *We Are Pharaoh*, asks its reader to begin at the "billowing page," a blank space of "intersecting possibilities." The conjured image is a sort of endless paper sea, each line a current of images intended to flood our sensibilities—"the flesh calls back its bulls, the divers arrange themselves, occur as gods (loa) occur, that is, pliant: beds of mushrooms (pendentives) intersected by light." As the poem's title, "Polyhedron," would suggest, Fernandez presents the reader with a figure possessing many faces: as we wind our way through a stream of images, the reader accesses a place of endless referentiality, suspending all expectation of narrative. Fernandez creates an experience akin to the headspace one enters when entering an art museum—a space dense with vision.

Within the first few pages, the reader collides with what Fernandez calls "bacchanals of vision," or prophetic utterances melding the real with the surreal, the contemporary with the ancient, the celestial with the mundane, the violent with the erotic. This kind of chaotic landscape, rife with color, violence, and urge, is harnessed by a sense of the visual—"Van Gogh paints a bouquet of pistols," Velasquez sees a lakewater eye "rising into itself." Through visual references, as well as pop-cultural ones, the reader engages in an act of creation—the reader becomes the artist, equipped with the tools and colors of the lyric to compress the drama of human history into the space of a book.

Fernandez conjures the entire history of lyric poetry and manipulates its potency to address the vastness and confusion of our age. The result is a challenging collage of amped-up lyricism, whose very definition is celebrated as much as it is interrogated and challenged: image-dense moments are interrupted startlingly with others. Just as viewers walking through a museum take in one moment of beauty in the same step as they take in another, all here is fleetingly explored as images are swept up in a tremendous wave of visual momentum. Fernandez's lyric embraces the expansiveness of our world through the power of image, capturing the endlessly referential nature of the postmodern condition through the evolution of human vision. The ancient pushes up against the modern uselessly, deconstructing the linear so that time becomes strangely all-encompassing. Throughout the book, the lines lasso the ancient and yank it into the contemporary; coliseums groan their heft into the tropicalia of Miami; we are asked to consider Dionysus as much as Mike Tyson. This suspension of time allows Fernandez to lead the reader through discrete moments that mimic the experience of viewing art, the language itself performing a kind of sensual overload. Manipulating language as a painter manipulates a brush—melding color and texture through the visual field—Fernandez too constructs the "billowing page" as a field where all-time occurs simultaneously. He writes in "Emergence":

If historical time is a tract of territories, like a field with various plots in rotation, and if each plot is an epoch of human history, say that we are coming out of the terrain of The Grand Tour, say that we have passed from the epochs of corn and wheat and entered the Epoch of the Radish. . . . A conceptualization of linear time as a splashing away and of a pushing forward onto a new barge that has miraculously offered itself up—La Muerte de Dios.

These lines establish the role of the collection, where all-time is visible at once. The viewer can begin at any epoch and move through eras at will. Fernandez harnesses the linear

nature of reading—left to right, top to bottom—as if to mimic the linear passage of time—then to now, present to future—and manipulates it so that readers are able to experience this temporal dissonance as they move through the page. The effect is cacophonous as much as it is harmonious, “like a lattice of metaphysics.” We are pulled singularly through the many strands of time simultaneously, combing through the text as if through tangled hair.

But despite the expansiveness of Pharaoh’s scope, we are asked to delve deeper still into the possibilities of vision. Just as we are bounding across dreamy erotic landscapes of the body, we land in the viscous color of a Miró, the celestial spaces of Venus and Adonis, the wilderness of the Hyena Men from the photographs of Pieter Hugo. Fernandez renders the physical through the imagined, creating an ekphrastic feedback loop that performs the mimetic qualities of art through language, as in “Flowerheads”:

III.

Boom. Gainsay death metal is a window, ram’s-horn ripple. RZA shaved the track, niggaz caught razor bumps. Ascylltus: “To sell ’em, piece by piece, brick by brick, a catch!” Encolpius: “Twice the street value . . .” Homage gainsays a death-work of preterit lexicons. Tramlines etched adept, colossal rounded patterns.

The references to visual art act as a layer placed over the body of the book—a sort of veil, obscuring as much as revealing what it can about the text. Fernandez is interested in the potential of perception and how perception evolves contextually over time, often taking different shapes for different viewers, or in this case, readers. Fernandez asks his readers to approach the book with a new approach to the lyric—a form (if it is one) that prizes complexity over linearity, abundance over sturdiness. The effect can be confusing, maddening, baffling, but its intensity can’t be denied.

Vanessa Angelica Villarreal is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where she studies poetry and prose. She is the recipient of the Brian Lawrence Poetry Prize at the University of Houston, and her work has appeared in The Potomac Review.

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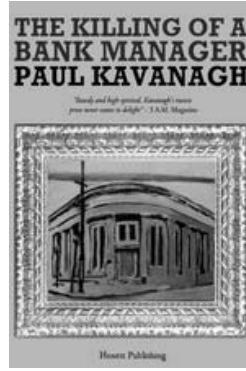
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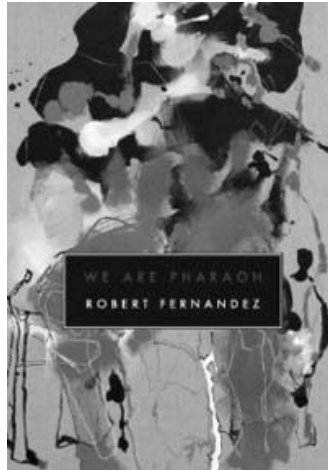
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Reviews

Bethany Prosseda We Are Pharaoh



We Are Pharaoh
by Robert Fernandez
Canarium Books, 2011
136 pages / \$14 Buy from SPD

We Are Pharaoh is Robert Fernandez's first collection of poems, published in 2011 with Canarium Books. In this collection, we find ourselves located in a lush and tropical landscape; however, this landscape becomes quickly complicated by a fragmented lyric that ensnares all that crosses its path. While Fernandez's poems are entangled in broad themes such as the lyric, human history, art, and the Sublime, the poems of this collection are primarily concerned with the cyclical and conflicted nature of upheaval. Although it seems impossible for one collection of poems to effectively reconcile so many disparate and limitless themes, Fernandez succeeds in creating a sense of cohesion. There is an inexplicable awe and certain joy that radiates from *We Are Pharaoh* as Fernandez tasks us with the challenge of tracing and teasing apart his root-like lyric—"A tangling of fruits and vases" where "the shade is verboten." In this act of tracing, and "if [we] were to succeed," we may discover what truths may lie "in blinding sunlight" above the foundation of this collection (84).

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Landscape plays an essential role in the creation of lyric fragmentation that pervades the poems in *We Are Pharaoh*. Throughout the collection, Fernandez's poems are in conversation with specific works of art by artists such as Velázquez, Sir Stanley Spencer, Botticelli, and others. The first such ekphrastic reference appears in "Polyhedron," which is the first poem of the collection. Fernandez states, "Think of the bardo as forty-one or 2,700 intersecting tiles. The mosaic has a fundamentally Caribbean soul. The under-flesh of a fugue, of cosmic background radiation" (3). A polyhedron, like a mosaic, is a solid figure that possesses many faces. Given this definition, Fernandez subtly steers us to a method for reading his fragmented and comparatively mosaic-like poems; similar to a fugue, each fragment is an inchoate face or theme that gains definition when considered not as part, but as whole. The emergence of many roots or motifs throughout Fernandez's collection is in direct conversation with the book's title: *We Are Pharaoh*, which posits the notion of unity. While the lyric implies singularity—the lyric "I" versus the lyric "you"—the title signals a collective, represented by "we." In this sense, the individual is pitted against the collective; the act of which suggests a struggle or upheaval in which absolute power is ultimately yielded to the collective. In this sense, art serves to represent the collective that is present within this collection.

In the poems' ekphrastic moments, Fernandez often chooses to engage with landscape paintings by artists not known for their work with landscapes. In this detail alone there is an act of upheaval in the refusal to reinforce a dominant narrative. A common thread that runs throughout these paintings is the emphasis of background over foreground. In these works, background becomes foreground; similarly, Fernandez utilizes the practice of background as foreground throughout the poems in *We Are Pharaoh*, and in doing so creates an endless struggle in which the many voices present in Fernandez's lyric are caught in a violent cycle: emerging only to be again subdued.

While many of Fernandez's ekphrastic references will not be common knowledge for most readers, the gesture feels genuine. These references seem synesthetic in nature; they exist not because the poem seeks to describe these works, but rather because the landscape of the poem is reminiscent of the colors, textures, and qualities of composition depicted in these works of art. These references seek to create cohesion through visualization. However, this attempt to create unity proves contradictory in that these references also fork in another direction: toward an upheaval of the poems themselves. If Fernandez's gesture is genuine, the involuntary emergence of art within the poems results in a disruption of the poem's system.

The element of upheaval further extends Fernandez's fragmented lyric. Upheaval haunts the poems in this collection, and in turn an unending struggle emerges—art is at odds with the lyric; the Sublime with the mundane; and the individual with the collective. In this manner, upheaval functions as a nutrient essential to the creation of the lyric's root system, which seizes on the poems in this collection. One poem in Fernandez's collection, titled "The Root," lists a number of qualities possessed by roots. The poem reads:

Being active, on the tips of its toes, forking, conversational (best accosted from the side), being hyper-national, elevated, sunk, being foundational, fanning to structure, being hostile, dormant, couched in retreat, being soft vein, mouth, soil and horizon, being disaster and re-architect, plumed through its length, being cluster, spore, sprawl, design and concurrent enaction, being fiber, thirst, hormone, cymbal, lattice and stress and sleeving unity...(26).

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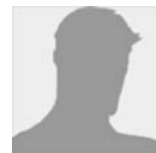
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For Fernandez, the root is rhizomatic. The rhizome is a system that allows for multiple, non-hierarchical points of entry and exit into a given body or structure—which root do we trace and where does it lead? The root is also, and perhaps more importantly, a system capable of creating both destruction and unity. The root may create destruction through upheaval—disrupting sidewalks or other solid structures that may lie above—or unity by holding soil and other disparate elements together, preventing erosion. *We Are Pharaoh* performs both the act of upheaval and the creation of unity; the realization of which creates an undeniable and compelling tension that renders the work nearly organic and very much alive: a body whose creator has given over his power so that the work may define and redefine its own values.

Bethany Prosseda is an M.F.A. student at the University of Colorado at Boulder where she also teaches. She has work forthcoming with *Rain Taxi*.

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We Are Pharaoh

Robert Fernandez. *Canarium* (SPD, dist.), \$14 trade paper (136p) ISBN 978-0-9822376-5-6

The prose poems, torqued anecdotes and free verse fragments of Fernandez's first collection emanate from a country based in part on news from the global South, in part on the smoke trails of European surrealism, and in part (the best part) on ancient Egypt, whose iconography and whose doomed empire provide an armature for Fernandez's uneasy scenes: "A nurse raises/ Her beak from my chest/ All my vultures are warm/ And with gold discs for heads,/ All my vultures are form." Sometimes (especially early on) Fernandez juxtaposes his own desires with the needs and events he sees in the developing world: "You open your heart's wings like a bread riot, split the uncooked potatoes on the table with a glance, and eat." The awkwardness of the comparison seems deliberate, the irony wrenching: how can we contemplate our own language, our own longings, when there are such big events going on far away? The emotional and the ethical questions that the starkest moment pursue can get overshadowed by the showiness elsewhere, reminiscent of earlier American poets (Ben Belitt, say) who also took cues from surrealists: "that a honeyed crucifixion has courage/ that the wind commissions horsehair sofas"; "Or if I say damage, but you show that you are April; if I say damage and you are April in the midst of institutions, holographs and the prolonged death of myth." Some first books leave too much out; Fernandez, attentive both to political austerity and to the delights of ornament, tries very hard to get everything in. (Apr.)

Reviewed on: 04/18/2011

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