

Horses, Sleep, Snow, Dust

By Katherine Bode-Lang

Book Review:

Radio Crackling, Radio Gone, by Lisa Olstein. Copper Canyon Press, 2006.

A reader must listen carefully in order to catch the nuances of Lisa Olstein's debut collection, *Radio Crackling, Radio Gone*. Most everything comes as a surprise in this book: her directness ("I never meant to say it was ordinary, / it just became so ordinary"); her imagery (" . . . my porcelain / eggcup chin, your wishbone hand"); and her riddles ("I started loving you / when your sleeve caught fire"). A blend of lyrical and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, Olstein offers moments of insight and association, while at other times leaves the reader puzzled by lack of specificity. Whether writing about electrons or goats, relationships or markets, the reader can expect disarming beauty and precision, if not a clear narrative.

Winner of Copper Canyon's 2005 Hayden Carruth Award for New and Emerging Poets, this book demonstrates Olstein's careful use of craft. She resists repetition in form: Her first poem opens with terse sentences and end-stopped lines, while in subsequent poems the lines lengthen and enjamb. Though Olstein may let a poem's subject run wildly, she breaks her lines and stanzas with purpose. Furthermore, she never neglects sound. She subtly works in slant rhymes and plays with repeating words and phrases. This attention to prosody at times belies the puzzling content of the poems, as in "Bloom": "There are canisters of kerosene / burning a path across the ice / taken from the kitchen store. . . ."

Olstein's images can turn the ordinary, even the cliché, into small astonishments. In "A Great River Flows Nearby," she writes: "April's first bee stumbles newly minted from its vault." Or, as in "Dear One Absent This Long While":

It has been so wet stones glaze in moss;
everything blooms coldly.

I expect you. I thought one night it was you
at the base of the drive, you at the foot of the stairs,

you in a shiver of light, but each time
leaves in wind revealed themselves,

the retreating shadow of a fox, daybreak.

We expect you, cat and I, bluebirds and I, the stove.

Horses, sleep, snow, dust, and barns each appear multiple times in *Radio Crackling*, *Radio Gone*; the repetition and familiarity of these words create a landscape or backdrop that helps the collection cohere. They also serve as benchmarks for the reader. Because many of Olstein's poems evoke exact images, some obscure references can leave the reader confused. The third section of the book, a long poem in nine parts titled "A Practical Guide to Self-Hypnosis," feels overly invested in its own language. From part three:

beneath your eyes beneath your lids below your brow beneath
the corneal waters beneath the iris beneath the vitreous flow
behind the vacancy of the pupil behind the macula behind the
nerve root before the brain wall:

Such unevenness proves more of a distraction than a discomfort overall. Elsewhere, points of confusion or vagueness don't disrupt the work because the individual poems blend and harmonize with the whole.

Olstein's titles show the writer's intelligence and wit, as when a title's disjunction with its poem allows for a multi-layered reading. "Another Story with a Burning Barn in It" never shows the burning barn, but it still leaves the reader with a vivid image—the title does the early imagistic work of the poem. A poem that tallies birds in five small couplets follows the title "Today Will Be Cloudy and Gray. Tomorrow It Will Rain." This sets a context or mood for the poem, if

not securely knotting the title and content together. “Metaphor Will Get You Everywhere,” and “The Poet’s Youth Was Almost Impossibly Glamorous and Romantic” dip into meta-poetry—the poet writing about being a poet—as does “Still Early”: “We’re always on the lookout for signs, hidden messages / in things—the curve of a pear, how long it takes to rot.” Olstein’s self-awareness as a poet never wanders far from her perfected images.

With references ranging from her studies at Harvard Divinity School to hypnotism, Olstein’s poems rarely sit still. They simultaneously draw the reader in with their intimacy, while also declaring distance, either in form or subject. The intelligent allusions, quick turns, and bright images can be mesmerizing. In the end, the title *Radio Crackling, Radio Gone* best describes the book as a whole: It reads like a radio not quite tuned in, as when multiple broadcasts come through between stations; what comes through can be revelatory in its surprise.