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Greg Boyd's *Carnival Aptitude* and Robert Perchan's *Perchan's Chorea*

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Greg Boyd. *Carnival Aptitude*. Asylum Arts. 1993. 119 pp. Paper: 9.95

Robert Perchan. *Perchan's Chorea*. Watermark Press. 1991. 147 pp. Cloth: \$17.50

The cover of *Carnival Aptitude*, one of twenty-nine of Greg Boyd's photomontages in this book, sets the mood for what's to come. Two musicians, a guitarist and a fiddler, lead a wedding procession along a dirt road. Behind the procession, museum visitors examine the paintings displayed on the enormous walls—yes, the dirt road traverses through a museum. A large open doorway in the back of the museum reveals the rising slope of a mountain. That art of juxtaposition, and the atmosphere of a carnival, color the sixty-three "short fictions" in this delightful book.

Certainly Boyd owes a debt to Rene Magritte, which he openly acknowledges with an aside in "Edouard's Nose" (" 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe'") and, more affectionately, with certain images, such as in the closing of "Ladders": "...tiny ladders sprouting from the soil, shooting upward like green stalks, bubbling to the surface of lakes and rivers, or else floating down from above like snow." Boyd knows how to quickly establish a storyline, let loose a magical transformation, and then allow the event to proceed to its "logical" conclusion. It's a technique that can not only be seen in the paintings of Magritte, but also in the prose poems of Russell Edson and Barry Yourgrau, all going back, perhaps, to that day Kafka nudged Gregor Samsa awake in "The Metamorphosis."

Regardless of origins, the technique works, especially in the hands of a skilled practitioner like Boyd. At times the poems are so visual they seem a short film directed by Magritte, as in "Lovers," here in its entirety:

Taking showers alone every day—that's not what life's all about—so a man carved himself a lover out of soap. Imagine his joy, his ecstasy at being wrapped in her slippery soft embrace. As for the rest, it's what one would expect: a steady melting away until, hand in hand, they disappeared together down the drain.

"Neither poetry nor fiction," says Russel Edson of the prose poems of *Carnival Aptitude*, "and at the same time both." I think he has

it exactly right. There's the narrative thread of fiction that runs through each of the pieces in this book. No matter how surreal or bizarre the monkey wrench thrown into the works, Boyd the storyteller proceeds as if nothing out of the ordinary has taken place. A woman carved out of soap comes to life in "Lovers," but it's no more unusual than the fact that she was carved out of soap, or that the man desired a shower-partner in the first place. Boyd trusts the "logic" of the story, which demands that not only the soap figure wash down the drain, but her lover, too.

These prose poems show not only the richly imaginative dreamscapes of the poet, but also a poet's care for language: "Slippery soft embrace" and, instead of the prosy "disappeared down the drain together," there's the rhythmical "disappeared together down the drain." Further evidence of Boyd's poetic leanings can be found throughout the book. But they never call attention to themselves. Boyd effortlessly (or so it appears) transports the reader with a magician's touch. The world Boyd transports us to, though, while possessing a lightness of tone, takes on a darker shade with the six section introductions, which the author notes are "based loosely on the chapter entitled 'Carnival' in *Petrus Borel, The Lycanthrope*, by Enid Starkie." Here's the opening to section one:

Farewell to the flesh! Carnival (derived from the Latin words for "meat" and "remove"), is a kind of physical and spiritual gorging before the coming poverty of Lent. But it is more: a lingering kiss at the station, a last toast, a cigarette before the firing squad, chocolate cake en route to the electric chair, sex in the cemetery—celebration in excess, the act of being alive. Farewell to the Flesh!

With this "carnival" backdrop, the characters of *Carnival Aptitude* animate a world on the brink of some coming catastrophe, one they can feel if not see, and so they exuberantly plunge themselves all the harder into their occupations and diversions. Boyd drives this point home in the twelve prose poems that make up "Games." With the savage wit found in Vasko Popa's own "Games," Boyd subverts society's approved ways of behavior in pieces with such titles as "Small Talk," "God," and "American Dream." In "Tennis," for example, the game consists of jumping "back and forth over the net while people are trying to play." While I admire the intent here, some of the games do

feel strained, such as in "Art": "Each competitor receives a uniform lump of human feces which he or she attempts to shape into a beautiful and original form." This strain, however, stands out as an exception to the sly charm of the book.

With *Carnival Aptitude* Greg Boyd deserves recognition as one of our most talented writers of the prose poem. I only hope he continues to experiment with the possibilities of the form. He's mastered the technique of surreal juxtaposition, in word and photomontage. I, for one, would like to see him try other techniques, pushing the form, which seems remarkably flexible. While I greatly admire Boyd's talent, there's a sameness to *Carnival Aptitude*. I keep wishing for the narrative to fracture, for the emotions to dominate, for something truly surprising to break the tight narrative control.

While Boyd creates an atmosphere of excess by inserting carnival scenes borrowed from Enid Starkie's novel, Robert Perchan has no need of a work of literature to create excess in his *Perchan's Chorea: Eros and Exile*. Rather, he plunges us into his experiences in Korea in a series of short prose narratives, personal letters, letters-to-the-editor, riddles, puns, proverbs, anecdotes, news stories from the *Korean Herald*, and definitions. An example of one of the latter helps explain the title (but by page 101, where this definition appears, readers will have long before recognized the pun): "CHOREA (pronounced KOREA): 'A nervous disorder (as of man or dogs) marked by spasmodic movements of the limbs and facial muscles and by incoordination.'" '

What's truly impressive about *Perchan's Chorea* is how the author is able to make all the disparate pieces cohere into what Albert Goldbarth calls a "fractured-narrative-of-a-novel." The problem with the book for this reader, however, is that after Perchan establishes the Korea/chorea state of sordidness, the "novel" aspect of the book isn't utilized. The author continues to pile up further evidence on the seediness and corruption of Korea rather than utilize his material for some other further insight or variation or complication, perhaps even bringing his characters to life, as a novel would do. The book, in the end, then, reads more as a collage-autobiography than novel, despite its ability to create and sustain a dark atmosphere of "eros and exile."

"Somewhere in smoky-industrial-military modern Korea," reads the book flap of *Perchan's Chorea*, "a poet is living in a garret with a whore." This living situation probably accounts for much of the book's embittered, jaded tone. It brings humor to the author's keen observations of Korean society. It also, unfortunately, brings some nasty com-

ments on women, comments that Perchan seems to feel justified making as he's living with a whore, or apparently a series of whores, whose names Perchan uses for the three sections of the book: "In-Ja," "Mi-Ja," and "Un-Joo."

When *Perchan's Chorea* takes on Korean society, the book is at its scathingly-dark-humored best, whether studying diet (the infamous dog-meat soup), language (the use of the prefix *um* to convey "the negative, the passive, secrecy, darkness," as in *um-tong-ha-da*: "to experience sex for the first time," religion ("Overheard inside the Buddha's head: Korea is a single personality with a multiple personality disorder"), and Korean gender relations ("Overheard in a bar near Pusan City Hall as the nation made preparations to host the games: 'They make wife-beating an Olympic event, I know we can sweep the lower weight classes. But what about 80 kgs? And heavy-weight? The American? The Russians?'"). The manner in which he skewers Korean culture is also fascinating. Drawing on the sense of "the found poem," Perchan usually stands back and lets the damning letter or conversation or newspaper account speak for itself. Indeed, his use of collage, one found text after another adding breadth and width to his "Chorea," is compelling. Perchan has an eye, and ear, not only for the bizarre in the everyday, but the everyday in the bizarre, whether presenting a letter complaining about Korean "necktied salarymen" spitting in the streets of Seoul, or the surreal phrases that are created by English spoken with a Korean accent (the Standard Version of the Bible becomes the "Revised Standard Virgin").

Perchan interlaces his "found" prose poems with personal narratives, which often bring the writer's troubled relations with women to the foreground. This is where the book begins to move from satiric to self-indulgent. Strolling with In-ja through a fishmarket, for example, Perchan shares this revelation:

...suddenly it all comes back to me, word for word, that strange footnote that so deepened and thwarted my love of cunnilingus in a more amorous, more innocent age: *Merely in passing will I refer to the peculiar fact that the genital secretion of the female among the higher mammals and in man, the erotically stimulating effect of which, as we have said, may be traceable to infantile reminiscences, possesses a distinctly fishy odor (odor of herring brine), according to the description of all physiologists; this odor of the vagina comes from the same sub-*

stance (trimethylamine) as the decomposition of fish gives rise to.

Like William Burroughs in *Naked Lunch*, Perchan employs dark humor and sexuality to shock the reader and show how totally out of place the values and assumptions of the homeland are in the "new world" of the expatriate. Yet often, rather than shock, Perchan merely sounds sophomoric, smug, and sexist:

My anthropologist friend Harry T. Colfax, perennial candidate for Senator Proxmire's Golden Fleece Award, has divided Korean women into a dozen phenotypes according to the configurations of their pubic hair. He has noted the Squat V, Standard V, Hanging Gardens, Hone-on-the-Range, Forked Pennant, Black Ingot, Wool-over-the-Eye, Blue Furze, Spider-in-the-Thatch, Maidenhair Fern (or Semi-hairless) and True Hairless.

One wonders why, if pubic configurations are so hilarious, Perchan fails to practice this art on Korean men as well as women.

There is much in *Perchan's Chorea* to praise. The writer expands the boundaries of the prose poem and skillfully arranges his found material to build a biting picture of modern Korea. Anyone interested in that country or in the experiences of an expatriate will find much here to enjoy. But *Perchan's Chorea* may also leave you with a sense of exasperation at a writer with so much talent obsessed with what he thinks clever remarks about female pubic hair.

After reading these two collections, I'm struck by a line in Greg Boyd's book: "*The wildest behavior occurred in plague years, as the inhabitants of the city waited for the next wave to strike.*"

John Bradley