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Gian Lombardo's *Sky Open Again* Brian Henry

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Gian Lombardo. *Sky Open Again*. Baltimore: Dolphin-Moon Press, 1997. 72 pp. \$10.00.

The narrator in Kafka's "Description of a Struggle" plays God by forcing the wind to blow, causing the moon to rise, whistling vultures down from the air, and flattening a mountain road. But this god gradually loses control of his vanishing landscape. Many of Kafka's characters, in fact, create worlds that become independent of their makers, often evolving into places that the creators themselves would like to escape. These characters experience this terrifying loss of power—or agency—as they vacillate between subject and object. And when they manage to get *behind* the verb, their actions are neither rational nor productive. They are puppets that can knock each other around but barely survive on their own. Nietzsche's superman, then, has been transformed into something subhuman (or, in twentieth century literature's most renowned case, a human insect).

Gian Lombardo explores the illusion of mankind's autonomy in his new book of prose poems, *Sky Open Again*. The figures in Lombardo's poems are gods powerless to control the worlds that they create. In "Keep for Thought," for example, a butcher conjures animals with song ("He liked to accompany himself on the bagpipes for a lamb"). When this bloodstained Orpheus becomes depressed by bad weather, however, his song's results are less than ideal: a calf with no liver, "a comb or a hoof or an ear" instead of the main course.

The idea of powerlessness recurs throughout the book, somewhat resembling the tragicomic figures that we see in Edson's prose poems. People constantly move in these poems, but to no purpose: the train goes nowhere, the traffic has stopped. Whereas Edson's puppet theater usually takes place within a confined area, Lombardo's stage is commonly the natural landscape. *Sky Open Again* begins with "Light Singing Before the Earth," both Genesis and anti-Genesis. We immediately know that we're in a new world, one complete with a vertical horizon. Evangelical in its rhythm, the poem resembles a sermon in rhetoric, but with uncanny content:

Any moment the sky may darken and there may be great noise,
any moment like this moment, any moment when the narrow slit of
sky above becomes black and grey, any moment like this moment
when the two rivers cut into the gorge rise up to the sky in a great
rush, shouting as they move upwards in bits and pieces...

Lombardo's sensibility is more lyrical than narrative, more circular than linear. We can see an Edsonian obsession with repetition in these poems, as well as a bent toward strange details and surprising juxtapositions. When he falters, which happens seldom, he relies more on narrative than on music and seeks to explain (rather than reveal or embody) the world he creates. Although

enticing, the first paragraph of "An Enduring Serenity" succumbs to this narrative bug despite its aspirations to original perceptions and weirdness:

Sometimes I get down on my knees and pray, the editor of our town's newspaper was saying as he watched the train, what we called our lonesome gila, pull into the station. It was ten minutes late, but the woman didn't know that, what with all the people scrambling onto the train, barely letting the one figure the editor saw descend as he spoke, observing her as she made her way in her loose-fitting black dress, slowly passing two men who were lifting crates filled with lemons as fast as they could onto the baggage car.

To complain too loudly, though, about the few instances where language collapses under the strain of the narrative would be overly critical, for even the weakest poems in *Sky Open Again* are compelling.

Although "Light Singing Before the Earth" is Lombardo's ars poetica in this collection, other poems reveal a poet preoccupied with continually razing the landscape in order to re-create and repopulate it. This re-creation might involve an initial undoing, as in "Reading Errors on the Approach":

Erase the lines of cement walks. There are more things to consider than the ones that daily map what we see, what we hear, what we think. There are no more buildings—all structures have been removed. There is no wind.

The sky stands on all fours and shakes off the dew ...

Erase all but the uplifted sky and stone and heart of the land...

Here, and elsewhere in the collection, Lombardo's poems echo Breton's "I own a boat detached from all climates" because they do not seek to represent the world outside the poem (nature, society, history). Instead, they create a new world, which inevitably becomes a criticism of the old one. The quandary of "Source of Conflict" also applies to these poems: "Assume that old Beelzebub goes around unnamings things. Does it make a difference to know the word *swim* to stay afloat?"

Lombardo's attempts to remake the world stem from his epistemological search that has no resolution. In "Foreseeing the Passages" Lombardo's own peculiar music becomes a meditative poetry in a world too exhausted for meditation:

Half the stars fell from the sky. Half the stars descended onto the plateau and played tumbleweed in the dark wind. There are many in town who doubt us. We would like to believe you, they say. We'd like to know what really happened. There's no

need to make something up, no need for embellishment. They have been so long in the sky, they could not have fallen out. They could not have kicked up dust, so much hail scampering off the edge of the gorge. Please don't make up this torrential down-pour, this storm of stars so long in the sky, that now floats in our glasses of water so long, so long in the river.

Despite its humor, the poem is imbued with real melancholy, a painful awareness of our failures. This pain is especially acute in Lombardo's poetry because he acknowledges the possibility of human agency while removing it from his world. The tragedy of his narrators lies in their ability to make a world and in their impotence to control it once it's in place.

That lack of agency can yield both humorous and sad results as people try to change their lives, whether they exchange body parts in a movie theater or are forbidden to sign the register until they arm-wrestle the innkeepers. The dramatic monologue "Ready or Not" occupies this dual territory:

I wish I could say it began with the invitation, that the whole debacle began at the beginning, at its conception, at such a thing as a wonderful idea, much like deciding on a whim to have one's morning coffee in black tie ...

If the longer you run, the less the company, then being stationary should accumulate a mountain of faces.

Of course, being stationary, especially if you're having coffee in black tie, yields little but unpleasant self-reflection:

But that invitation was the end, and those who have not come beg to be missed, without listening, with those regrets only matching stride for stride for the longest of distances.

Lombardo straddles the boundary between pathos and the ridiculous, and succeeds in elevating many of his poems above their initial situation. In "A Sicilian in Every Pot," he manages this balancing act to great effect:

With everyone a spy nothing became remarkable to report.
If someone skated a figure eight on the ice, we all did. And if the ice were thin and gave way, we would press our faces against it and think of better days.

Lombardo's ambition also extends to the linguistic landscape, which he levels again and again in this collection. Many of his titles (such as "Going for Broke," "A Fresh Start," "Stops on a Dime," "Out of Pocket," "By the Bootstrap") consciously acknowledge clichés in order to reinvent them. The first paragraph of "Already Unwrapped" contains his view of tired language:

"At some places, at certain times, probably too much of the time, all that is said sounds more than vaguely familiar." By playing with cliches, Lombardo shakes up the world of familiar language and presents us with a skewed version of it. Through his relentless focus on and experimentation with the physical, emotional, and linguistic landscapes, Lombardo has built an important and engaging world in *Sky Open Again*.

Brian Henry