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Book Reviews: Gian Lombardo's *Who Lets Go First* Brian Johnson

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Gian Lombardo. *Who Lets Go First*. Amherst, MA: Swamp Press. 1999.

A whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, a book has some reason for being other than its size. Even if we see in most poetry collections nothing more than a group of the poet's favorite things piled between the covers, and treat those things accordingly—liking some, disliking others—we still want the book to possess a unifying idea, a presiding spirit, a dazzling architecture. That is, we want to apprehend the relation between the parts. The strength of *Who Lets Go First*, Gian Lombardo's fourth book of poems, lies in the clarity of this relation.

Like many other poets who have searched for mystic patterns in experience (James Merrill at his Ouija board comes to mind), Lombardo draws on an outside source for his inspiration. In his case, the muse is the / *Ching*, a classic Chinese book of divination consisting of sixty-four lineal hexagrams, each followed by a written commentary. One well-known translator of the / *Ching*, James Legge, describes these commentaries as "short essays, enigmatically and symbolically expressed, on important themes, mostly of a moral, social, and political character." As divination is their purpose, the authors of the texts (a duke and his son) describe a particular course of action to be taken in the circumstances represented by the hexagram; they comment on whether that action will have a favorable or unfavorable outcome; and they recommend that individuals pursue or flee from that course of action. Lombardo's book mirrors the / *Ching* in its structure and tone. Not only does it contain sixty-four prose poems, each an imaginative response to the original hexagrams and commentaries, but the poems are also "enigmatically and symbolically expressed" instructions for living. *Who Lets Go First* is a twentieth-century guide for the perplexed.

The singular narrative strategy of the collection follows from its instructional purposes, however absurd, elliptical, and paradoxical that instruction appears to be. Every poem is addressed to a second person ("you"), creating an intimate rhetoric that evolves into a teacher/student, writer/reader colloquy. Lombardo's poetic instruction takes several forms. He makes proposals: "Find a sand bar and swim to it. Settle down with your back against its soothing coolness. Enjoy the view until the birds reverse direction or water slaps the back of your head." He issues warnings: "Don't get too lost in thought now that a head turns straight at you and a paw extends up." He confirms fears: "It's not paranoia: There are days when everyone has it in for you." He admonishes: "If you can't swim, don't seek stones." He prophesies: "Soon enough you'll see less but hear more of your breath as it passes through you." Lombardo resembles Edson in his skill at finding "the humor of the deep, uncomfortable metaphor." At times, the inherent ambiguity of his "you" leads us to believe that the person being addressed is none other than the author himself, thereby illustrating Edson's definition of the prose poem: "A good prose poem is a statement that seeks sanity while its author teeters at the edge of the abyss."

Indeed, the bipolar tone of these poems, at once good-natured and dark-

spirited, owes something to the yin-yang spirit of Chinese philosophy. Many of the poems are attempts to create a harmony—or negotiate a truce—between opposing elements. "Mix & Match" is representative:

Some things burn, some don't. Some float, some sink. Just because you can't burn a river doesn't mean you have to sit on the bank, furiously pulling up grass, handful by handful.

Someone calls from the opposite shore. If you can't swim, don't seek stones. Rather, keep an eye out for what's light and quick— what could, in some circumstances, be considered volatile.

This is a book of elemental conflicts: land and sky, low and high, light and dark, hunger and satiation, free will and fate, departing and arriving. In contrast, however, to the "moral, social, and political character" of the / *Ching*, the character of *Who Lets Go First* is best described as "existential." Lombardo is concerned with the movements of solitude; his desire is to be a happy, capable figure in a landscape rather than a lost one. In the end, he suggests, our search is for the horizon that welcomes us; whether it is full or empty of people when we arrive is a secondary question.

Lombardo's horizon is one of places as well as language. Or, more pointedly, the places *in* language. Along with visual artists such as Jenny Holzer and Edward Ruscha, and the Dutch poet-painter Marcel Broodthaers, Lombardo is interested in the deeper significance and hidden resonances of clichés. They assume for him an almost mythological stature, albeit one that only digging and writing can bring to light. Each poem in the book is titled with a cliché, e.g. "Tongue Tied," "Top of the World," "A Watched Pot," "Hand That Feeds," "Forest for the Trees," while the body of the poem functions as an imaginative exposition and decry tion of the riddles posed by the cliché and the hexagram. The book is an impressive intellectual feat; it presents us with a working picture of the poet as sage, alchemist, and diviner. It fails only in those places where the author is unable to draw the poetic subtext of the cliché and the hexagram all the way to the surface. For instance, in "Where There's Smoke," Lombardo writes:

For this arrangement, ask the taller ones to move to the back so they stand above those without much height.

A few chairs are found so the older folk can rest. Others kneel.

The young ones sit on the floor, cross-legged. Infants are held in their grandparents' laps.

There's only a moment or two before the camera's shutter clicks and they are caught: One moment rife with mischief—a mouth with extended tongue, or with eyes shut, or cheeks puffed out, arrested in mid-cough.

The poem hinges on the interplay between the title and the concluding image, a play that doesn't entirely rescue it from a flat photorealism. Although surreal turns and arresting rhetorical questions mark the more dynamic of Lombardo's poems, he is occasionally prone to wordiness and overuse of contractions: "When the song's over, there's the exclamation, the warning to mind your head—mind where you stand, listening to what's no less than a prognostication." Finally, despite the forceful appeal of the collection's "you" statements, this appeal depends on the imaginative participation of readers for whom the scenarios of each poem may not apply. Reader involvement may be a prerequisite for the enjoyment of all poems, but the "you" of *Who Lets Go First* insists on it, without restraint or variation.

The considerable merit of this collection is as much philosophical as poetic. Lombardo has created a wide-ranging voice worthy of the / *Ching*: oracular, practical, sly, and compassionate. He recognizes that we are always at a crossroads, and always misreading the signs, and always torn between a life of safety and a life of adventure. His book narrates the major riddle of our life on earth: mysteries are within our reach, but outside of our understanding.

Brian Johnson