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**Kenneth Koch's *Hotel Lambosa*;
Jessica Treat's *A Robber In The
House*; Nin Andrew's *The Book Of
Orgasms***

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Kenneth Koch. *Hotel Lambosa*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1993. \$10.95.
Jessica Treat. *A Robber in the House*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press,
1993. \$10.95.
Nin Andrews. *The Book of Orgasms*. Asylum Arts, 1994. \$8.95

While the line between the prose poem and short-short story has been getting fuzzier, the number of new books in this hybrid category has been growing exponentially. Perhaps in the interests of increasing sales, publishers seem to be labeling them more often as fiction rather than poetry; the three books listed above are all collections of "short-short fiction" although they read like prose poems. But the semantic distinction between the two genres is less interesting than what is achieved in the blur between them. Each of these collections activates the distinction in interesting ways, making use of some aspect of narrative form to create poetic effects of their own: Kenneth Koch mixes the form's intimacy and immediacy with a conversational tone to make a luxurious and companionable travel narrative; Jessica Treat makes use of the form's surrealist roots to make "stories" that are often simultaneously erotic, dreamlike, allegorical, and supernatural; and Nin Andrews uses the fictional climax to make *a Book of Orgasms*.

If you haven't made it to Latin America, Europe, China, or Egypt for a while, one of the recent titles in Coffee House Press's "Coffee-to-Go" series may be enough to satisfy your literary wanderlust and even give you a small dose of expatriate ennui. Kenneth Koch's *Hotel Lambosa* is filled with the thrills and doldrums of globe-trotting ("Agorokoritso"), dreams ("Interpretation of Dreams"), erotic encounters ("Hotel Lambosa"), poetic tales ("The Allegory of Spring"), and seemingly "real" reportage (the pharmacy in Beijing that sells deer-horn powder). But it's all a bit dream-like here, where the territory traversed is partly imaginary and the personal narrative reads like a fable.

On the whole Koch's lines are, syntactically speaking, simple sentences, and this immediate accessibility and understatement is part of their charm. At times they are so clipped as to turn bland observation into the tongue-in-cheek drama of a Dragnet stakeout, as "Man Woman and Dog" begins: "The dog stayed in the car. She went into the cafe." But as the point-of-view shifts in closer, the tone shifts from clarity into thick ambiguities that approach epiphany without losing their sense of humor or allowing closure: "This was clever but didn't approach the real subject: Are men, or men and women, incapable of love? And beneath that: what. . . . It was the tone of the day, shared by Alfhea."

Part of what is unsettling (and most often pleasantly so) about this kind of work is its untroubled and restrained surface. These sentences maintain a difficult combination of whimsy and deadpan calm, even when reporting a moment of panic or ecstasy. The surface of the writing is an objective production that assumes the drama and detached intimacy of a piece of theatre or an artful conversation for the reader's pleasure.

Hotel Lambosa is a writing out of and an illumination of *effects* that are most often registered but unexposed, just under the surface of the narrative itself. But occasionally the understatement and control open into a magical estrangement that gets brought back into the everyday, as in "Em Portugues," which reads in full:

They were listening to the fados, sung one after. Each fado sang of the scorched terrible unsatisfiable lost wretchedness of love. There is no happy side, except for intensity of feeling, to a fado song. They felt the excessively narrow reality of the fados shoving into and bumping them, like a drunk. The man's hand untightened itself from the woman's after the momentous final song. As they got up to go back to the Hotel of Ionia and of Camoens, they were accosted by a waiter at the exit, saying You forgot your coats. We didn't wear any coats. My love is gone, my heart is like a smashed mask of glass. If my shoeprints are steeped in your blood, woman, you will know that I have come back. Those coats belong to somebody else.

This shift from observer to participant—from watching to embodying what one sees—is just one of the definitive poetic gestures of this collection.

Jessica Treat's first book, *A Robber in the House*, has an atmosphere of possibility and surprise that is, at times, not unlike Koch's. Seldom offering resolution, each piece operates around a specific dramatic or emotional center. The context of *A Robber in the House* shifts between the realms of magical encounters, imaginary and allegorical folk-narratives, surreality, and dream. Divided into six sections that establish a very general sense of geographical setting, thematically the book seems to cover everything from the global to the personal with its underlying exploration of existential angst, the ethics of tourism, sexual fidelity, parental control, and sibling rivalries.

All of these undercurrents are expressed with clarity, surprise, and—to get clinical—unresolved emotional content. "El Zacatecano" looks at life through shoes, replacing economic and social hierarchies with aesthetic judgment. The heat and Hitchcockian confusion in "Zamora" are as palpable as an anxiety dream. "The Man I Want to Marry" slips away while the narration is absorbed in contemplating him, resurfacing from its fantasy when it is irrevocably too late. "Matchstick Woman" is a commentary on mirroring, prejudice, homelessness, and commodity culture that reads like an episode of *The Outer Limits*. And the title piece entangles thievery and sexuality in a narrative that could be the dramatic embodiment of a metaphysical conceit.

Treat effectively layers one narrative with the narrating of the process of narration itself. "Knee Deep," for instance, begins:

It had occurred to her that there was another life running along beside hers, a stream she'd walked along, crossed even, but never entered, never sank up to her knees in, never swam in. It was not a mistake to realize this, but to follow it, to leave her clothes on the bank and enter the stream—perhaps this was not what she should have done. But then, these and other considerations had to be left behind like her clothes, her outer wrappings.

The dilemma of the empathic writer is, of course, that one can't be doing and writing at the same time, and by allowing oneself to be immersed in one stream—say, for the sake of wordplay, a stream-of-consciousness—the other stream that so inspires the writer's abandon has disappeared, been dammed, or dried up. This tension between the writer's world and its mirage gives this collection a smooth surface that is so rich with doubts and uncertainties that its overall effect is more hallucinatory than one would expect, more built on afterimage than on imagery itself.

Stylistically, this prose tends to be more adjectival and adverbial than Koch's; while Koch's work creates gaps of ambiguity by sequencing one action, event, or perception after another without explanatory transitions, Treat entangles the reader in the burdens of its own history and its possible choices. While not all of these entanglements are equally productive or pleasant, Treat's work is meant to take time, to divert the reader, like riddles, to create a charm against the end.

While its content is true to its title, the writing in Nin Andrew's *Book of Orgasms* is interestingly provocative and poetic, not pornographic, new age, or tantric. The book is composed entirely of prose poems that document the various problems, classifications, and poetic and sociopolitical implications of the orgasm, though perhaps any culturally repressed term would work equally well. At its best moments, it is to sex what Walton & Cotton's *Compleat Angler* is to fishing. Even the most literal-minded reader will have a hard time seeing it as merely encyclopedic although it is occasionally structured like catalog entries, and it does include a whimsical glossary at the back. Similarly, its syntax seems to emerge from a combination of clinical descriptions, anecdotes, and magical realism. Though occasionally the collection becomes a bit mechanical in its humor, it builds on the self-conscious discomfort and transgressive pleasure that readers are, I think, expected to have with its title, and the tone of the book fluctuates smoothly between social critique and pillow talk.

Daring the reader to see beyond the sensationalism of its title, the collection gradually begins to sound like an allegory of human freedom and imagination. The most fascinating turn the book takes is its transformation of this initial discomfort and voyeurism into a kind of familiarity that begins to make the world outside the orgasm seem transgressive and bizarre, as in the

most political poem in the book, "The Anti-Orgasm": "It is important to be afraid in the land of the anti-orgasm. And we are ... Better to hide, keep them quiet. It's very dangerous. We tighten our belt... Look! The whole nation is turning to stone. . . ." As the world turns to statuary, the orgasm comes to represent the basic pleasures and liberties of life. And like all such liberties, it is fragile and elusive.

Not every passage in *The Book of Orgasms* is so profound, but at its best moments, its writing echoes this wistfulness between the physical and the intangible, mixing it with a philosophical seriousness that is not limited to the bedroom: "Me I love the pungent humans. I cannot resist their call. Like snow in winter, I fall helplessly, slowly, before dissolving into a river at the moment of contact. The loss of myself is always unbearable."

Elizabeth Willis