

Creative Class Problems: Microaggressions by Erik Stinson

written by Matthew O'Shannessy | November 3, 2016



microaggressions

by Erik Stinson

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174 pages – [Test Centre](#)

If you believe micropoetry.com, a micropoem is a poem “short enough for Twitter and SMS”—a voguish form designed for the digital attention span. It’s also the form of choice for Erik Stinson in *microaggressions*, his second book of poetry. Stinson is a New York-based writer who describes himself as an “advertising creative”. His muse is the lifestyle of the urban cosmopolitan—the type of person that might work in advertising, fashion, or even the art world—and is conscious of, even jaded about, their role in the commodification of culture. The micropoem’s on-trend, throw-away appeal seems a self-conscious choice for Stinson, and serves his subject well.

While a “microaggression” is generally defined as a slight against a minority group, here the title is more of a pun on the format—perhaps also signifying a mild politically-incorrect warp in Stinson’s posture. Given his background, it may also be an attempt to bring attention to the book via controversy; after all, “outrage marketing” is a strategy beloved of high-profile brands from American Apparel to Donald Trump.

Stinson’s muse is a familiar figure in recent art and literature: the highly educated urbanite, well-versed in art and political theory, who has adopted a career as a commercial creative while still critical (or at least ambivalent) towards the spectacle they participate in. It’s an attitude that pops up in the art collective K-Hole, who operate a marketing consultancy that is also an art project. As in Ludovico Pignatti Morano’s recent novel *Nicola Milan* or the poetry of Jon Leon, Stinson’s creative class types flit effortlessly from coast to coast, photo shoot to photo shoot, from undiscovered dive bar to exclusive neighborhood—all the while capitalizing on their cultural sophistication. They’ve read Lazzato (or at least Debord) and they know that the parties, galleries and loft apartments that they move between are not

just the backdrop of a glamorous lifestyle—they're the production line in a decentralized factory; they're work.

Stinson's narrators exist in a perpetual dawn of new trends. They transform products into ideas and create cutting edge digital projects for haggard, aging rock stars. They take a nihilistic pleasure in "selling out," scoffing at the moral superiority of people and subcultures who think they've escaped commercialism.

Micropoetry apparently has no rules, but Stinson's language is spare and unadorned. It's informed by the craft of the marketer who has learned to strip away excess information, and focus on "power words" to convey emotion and increase conversions. In content, his simple, haiku-like poems call to mind Jon Leon. But where Leon presents a vivid, decadent vision of the American creative class—strung out, driving, fucking, ecstatic at the destruction of their own self in a perpetually-crashing economy—Stinson's poems are awash with a quiet ennui. Where Leon's narrators often speak from the inside of the *Wolf of Wall Street*-style decadence of the mid-2000s, Stinson is searching for solace in the strange moments of beauty that present themselves in his artificial world. From a frayed jean cuff to a boring drug deal to skateboarding man-children, everything is a potential editorial concept, tag line, or new aesthetic. Everything is beautiful. Even unemployment is grist for the creative mill: one poem describes the aftermath of a "hard downturn" where the narrator's attention falls on the "e-cigarette glow" at the back of "the latest groovy breadline". Sex and drugs are only as worthy of our attention as a pure white pair of sneakers, the copy on the back of a cereal box, or an archival quality .jpeg of a lizard. In this commercial world of surfaces, the only thing worthy of any special significance is the brand. Hence why brand names are the only thing in the book that are capitalized. Emotion is a commodity, and passion (or the performance of passion) is reserved for the client meeting:

i say *remember the back of the cereal box*
as I explain our optics to the lead client

i say *consider the lava lamp's digitality*
i remind her that back-end development
isn't my concern

i say *you didn't bring me here to*
think about costs

i freeze and reinvent eye contact

i say *the choice you have to make*
is between three distinct dreams

In this world, everything is novelty and nothing is shocking. A well-designed leather bag speaks more profoundly than a philosophy book, and Guy Debord's suicide is no more significant than an online discount code. In our state of political and aesthetic exhaustion, *microaggressions* offers up an odd remedy to soothe our anxiety and distract us from our precariousness: retail therapy.