

REVIEW: Renee Gladman's Calamities and Prose Architectures

written by Guest Contributor | July 26, 2017



[Calamities](#) by Renee Gladman. Wave Books, 2016. 144 pages.

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Renee Gladman is an alchemist in the field of literary transubstantiation. She sculpts narrative and its medium, language, into near-bodily constructions that bring slowly into focus the sensory and intellectual complexities of navigating the space of writing and living and being a person in the world without betraying the physicality of those spaces. Her work gradually builds itself around you, the language of *thinking* and *writing* and *being* infused together through looping, penetrating prose, until you feel as though Gladman has begun to unlock the dichotomous borders separating our experiences of art and life.

For Gladman, being a person in the world is an act of framing space, reacting to space, and occupying space. In her work, she deftly explores bridging these physical and psychological acts with the task of writing and the key, in her latest ("Calamities") is *drawing*. The activity, undertaken in part to alleviate, or at least sidestep, writer's block, allows Gladman a different dimension from which to approach the body's existence in linguistic and narrative spaces and how such ideas play out on a daily, more intimate scale.

Whether intimate or abstract, the issue is continuously mystifying to Gladman and her narrators. Throughout the unsettling, maddening, page-turning "Event Factory" (part of the "Ravickians" series of books), in which the narrator (a linguist) tries to make sense of a fictional city-state, the issue of occupying and framing and reacting to space is explored through *walking*. The activity allows the narrator to make sense of her world while also *making*

that world. In "Calamities," narrative and physical activities continue to drive her ideas forward, but Gladman more explicitly examines the movement of literary construction and the building materials themselves: narrative devices, how time operates, characters, spaces, sentences, words, and the line itself.

And when Gladman zooms in on these building materials, in her delightfully conversational style, you can feel the lines connecting her thematic spheres growing taught, the spaces containing the physical, the abstract, the artful, gradually colliding and merging.

Such a style makes following Gladman through the weeds of metacognitive writing a captivating experience. Her control is misleading, her circular prose coming off as casual but obsessive, and just when you feel that the knot of her thinking couldn't possibly be pulled any tighter, she spins off a hilarious missive about the pleasures of being bossed around while on vacation or the horror/wonder of realizing "that 'the person in the world' was not a philosophical placeholder, as I had been treating it for the last twenty years, but was actually a student in my class of eleven silent girls." The "calamities" can be deeply funny, but they can also be surgical dissections of occupying space as a black lesbian woman or the insidious use of the term "slam-dunk" to justify why the narrator (who is not a "slam-dunk") is being let go from her academic job.

Language, of course, is the way in. Perhaps it's the way out too: "Language was beautiful exposed; it was like a live wire set loose, a hot wire, burning, leaving trace. If you looked into language this way, you saw where it burned, the map it made." And the map is continually adjusted, added to, erased; Gladman's process is to uncover the inner workings of language, to arrive at the smallest particle and describe its movement. Because if you could name and describe that movement, you'd be naming and describing thinking, writing, being a person; it's a psycho-physical conglomeration of experience.

Gladman, a prose artist, elucidates such an experience by putting all of these ideas, ultimately, into the same container: in this case, prose: "I hadn't wanted to think about narrative at the same time that I was conscious of my body lying in the object world. It was a problem of space similar to what Martha and I were discussing yesterday: Was it possible to say that something was gathering outside of a thing with the intention of meeting something else when this something else was the larger space in which that first thing existed? Could I talk about narrative as I was operating within it?" The answer is yes, but complicated, because "Calamities" is a loosely narrative book about a narrator thinking through narrative while also living

said narrative and describing it so well, so intricately, that it becomes a physical experience for the reader.

It comes down to the physicality of art, and as is often with Gladman's work, a spectacular image: "One of my favorite words was in my mouth, and I was torn between chewing and swallowing it, so that it could become a part of me, another organ that processed or eliminated some material of my being, or spitting it out immediately, without doing any damage to its form, so that I could study the word in all its glory."

That "glory" is porous, her calamities speaking to the seemingly impossible corners writing can send a writer and the flexibility required to exit those corners, or least reframe them. It's a space invested in openings, possibilities, questions. What kind of space does my own writing make? How do I occupy that space? How do I occupy that space as a straight white male? What does poetry or writing have to do with these questions?

These are my questions (some are Gladman's). And they arise in an extraordinary way: a slow, steady, circuitous narrative in which reading and writing and thinking and being become physical acts; the writer is a body, a mind, an artist in the world, occupying spaces from bedrooms to cities to the infinite space between the reader and writer and page.

What does this look like, exactly? In "Calamities," it looks like prose. Simple enough, aesthetically, as the extraordinary often is. But while Gladman was writing "Calamities" and thinking through literalizing space and narrative, she was also drawing these ideas too. Wave Books just released a monograph of these drawings, "Prose Architectures," and they look like the skylines or maps of the cities she's exploring through her written work, architectural ideas rising from the page from a single painstaking line looping and zagging into form. On another level, they look like representations of language taking place, the line of her pen the unfolding line and squiggle and doubling back of a prose sentence. They're all small, focused, postcard-sized. You can observe them from a distance and imagine the conjured city or narrative moment (in prose) that they evoke, or you can follow her line as it rises up towers and around alleys and over bridges, exploring and building, simultaneously. The later drawings, (presented chronologically) show Gladman using shapes of chalky color, hovering behind or to the side of her "architectures," invoking emotional registers and questions of interiority; what are these spectres intruding upon the city? Are they blooming shapes of some interior experience called forth to the page?

The title of her book could doubly serve as a thesis of sorts for her work as a visual artist and prose writer (who nonetheless is often known as a poet). In recent books, she never strays far from the organizing principles of narrative, but like blueprints for a particularly avant-garde building, the structure of narrative allows for all kinds of spaces to be framed and explored. Like her art, architecture can be an idea or a thing, a description or an experience.

It's a pleasure, after working through Gladman's prose and trying to calibrate her many contextual, space-defining movements to encounter how such ideas might look two-dimensionally. But then, the two dimensions are only so for a moment; eventually, her work on the page and through space surrounds you, an architectural, intellectual, physical marvel, and you're left wondering, how big is this space? How far back does it go?



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