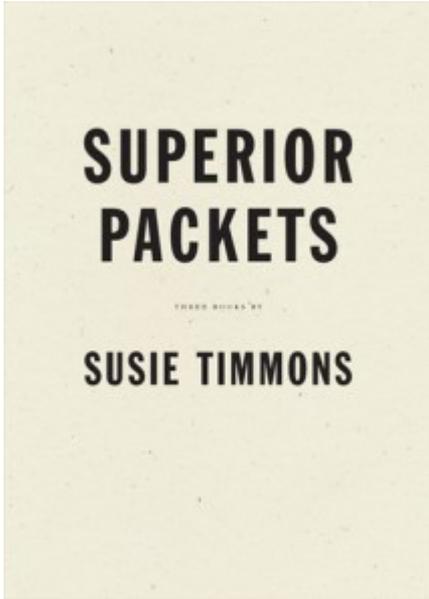


Superior Packets: Three Books by Susie Timmons

written by John Yohe | April 5, 2016



Superior Packets: Three Books by Susie Timmons
Wave Books, 2015
200 pages – [Wave](#) / [Amazon](#)

I should know Susie Timmons' work. Why haven't I read her work before? I'm a fan of New York School poets, first, second, and subsequent generations. I even earned my MFA in Poetry from The New School and lived in New York for two years. I've read poets that know her and like her work. And I think I'm not alone. Fortunately, Wave Books has collected three books by Timmons, published over decades, into one collection, *Superior Packets*, which will hopefully bring her to a wider readership.

If you'd like an idea of Timmons' style, and/or 'place' in the poetry world, consider this: Her second book, *Locked From The Outside*, won the inaugural Ted Berrigan Award, judged by Alice Notley, Robert Creeley, Anselm Hollo, and Ron Padgett. Notley wrote an intro essay for the original publication, which is unfortunately not included here by Wave Books, but from that cast of characters, you could suppose she either is in, or the next generation down from, the second generation of New York School poetry, meaning there's going to be some wit, some humor, and a little weirdness. Voila:

"Russian Folk Songs"

I have no mother,
I have no father,
I was born from the street
I was born from a chicken egg

*

As we float on a stinking lake
I kiss your slimy lips
and you hold me close to your hairy chest

*

Mary, Mary, your legs are so white and lovely
let us watch while you wash them in the river—
Be quiet, you noisy geese! My mother-in-law
is asleep beneath that bush.

This has Padgett's absurd humor all over it, and the poem has that key comic pause—in the brain, in the process of reading—where at first the poem might not quite seem right, playing with readers' expectations about what poetry is, or should do. Meaning, probably, a reader might be expecting some kind of nugget of wisdom, some kind of serious Tolstoyian russian-ness, and be a little confused right about the time they hit "I was born from a chicken egg." That's the moment of truth: do you stop in annoyance because the poem is not profound? Or do you laugh at the absurdity and your own expectations? Or, perhaps, if you know Timmons (I didn't before this) or the New York School poetics (yes), were you in on the joke from the beginning?

And should poetry be a joke? If you're laughing at that sentence, then yes. If not, then maybe you should be studying Critical Theory: They're a serious lot over in their gated community universities. But don't read Timmons like you'd read, say, Sylvia Plath.

"Russian Folks Songs" is from Timmons' most recent book, the third in this collection, *The New Old Paint* (2010), though many of my favorites are from the second, *Locked From The Outside*, from 1990. And though I tend to read her like I do Padgett, visualizing her with a mischievous smile but a 'straight' face, and *voice*—serious, until the point of absurdity where she, and I, and you, can't contain ourselves and laugh, though there are some weird surprises, like in the second half of "Three Rolls":

There's a station wagon outside, looking like a shoe.
a girl appeared on the scene with two matching dogs
I had a negative response, stylish but felt
bad for the dogs being a display for this girl's
personality, envious I guess, should feel sorry for all,
do—feel sorry for christmas trees.
Hacked Down In Their Prime.
a friend, her mom sent her a can of anchovies
for christmas, Hi Jane. Seasons Greetings.

No more faith in my writing, no more bursting with excitement
fairly sad tonight. no lovers, boyfriends, city
is shithead mean, outsider is me.

That last stanza certainly takes the poem in an extreme opposite direction.

Seemingly. One might argue for cutting that stanza. I might. Might have. Not only is the mood different, but that stanza is more seemingly autobiographical than the rest of the playful poem (maybe more autobiographical than the rest of the whole collection). And yet. But. Timmons chose to keep it, and, I think, she's playing with our expectations about what poetry is again. Just when you think her poetry has to be read as absurd and jester-like, bam, here she comes with some simple statements about being lonely around Christmas in New York. And hell, I've been there.

And even the last lines of the previous stanza hint that something is not right, they shift the poem already, with that seemingly clueless present from a mom to a daughter, making us imagine a whole huge family story going on there. The daughter is at the very least not understood, which leads us into Timmon's own feelings of not even having anyone around—to understand her or not—at all.

This idea, that there is more going on in a poem than we know—though we may sense it—is exactly what good poetry of any type inspires in us. Which is true of more than a few of Timmons' poems. Point being, Timmons is a great example of how poets, and poetry, defy our expectations, though I can't help wonder if her humor, her oddball quirkiness, and yes her gender have something to do with us not having heard of her before. That is, is this part of the 'women aren't funny' phenomenon that ran through the comedy world (and still does)? While O'Hara, Bukowski, Ashbury, and Padgett (and Trinidad, and Lehman, and Alexie) are known for their humor, a woman poet known for it is more rare.

Maybe I'm wrong. It's happened before. Because have Denise Duhamel, Kim Addonizio, and especially Amy Gerstler, though none of them quite has the non-sequitur-ness style of Timmons. Do poetry snobs (I can say that, I am one) prefer women to—gasp—make sense? Or is it to be serious? Because there are plenty of female Language poets that don't make sense. Or is it just merely the winds of fate in the Po Biz. Consult the book:

"Klown Kollidge"

uh uh here it comes
The Scorn

direct from the mouth of a

great big clown

lecturing a class of clowns

NOT acceptable

righteous indignation
pouring down
like piss

from some clowny high ground

If Timmons is critiquing the clowns (and they're everywhere)(I can say that, I am one), then she is the Jester, urging us to not take ourselves too seriously. Is that a joke? Is that poetry?