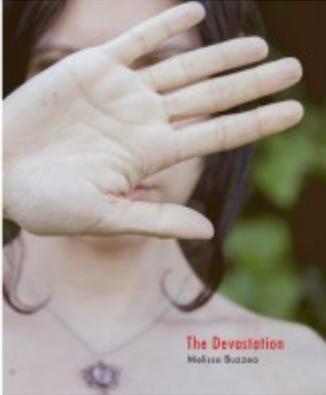


The Devastation by Melissa Buzzeo

written by Guest Contributor | April 19, 2016



The Devastation by Melissa Buzzeo
Nightboat Books, 2015
184 pages – [Nightboat](#) / [Amazon](#)

I first encountered Melissa Buzzeo's writing when I was 23. It was 2007, a year after I graduated from Berkeley, where I had fallen into an intense obsession with Derridean post-structuralist theory. Yes, I was a dork, and yes, I loved language. My Atlanta Catholic upbringing couldn't have prepared me for the intrigue of mid- to late-20th century continental philosophy. Neither did it gracefully support me in my confused coming-to-terms with my queerness. I say "confused coming-to-terms"—and not "exuberant embrace"—because, still in the 21st century, the US South is ripe with shame and violence for the undesirable body. Blood in the soil for that which they deem *unfit*.

I thought critical literary theory was the answer: finally, a way to examine the thick yet unstable veneer over the abyss—of our bodies, of our texts—and the implications of power at play in a heavily structured and decisively oppressive cultural machine bent on enacting obscurantisms and systemic gag-orders. While reading and researching poetry, short stories, and novels, I put this sharp tool to work, exposing and delimiting and commenting on the hypocrisy of "Western Progress" through a very academic, and thus very rational, identity-based theory.

But then it happened: I fell decidedly out of love. A type of obsession in its own way. A horror, unable to stop staring at what had become an almost robotic usage of buzzwords and phrases where the "always already," the other of the Other, the lack in the center that has no center, the slippage of signifiers, and the *jouissance* of the circumscribed *objet petit a* arose willy-nilly, *sans réserve*. The point is not that this interpretation of interpretation—this most literary of literary critiques—focusing on the instability of language and the lack of intentionality was *wrong*. Rather, it became *rote*. The language that should have remained *beyond the pale* in its multi-positional destabilizations became ossified, heavy, a Mad Libs edition of genre-writing: the academy series. Heady literary analysis no

longer excited me.

This is when I began reading Melissa Buzzeo. [What Began Us](#) (2007) was like a firm grasp on my wrist, leading me to the edge of what is real which is the body that is here and also not here; a language that complicates and overflows all I had learned and then learned to distrust. I was suffocating, and it took *What Began Us* to remind me to breathe. Buzzeo writes:

Outside of scent and inside of sight. Outside of touch. I can't leave the rings. The duplicity of the rings. The transfer from this hand to that hand.

From this hardness forming beyond the sea.

Oh my god: this pacing. This rhythmic tidal pull. This written-through space of framed silence housing the unseeable object leading towards the far side of the horizon. This was not the language I had come to recognize: divorced from the body, always performing, slipping away from authorial demands. No, this language remained intimately close to the body: Buzzeo's body, but also my own. A residue of carnality within the line. And in this carnality, a disappearance of "understanding" as verbs and nouns slid in and out of expectation. In and out of genre. In and out of the body and back again. At 23 I felt it. I did not know it. I did not want to know it. I read *What Began Us* in one day, and it stuck below the surface, under my skin, even after it was placed back on the shelf.

Because Buzzeo's cadence, her word choice, her anti-descriptive verbal architecture—syntactic as well as semantic—enact a very real space which we enter and inhabit for a time. The time of reading. Which is an augmented time. Here, I wondered if maybe the time I was entering—an *architexture* of punctuation, elongated phrasing, images that reach a cliff: and disappear—had nothing to do with what I learned, how I was trained to deconstruct, poke for holes, wittily de/en/circum/in/scribe double meanings to show the power of deductive reasoning.

Because reason doesn't hold a space here; or rather, Melissa Buzzeo's work bypasses reason to touch lower down—to use a body-metaphor—the belly of being and thus enacts a time that sticks. Edward T. Hall, a gestural anthropologist (at least, that's what I like to call him) interested in pre-verbal communication, writes of a "pan-human syncing" that occurs through body movement and gesticulation. Within encounter, he says, "two nervous systems drive each other." You can feel that drive here, within the written line and the way it folds over on itself, evoking a literary space unlike any I had experienced. Where was a theory to explain this envelopment? Who was the genie that could manifest such intimate and sensuous textual touch? The institution did not prepare me for meeting Melissa Buzzeo's absent body so viscerally present in writing—in literature. I attuned to the sentential rhythms of *What Began Us*, and let them orient me, leading me here: in all senses of the word.

[The Devastation](#) (2015) continues this architextural space within a writing that, extended to its extreme—and beyond this extreme—ruthlessly retains a

sensuous attention. Sensuous attention: because there is a delicacy in the relationship between words and the furrowed space of inter-verbal vibration. Ruthlessly: because of the driving force of the sentence, pushing us towards the brink, the place past Melissa Buzzeo's other works, her langue-scapes that become familiar in their creation of a queering orientation, one you move through slowly, as if through fog. The Buzzeo text is a blotted out space: of absence, the missing, and that which is unbounded. We find ourselves here, but then sense the driving force compelling us towards the line. Drawn, it cannot be crossed. And then—it is.

The body that you feel in *The Devastation* is writing being unwritten. Writing writing the unwritable. In an epic low tide. When 23, Melissa Buzzeo's words pulled me by the limbs; now, at 32, her sentences push me from behind—both hands on my lower back—towards the horizon of grief and longing.

To have never left: this broken text.
That we fold over skin.
I had set out to write about the cold
The frozen freeing of form
But it no longer existed
But we no longer existed
This harsh formlessness over skin

And I thought I had adequately prepared myself.

After the Devastation we tried to eat form
But it was unclear what it was to swallow.
Shallow is that a word
Remembrance as gesture
As dye overdeveloped
A tie in somebody else's water
A salve over somebody else's burn.

Well-experienced in Buzzeo's textural constructs, I steeled myself to enter a book staging a post-apocalyptic landscape; a world at its end; our world, a gesture past global time, one where I might not even exist. But Buzzeo is a master of the subtle swerve. This was not an exploration of generalized disaster, a theoretical space written as a foil for our present precarious situation, political structures, and strategic decimation of all that gives us life: a glance towards a future potential along a global horizon.

No, *The Devastation* is not this.

Rather, it is the "post-" at the horizons in our bodies, as intimate as disaster gets. This is the horizon we carry around within each of us, a potential of implosion that, like Buzzeo's text, pushes inexorably to the line that disappears in the blinding sun: the bright white of a Blanchotian night. A metaphoric space that tears itself open only when entered, and it is never entered—until it is.

In this way, *The Devastation* is occurring, has occurred, will continue to erode, blank out, impress its blankness on our walls, over our floors,

draining the water not meant for us. In the intense longing of an absolute passivity.

And yet, sharing the trace of the breath of the author, herself present in the injunction to notice the catastrophe, to grieve after language's disappearance, its evaporation from our very bodies, we notice a light that shines through the seams as a different form of illumination in contrapposto to that scalding-white night. A figure in perpetual evacuation of this site of destruction leaves behind a language—the writer embodied in line: "Each word a seismic other held below breath which is a phrase from before."

The "phrase from before" reverberating under breath: an under-the-surface lightning, as if prickling the skin from beneath, a palimpsest of body and text. To recall another phrase from before—these lines of poetry from Sappho (translated by Anne Carson): "...no speaking is left in me // no: tongue breaks and thin / fire is racing under skin / and in eyes no sight and drumming fills ears." For Melissa Buzzeo, the tongue also breaks, but it's not fire that runs under the skin but *evaporation*. The sentence that draws out as it desiccates.

And why did I agree to such earth
Such incremental
excrement covered
earth

To want and to be tangential to want.

In the dissolution of paper
In the disuse of paper

And the ink on the skin instead of the letter

Rotted and the entry
Thrown away

And it is this evaporation, this evacuation of moisture that leaves the insides aroused but never numb. This is the ceaseless urge of Buzzeo's unremitting rhythm. A driven continuance between book and body; memory and event; with sensation circumnavigating logic-driven processing, with sensation moving around them and under them, like the withdrawal of the sea.

And yet, all is not lost. Or rather, all is not bleached away, as the world breaks into this blank topography in jagged memories, not housed within a body, but within the text itself; the repetition of phrases and images that the text itself remembers and the moment when "[t]he earth began to seep into text."

For Buzzeo, language becomes the conduit of its own emergence, attaining a status as sculptural objects where texture evokes feeling, as well as temperature, as well as light. The Buzzeo sentence pushes towards an eroticism not just in denying expectation but in enacting impossibility. Not

terse in its ruthless rhythms as we gain intense attention to the way the devastation has swirled and left marks of its own. This incredible longing: “If I were another person I would be able to write a beautiful book. For them. And translate its water through the sun.”

And yet, Melissa Buzzeo, you have written a beautiful book. For us. Those that have seen the devastation on the horizons of our own bodies, for a time: extended. And although we may not have had the words to say what could not be said, you have done it for us –

In writing silence is first. By not writing I was saying first: you.

Because the pronouns have already been wiped out.

In the Devastation everything disappeared.

Except one.

Except once.

The Devastation, as book, is this exception, existing in perpetuity, unceasing. Where Buzzeo’s “unmet I” and I meet: on the evacuated viscera of the written page.



JH Phrydas is an LA-based writer and researcher of prose. Raised by his birth family in Atlanta and queer family in the Bay Area, he was generously awarded grants to study writing and somatics under the guidance of Bhanu Kapil. He was the cofounding editor of *Tract/Trace: an investigative journal* and currently curates the long-term project [X21REQ](#), which calls for artists and writers to answer the question: “What does the twenty-first century require of you?” His recent work has been featured in *Aufgabe*, *Fact-Simile*, and *Jacket2*, and his first full-length book, [Levitations](#), was published in November 2015 by [Timeless](#).

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