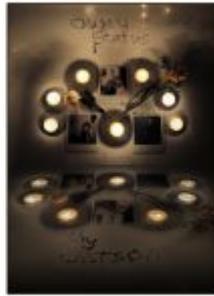


The Non-Objective Correlative: Blessing Is All Sides of the Shadow – A Review of Pamela Stewart’s Just Visiting and Shy Watson’s Away Status

written by Barrett Warner | August 5, 2016



Just Visiting by Pamela Stewart
[Grey Suit Editions](#), 2016

Away Status by Shy Watson
[Bottlecap Press](#), 2016

D.H. Lawrence would have adored social media. It isn't so hard to imagine *Lady Chatterley's Lover* being titled *A Friend of a Friend of a Follower*. And like many writers today, he left some of his best literary moments to wither on a correspondence feed rather than write the whole novel.

This is why I cherish letters, fleeting drafts of something larger. And why any mail day is a good mail day. Was it raining? It doesn't matter. Call it the warmest February on record. Or the soggiest April. I was sitting at my computer, reading a *Walrus* essay, "I Don't Care about Your Life." I remember thinking, *Oh dear, the author Jason Guriel is trying to seduce me with his rejection of confessional criticism*. I was giddy. I was afraid. It wasn't every day that I felt so wonderfully unwanted.

I danced around the kitchen to organize a cup of hot black tea for my spouse. Her lovely wrinkles in her forehead—the hazard of many years spent smiling with her whole face—my disheveled gray locks; we made for a predictable, encouraging pair.

"Listen to this," I began, and read a fragment of Lawrence, a letter written in 1908: *My verses are tolerable—rather pretty, but not suave; there is some blood in them. Poetry now a days seems to be a sort of plaster-cast craze, scraps sweetly molded in easy Plaster of Paris sentiment. Nobody chips verses earnestly out of the living rock of his own feeling...Before everything I like*

sincerity, and a quickening spontaneous emotion.

“Isn’t that amazing?” I asked.

There was a long discordant pause.

“Why are you dancing?” she said, without looking up from the stack of mail I’d brought to the house. Then, “I hate mail.”

She recycled most of it with a stealthy hand, dropping the notices and glossy catalogs into a gray chute. A few she set aside to answer later with personal checks. The new issue of *Time* went to the counter, its dimensions perfectly suited to sifting leaves and seeds and stems. Rolling a joint over Trump’s face, or on top of Hillary’s, or some exposé on the new Alzheimer’s pill, was as close to politics and science as it got for us.

“There’s a note from Jody,” she said. “And a chapbook.”

I felt a *quickenning spontaneous emotion*. “Oh?”

“And someone else—Bottlecap Press—sent *you* a chapbook.”



Pamela Stewart



Shy Watson

Pamela “Jody” Stewart and Shy Watson are separated by two or three generations, depending on which day it is. Sometime in the 1970s, Stewart traded a life in Arizona with Norman Dubie for the cooler conditions of a snowy western Massachusetts farm and, above all, “lime kiln” solitude. Stewart’s new life was peppered with the neediness and thankfulness of animals, the plundering of fruit off the tree, and hay so soft and sweet you could chop it into nicoise salad.

Watson's geography is even more restless. She flipped Kansas City for Boulder, before "settling" in the Pacific Northwest where she writes, paints, and works a few shifts. Last month she posted: "I have figured out my dream living situation. Like, if someone would have a room in Philly and we switched rooms every month so we could each live in Philly and Portland off and on like alternating."

Both authors have stunning new chapbooks which have a lot more in common than their similar titles—Stewart's, *Just Visiting*, and Watson's, *Away Status*—would suggest, and not only because both are hermits who seemingly cultivate a lack of positive identity. In Stewart, this happens off the grid, but in Watson, her fictive persona (as opposed to her soul as an artist) happens very much on the grid. And, while Stewart and Watson "chip verses out of the living rock of their own feeling," it seems to make a greater difference when a feeling has more layers than words allow. Both writers use feeling to engage in a kind of non-objective correlative. Each cultivates imprecision yet without being ambiguous. Gertrude Stein might have put it this way: "a rose is a door is a hillside is a night is a pool of vomit."

Feeling can be a gas as with Watson's ubiquitous fog, or a liquid as in Stewart's stream. For an image to carry some weight it should blend these states. While he did this in his correspondence, Lawrence's fallacy as a novelist / poet was to only treat feeling as artifact, something with concrete dimension—a solid. The nice thing about concrete, if you're someone like Jason Guriel, is that you can critique it without a confessional drift. It's old school, like fighting a war over territory rather than fighting a war on terror—a war against an emotion. The old Lawrence war is all the business of empire. The new combat is all personal.

Reading them together, a few pages of Watson and then Stewart and back to Watson, I enjoyed these two chapbooks, and not simply for the contrary arc produced by reading Stewart's "The Boys from Baltimore" (*Once, years apart, I kissed them both; The dark haired one I thought I loved—he was a knife jammed in my throat*), followed by Watson's " : / " (*I look up to notice / a man barreling across the street / with outstretched arms // I'M HERE FOR YOU*).

One author has memories. The other possibilities. In Stewart's "Homeland," the only suggestion that her poem about a mare and her unnamed rider might also be about a marriage gone awry is the closing mention of a skirmish in the mountains: "the rider spitting out the flies / the blood-flecked air of three wars / and a skirmish in the mountains."

Watson also mines conflict, but hers is more the result of combative *differences* instead of rightness and wrongness. It's more the conflict between the associative poet and her comically literal partners. In her poem, "August," the speaker whispers into a megaphone "because you are too drunk to remember me." Stewart is right: "despite beauty / it's awful to be born" and "to hate / feeds a lonely part of the soul / until the soul eats itself." This is what Watson is describing in her lines "the unconscious / guy in the grass / is being rained on / by a bag of wine."

There is a difference between surviving and living. Stewart and Watson are

both living—both curious—in a world of partners and suitors who are surviving, but barely so. Both have learned to be self-sufficient, without any reliance on the ones who are merely surviving to define who they are. Stewart writes in “More Often Than Not”:

She is a woman alone who can do as she likes. All day
she chooses one thing then another with no one watching.
It doesn't matter that you love her, your muse
of rough hands and little to say. At noon she spreads her table
with old newspaper and eats chops from her own lambs:
fat, lemon, and mint smearing her fingers.

Rough hands, smearing her fingers, eating off newsprint memories. These poems had me reaching for my napkin. Like many of Stewart's offerings, a man is present somewhere—a dog wanting in or out—like a “job which steadies your days as you hope.”

Watson, I think, would enjoy Stewart's chops. Whether wanting to “fuck / in the grand canyon / before i die” or wanting “to fuck / in the grand canyon / while i'm dying,” the main thing here is not the fucking or the dude, but the expansive landscape. Without any wonder, too many love songs diminish into bickering, and Watson's focus is her wonder in everything. In “free the nipples” she writes, “when I complain about / my itchy armpits / and you say something about how I don't shave.” Watson wants something larger. She would rather be looking into the sky, or be the sky looking down into someone's gaze.

Stewart and Watson wouldn't exactly agree that a poem is a song that's spoke. For each, a poem is a kind of letter, “forcing a stamp / into the gray matter” (Watson). And so there is no surprise that Watson would include a four page copy of a “handwritten letter” in her collection. It begins ominously: “the last letter i wrote you was a documentation of a moment of fear.” Perhaps she is describing poetry as documentation, rather than art, or somehow admitting the limitations of transferring personal experience into divine literature.

Reading Stewart and Watson, it feels as if we're reading deeply personal correspondence discovered while the author was away. Both writers are frank about their intimacies, their horrors, their lives, and yet both do so without dwelling on biographical minutiae. Isn't that what's to do? To make immortal desire our best hope for restoring personal witness? To “live it before it comes out of your horn,” as Charlie Parker said.

In Watson's “We Take Turns in Bed Despairing,” the divisions are mighty between one lover's knowledge and another lover's wisdom—between cultured education and the poet's totally limited omniscience that relies on every faculty to perceive, and be hungry for perceiving everything.

i tip the barista when they are looking
so you
are better than me

i can't explain it
how you handle stress

& actually shave

it's an issue

how you speak italian

it's an issue

that you showed me pinot noir

you leave scattered about your bed
these index cards

The role of confession, in art or criticism, is to temporarily misbalance the "horse." It's to shred the waves that separate selfhood from otherness. To say, *I don't care about your life*, is really to say, *I don't care about the possibility of your art*.

The "óther" for Watson is an "other" of shadows, reacting, grimacing; a portrait without much feature to her face. And Watson's heart is a shining light that never quite recovers from dappling Levis' meandering river. Stewart, on the other hand, is older, contemplative, but still quite hungry too. In her title poem she writes about the shadow which is "just visiting," *slithering / its lightness and breath / to stain our multitudes of skin, / bent backs, knees, / office chairs, and open mouths*.

Yes, these collections are personal, and full of mood. But if it is opinion you want I suggest you stick to reading Lawrence on a luggage conveyor belt. I'll be in the sky.