

The man with arms thrown wide might be both crucified and resurrected. The speaker then imagines that something “quick, / white, and hungry” dives down to swoop him up and flee with its prize, “so irresistible” is the gleam. The bird could be a ravenous sea gull; it could also be a dove. More suggestions of transformation appear in “Cardinal Virtue,” where a bird first seen only as a “grey flash tipped with carmine” is later spied perched on a fence post, where its red wings seem to “smolder.” What is it really? It is perhaps impossible to know anything outside ourselves:

“Incomprehensible thing, drenched in color
of something we call joy,
stuffed with something that we call song,
you are always first
inhuman.

“Types of Breathing,” the final poem, directly addresses the uses we make of language to create the world. The narrator imagines a time when we “wrote with our own blood,” mixing it with clay, perhaps to mark the walls of ancient caves in a time when we brought down “quick bodies” with stones, then “smithed songs to raise them up again.” “Every death claims a small dialect,” the speaker declares: “What I have not told you will go with me. // In our wake, what remains is the body / and the word body.”

Houses and everything in them will turn to dust unless reworked by the transforming agency of art. Beer’s book implies that during our lives as well, the creative process, perhaps along with understanding and compassion, can help us order chaos, make sense of what may make no sense at all. Her book stretches out a hand to suggest a path towards transcendence. It’s not easy going, but you may find yourself wanting to read it over and over.

—Carol Niederlander

Aaron Belz. *Lovely, Raspberry*. Persea Books, 2010.

If you are a serious reader of serious poetry, you might skim the book, *Lovely, Raspberry*, by Aaron Belz, and not give it a second thought, a second reading, let alone think of keeping it in the running for best book you’ve read this week, month, last six months, or even this year, and that would be a shame. A warning, this book will make the reader laugh. It is humorous and self-mocking, which also means

it is mocking the reader. Its laughter wades deep into the absurdity of the human condition. Humor does not toss this *Lovey, Raspberry* into that currently disdained category of accessibility—which allows, I guess, the heights of Parnassus to be reached too easily? Rest assured Belz’s poetic heights require climbing precipitous escarpments of language. This book is not light verse and has nothing to do with bal-sawood or pumice, or does it?

Belz’s humor does not often depend upon an elaborate narrative as is often found with other poets of wit, such as Billy Collins. Belz’s humor is much more out of control, a vehicle driving through an often speed-limitless landscape crowded with quick statements and hair pin turns of phrase as in the poem *you bore me*, whose title is also half of the first line: “you bore me. So be it. / I bore you and enjoy doing it.”

The first line: two shot-from-the-hip short sentences that are so simple, so straightforward, so unequivocal, and so deadpan, that the poem could end right there. But then the second line doesn’t slow down. Its aim is an unwavering immediacy and a self-satisfied surprise, which happens again and again in *Lovey, Raspberry*. The poem then asks, why not bore each other and not worry about it—advice that is counter to what we most want and expect in relationships. We struggle to be captivating, charming, and, oh so interesting to the other person. Following this contrary, tongue-in-cheek approach, the poet then declares:

I wish I were Canadian.

if I were Canadian,
I could be boring and
get away with it. You’d say,
this man is Canadian.
he bores me.

There is no predicting what’s around the corner of the next line in a Belz poem. Readers can expect the moon and the kitchen sink to come hurdling out these poems, and are left wondering, “Where did that come from,” all the while laughing, as in the conclusion of the poem “you bore me”: “you / act like you’re from Michigan.”

Sharon Olds in the poem, “Topography,” makes use of a similar strategy and metaphor in the lines: “your Idaho / bright on my Great Lakes, my Kansas / burning against your Kansas.” Old’s poem is ignited by reunion, love, and passion. Belz is a very different poet. His poems are not fueled by anything so romantic and does not end with any “*states united*.” This is very evident in the poem, “in verity”:

Honeycup,

I love you like a soft-bodied insect, I
love you in the smell of sluggy grass,
with the distance of a swing set. There is
a rotten hammer underneath the deck . . .

The poem “Topography,” wonderful as it is, is predictable when compared to “in verity,” with its own extraordinary declaration of love “like a soft-bodied insect.” Of course, maybe it’s hard to be laughing in the middle of such a passionate moment as Belz describes, but then there is love in the “sluggy grass” and love “with the distance of a swing set.” And what’s that “rotten hammer under the deck” doing? Rotten and misplaced as it is, the hammer is constructing a future, as is most of Belz’s poems, whereas Olds’ poem is rooted in the moment that is quickly twisting into the past.

Belz’s forte is the one-liner. Which came first the poet or the stand-up comic? Neither. Belz has melded the two into a very original whole. Whenever I’ve heard the comic Stephen Wright perform, I’ve thought that he’s as much a poet as a comic. Aaron Belz is a poet who can famously deliver multiple one liners within the context of a single poem. His one liners are often founded in the non sequitur, in the disassociation of images, in breaking down the logic of language and building a new (ir)rationality, and outright imaginative leaps into the abyss and over tall buildings. In one of my favorite poems in *Lovey Raspberry*, “tilling charles resnikoff’s back yard,” he does it all in the opening stanza:

Tilling Charles Resnikoff’s back yard
brought up a dozen lions and several patches
of wildebeest hearts.

Soon “verbs” fall everywhere and the downfall morphs into a downpour flushing cartoon animals from the bushes surrounding Resnikoff’s (the poet) house. Belz describes himself as looking like a “startled duck” amid this explosive ark of imagination. Then he writes, tongue-in-cheek, that he has a schedule to keep, a tedious map to follow that prevents him from hearing the poet at work.

Lovey Raspberry is a playful book not because there is a lack of serious subject matter but because the author resists, refuses, denies the poem any moment to devolve into a maudlin meditation on life’s travails—unless such a moment is about to make fun of itself. These poems run off quickly in so many directions, gathering whatever they can to their print-stained beastly breasts, joyously growling as they

escape from their pages, sometimes discovering an oblique, obtuse, backdoor, meaning-to-it-all, but also, and always, ready to risk the possibility of being left out in the cold, pawing at the door to get back in.

If there is a cautionary note concerning these poems, it is perhaps to be found in what Wallace Stevens wrote, “The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real . . . while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have.” I’m not worried, another poet, James Tate, has, throughout his career, unleashed his imagination on the reader with an absurdity that replicates at a viral rate. Belz is ready and more than equal to the task of infecting his readers with an absurdity that will keep them laughing. A deafening round of applause for this standup poet.

—Walter Bargaen

Andrew Ervin. *Extraordinary Renditions*. Coffee House Press, 2010.

Upon finishing *Extraordinary Renditions*, one has a sense of what it’s like to live in Budapest as an expatriate, as has its author, Andrew Ervin. Ervin’s debut is partly a bittersweet love letter to the Hungarian capital, which plays as much of a role in its three linked novellas as its three main characters. The city’s history is as prominent a feature of its existence as these characters’ personal histories are of theirs. And Budapest’s dramatic architecture, like Ervin’s prose, is evidence of a deep commitment to artistry. Amid the cold, gray weather that matches these characters’ brooding moods, the depression and poverty that has overtaken a glorious city creates a grimly romantic atmosphere.

Each of the novellas is a rendition of the same Hungarian Independence Day. And each is extraordinary in a different way—the collection’s title thereby reclaiming the phrase, which describes the CIA’s illegal program of abduction and transfer of suspected terrorists to countries where they may be tortured. Magda, a minor character in *Extraordinary Renditions* is involved in this execrable practice. She is the niece of Harkályi, the main character of the first novella, “14 Bagatelles.” Harkályi is a famous composer who survived the concentration camp Terezín, and has returned to Budapest for the first time in four decades for the debut of his new opera. The filthiness of the city and the memories of what happened to his family there depress him. As he walks around Budapest, uneasily rediscovering this changed and still threatening city of his youth, Harkályi looks forward to seeing Magda, but is further depressed when he finds out what she is doing. “His career as a composer was born, in a concen-