# The Glitter From Her Bones

## Agnes Borinsky

**Hugs and Cuddles**
by João Gilberto Noll
translated by Edgar Garbelotto.
240pp. Two Lines Press 2022

**Porneia**
by Eduardo Kac
200pp. Nightboat 2022

Brazilian author João Gilberto Noll's 2008 novel, *Hugs and Cuddles*, newly translated by Edgar Garbelotto, feels like a grotty romp, a provocation. It sloshes over you in one long endless paragraph, sentences that fall on top of each other like the accumulated smells of multiple lovers when you just stop showering and who knows what day it is anyway.

The novel starts with a childhood memory. Two boys wrestle in a hallway, fall down the stairs. They fight so they can keep touching each other. Then they grow up. One, our narrator, has a family and earns income from an inherited farm. The other becomes an engineer. Their lives separate, and then converge. The story, such as it is, is a tumble of fucking. The narrator fucks strangers, a goat, even his teenage son. Eventually he leaves his family and makes a life with the engineer. One central image involves a submarine full of Germans, traveling the globe, endlessly fucking.

Noll's language is lusty and explicit. Sentences careen between the bodily and the numinous. Even his abstractions feel like cocks fresh from some obscure ass, smelling like shit and cum. In the middle of a bathhouse encounter, the narrative will erupt into passages like this:

> The blackness could shelter lovers from the deprivation of sight. The darkness negated everything I needed to see. All that was left for me to do was to stick my hand inside a tantric body and gradually intoxicate myself with my soul's dispersions. There was nothing and nowhere I could fix my gaze besides the deepest dark of darkness... I wanted to present myself to the shadows with total availability... Bernardo brought his nose to my hand, which had just jerked off my dick.

Weird, right? And tasty? Shades of Genet, but hold the rosewater. All praise to Garbelotto's translation for bringing Noll's unrelenting, bucking tone through.

Meanwhile, deep in the shadows, we sense the ghosts of capitalism and Christianity. Panhandlers keep approaching the narrator like politicians, alluding to some unspecified national cause. Sexuality gets pitched as a series of "assets." Alternately sacrificial and all-powerful, the engineer becomes something of a Christ figure, and sex becomes the closest the narrator can get to a sacrament. He uses it to pin possible identities to himself, to imagine meaningful futures, to construct a true sense of home. But the national cause is never achieved, and the sacrament is never consummated. "I will not bring you paradise or sorrows," the narrator confesses. "I am the anonymous man, the one who can disappear without leaving any memory behind."

In the end, though, the queer convulsions of *Hugs and Cuddles* feel slightly macho. There's a particular combination of lassitude and sex-obsession that I recognize from writers as disparate as Michel Houellebecq and Philip Roth. These writers, generally male, act as if they are dragging themselves through the mud, but it feels, in the end, like a literary humble-brag, a swagger into worlds they have deemed abject and disgusting. Noll's narrator dies about halfway through the book, and is resurrected. And then he starts to become a woman. He tries on the role of housewife. Eventually, his once powerful cock melts away and out of the resulting anatomical "swamp" a vulva takes shape. I catch a whiff of misogyny, and it's not because the feminized narrator is actually abject. Abjection can be complex, musky, rich, human, real. Instead, this femininity feels abstract, cerebral, and sensationalized. It is an intellectual gesture, not a fleshy one. And that's where, for me, the novel starts to lose steam. I feel I am being poked with some man's idea of transgression.

Noll's book works, when it works, because it is one long edging session. The narrator speaks compulsively in the future conditional tense. He tips from one set of realities to another. Fears rise into desire which rises into disgust or exhaustion or violence which rises into a new reality. It's not a psychological novel, really; it's a book about capitalist exhaustion. But thematizing burnout is hard, and edging can't go on forever. At a certain point I was tired of it, of these narrative hands on my clit; I was ready for João Gilberto to leave, so I could make myself cum already, do the dishes, shower, read a little, and go to bed.

"A fuck," the narrator says, "once concluded, stinks."

Noll passed away in 2017, at age 70. He wrote *Hugs and Cuddles* in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and the end of a period of structural adjustment in Brazil, when American capital was forcing violent reconstructions of a number of economies in the global south. I feel that mood haunting *Hugs and Cuddles*. But Noll wrote, too, in the shadow of Brazil's long military dictatorship, which lasted from the mid-1960s until the early '80s.

*Untitled by Adrian Ghenie. Oil on canvas, mounted on board 2019*

Eduardo Kac's *Porneia*, out from Nightboat, collects the work that multidisciplinary artist Kac created under that dictatorship. Between 1980-82, Kac was at the center of the Movimento de Arte Pornô. At the time, the Brazilian Penal code of 1942 was still in effect, which held that it was still a crime to "make, import, acquire or possess, for purposes of trade, distribution, or public display, any obscene writing, drawing, painting, print or object." *Porneia* contains images of street performances, a series of manifestos, postcards sent through the mail (Pornograms), short poems meant for shouting (Yellpoems), graffiti, concrete poetry, typographic experiments, and scores, basically, for farting ("Flatographic Poems"). The book itself is gorgeously produced and the work feels thrilling, silly, and free.

Here is one of the Yellpoems, "Hot," in its entirety:

> boring lit doesn't light my clit
> ours is high lickerature
> throbbing text
> tit for tit
> that they wood stop
> stuff they could
> butt they cunt try ass they might

There's a density of wordplay in these, sonic and semantic, which is even more exciting when you look back and forth between Kac's English translation and his Portuguese original. And the joy of these poems isn't just the delight of a child yelling dirty words in the supermarket. The play is too dense, too complex, and they slip between too many points of reference. They are everything and nothing, deep and cheap. Even an awareness of the political stakes here—the thought of that penal code—doesn't eclipse the poems' gorgeous lightness of soul. I feel them crack me open, and "a haphazard happy girl / inside me awakens."

Kac's work gives language body. His energy feels restless and rigorous; tender, sexy, and deep. In what he calles the "Visual Works," Kac treats the materiality of the page—its texture, rips, curls—as part of a linguistic poem. There are other concrete poets I love: Norman Pritchard has his eerie spacial metaphysics, and bpNichol's charging of individual letters is almost theological. Kac's concrete poems feel different. They slip inside you like a finger. They make you feel implicated in their mischief as you decode them. And then there are the typographic experiments, versions of the then-nascent ASCII art, in which images are composed of standardized keyboard characters. Kac's experiments lean on the more textured layering that becomes possible on a typewriter. I can feel Kac's hands on the materials he has available, pushing, kneading, seeing how far he can take what he has.

As for the fart poems... I bow to their wild sublimity.

What makes me uneasy, though, is the way this work is framed in the present edition. Kac has written an introduction to the book, as well as a series of notes on each cluster of pieces. And his voice, now, feels stripped of all the lightness and play of the work he is framing. He speaks now in long catalogs of nouns: "In my series... I gave origin to a new form that mixes body art, design, political resistance, performance, activism, photography, and poetry." I have been rubbing up against a throbbing text, the work itself has given me an appetite for lickerature. And suddenly I find myself expected to honor this endless parade of dreary, self-important nouns. Nouns where any relation they might have to verbs, or to worldly transformation, is abstract and occluded.

It's disappointing, too, to realize how much of the context of the work Kac has left out. Kac gave the Porn Art Movement its name, and was at its center, but other accounts of the movement list multiple key members, across several cities. There was a group, after all, which called themselves the Gang: Kac, yes, and also Cairo de Assis Trindade and Teresa Jardim; others, including Glauco Mattoso, Ana Miranda, Cynthia Dorneles, Leila Míccolis, Sandra Terra, and Bráulio Tavares, participated, too. A few of these names appear in *Porneia*, but barely. "On February 13th, 1982, I presented collaboratively Interversão, a

multi-hour event…" I presented collaboratively? What does that even mean? The book contains images of a number of other people—collaborators, even—some of them naked—but Kac doesn't name them. He does meticulously note when an erect cock is his.

A friend recently shared the work of Bruna Kury, an anarchatransfeminist artist based in São Paulo. Kury includes herself in the underground "post-porn" movement. "Queer is no longer enough for us," she writes, in her Vomit Collective manifesto; "we want a trans, sudaka, mestiza, poor and precarious revolution." Looking at her work online, I find myself returning to Kac and Noll's work with a different set of eyes. In the photos of Kac's performance interventions in *Porneia* I see young, normatively attractive people, running, laughing on a beach. Their openness, their mischief, presents itself as natural, somehow. In Kury's work, I see an artist who has pierced, injected, suspended, transformed herself. She pushes her body to its limit to exorcise a force that seeks to discipline poor people and exploit racial difference to violent ends. I do not want to dismiss the joy—coded "natural"—of Kac's work. Sometimes joy, even silliness, is a powerful tool for slipping away from control. But for trans people, especially trans people of color, that "natural" is tricky. "Natural" too easily becomes its own regime, a position from which one person polices another's change. And if Noll is urging us to attend to a more contemporary form of capitalist exhaustion, his protagonist howls from a position of felt emptiness. Kury's work makes that emptiness feel like a luxury. "We vomit ourselves to reinvent ourselves," she writes, "we vomit our own flesh, our radioactivity, our viruses so that everyone gets infected." She is nauseous, she says, and refuses, now, to hold all that inside any longer. Capitalism depletes, yes. But Kury is hardly empty. She has been carrying too much for too long—beauty and grief, ungliness and joy. She wants to externalize the glitter from her bones.

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# Are We Having Fun Yet?

## Nick Mamatas

**Motor Spirit: The Long Hunt for the Zodiac**
by Jarett Kobek
316pp. We Heard You Like Books 2022

**How to Find Zodiac**
by Jarett Kobek
306pp. We Heard You Like Books 2022

*From the series, Funny House (Speech Acts) by Arnold Joseph Kemp. 2019*

"Zodiac is staging a public relations campaign," writes novelist and social critic Jarett Kobek in *Motor Spirit* of the infamous serial killer, who taunted the police and the public with frequent messages and coded ciphers in the late 1960s. "It's faltering." *Motor Spirit*, and its companion volume *How to Find Zodiac* were researched and written by Kobek during the days of shelter in place, and he self-published the titles to no little fanfare and scrutiny by legions of true crime readers and armchair sleuths. Spoiler: Kobek believes he has identified Zodiac as one Paul Doerr of Vallejo, California. Doerr was active in the world of science fiction/fantasy fandom: he corresponded with the fanzines of the era, read and collected comics, wore costumes while engaging in medieval recreations, and engaged in many of the weird libertarian folkways of fandom—tinkering; cryptography; détourned folk music called "filk"; wordplay and obscure references that are more tedious than clever; generalized animosity toward the post office, hippies, and kids today, etc.

Does that make Doerr the killer? In *Motor Spirit,* that is the least important question. In *How to Find Zodiac*, it is the most. The current fashion for true crime feels rather reactionary. It serves to stoke hysteria about the rates of violence, packages human misery for easy consumption, and often elevates the mere criminal to the status of cultural figure. But Kobek works differently. He seeks out Zodiac via a combination of literary and class analysis, and using Zodiac as a path to explore the counterculture of the 1960s and its discontents, and true crime today.

Zodiac wasn't always Zodiac. Despite the killer coining the name for himself—"Zodiac is the square's idea of the counterculture" Kobek says—the newspapers didn't cooperate at first, instead referring to him as the "cipher" and "code" killer. Zodiac's letters also made promises of carnage he didn't keep. No surprise that when the Manson slayings came along, Zodiac was pushed off the front pages.

What is "motor spirit"? For Kobek it is the impulse, the desire, to do something, to break through into the broader culture. The political or social or personal motivations come later, they're *ad hoc* justifications. The Weather Underground had motor spirit, and so did the acid-droppers on Haight Street. So too did the Minutemen, the far-right militia of which Doerr was once a member. The Minutemen recommended the purchase of untraceable mail order guns (Zodiac got his from Sears), engaged in cryptography (Zodiac's most famous trait), shared error-filled bomb-making plans (Zodiac made the same errors), and used as its symbol a set of crosshairs (just like Zodiac).

Kobek has motor spirit too. He didn't set out to write about Zodiac, and didn't set out to name the previously obscure Doerr as the killer. But the connection between the run-down Bay Area town of Vallejo and science fiction fanzines led Kobek to him. "Toilet literature consumed by the working-classes, freed from the pretensions of Literature," Kobek says of science fiction, more or less lovingly. (Kobek's novel *The Future Won't Be Long* features a tribute to SF writer Thomas Disch.) Zodiac's letters are full of references to comic books and science fiction, and in the 60s, before Comic-Con, before *Dungeons & Dragons*, before nerds with motor sprit came to dominate the multiplexes and streaming services, only a relative handful of people would grok (see what I did there?) what Zodiac was even on about.

And Doerr's dumpy car, lower middle-class animosity toward the left and the elites and the welfare state, and even his guns from Sears, hint at the kind of fascist class politics that could drive someone to kill in order to have slaves in the afterlife. Or maybe just to kill, and the slave stuff was another sci-fi put-on to get back into the news cycle. Class is a special sticking point in the analysis. Kobek spotted the car of the same make and model Zodiac drove in a Google search of Doerr's home decades later, leading detractors to sarcastically wonder how Doerr kept the car running all those years if he were The Real Killer. In San Francisco, people simply wave away their old vehicles when they secure the latest Tesla. In Vallejo and other lower-class burghs, dead cars are left to rust in driveways indefinitely.

Why does any of this matter at all? *Motor Spirit* matters because Kobek successfully captures something other than the Zodiac Killer. *Motor Spirit* is a book about the far-left and the far-right, and the great unwashed middle of the road that can point in either direction. It's a book about the peculiarities of the California Bay, which to this day has an outsize influence on the world's ability to self-consciously examine itself. (There's a reason the *Anarchist Review of Books* is not an online publication in the grip of Silicon Valley algorithms.) And it's a book about media creation and re-creation as *recreation*. Speaking of the Bay's influence on culture, remember Zippy the Pinhead and the interrogative slogan "Are we having fun yet?" *Motor Spirit* reminds us that no matter how hard the publishing and podcast and streaming industries attempt to jollify us with true crime stories, we are *not.*

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