In The Perfect Tense

Agnes Borinsky

The Fifth Wound
by Aurora Mattia
288pp. Nightboat 2023

A Queen in Bucks County
by Kay Gabriel
104pp. Nightboat 2022

Love, Leda
by Martin Hyatt
176pp. Peninsula Press 2023

Aurora Mattia's *The Fifth Wound* is a book full of ideas, quarrels, longings, story, song lyrics, poems, mythology. It rails against the kind of engagement that marketing copy tends to traffic in—it swallows and disgorges other forms, from police reports to rejection letters. Trying to reproduce "what it is" here feels like trying to transplant sensitive flowers into synthetic soil. Cornel West talks about the deodorization of culture. He talks about sweat, and funk. This book is full of fragrance.

Which is not to say it's easy. I found Mattia's book by turns boring, frustrating, overwhelming, devastating, and funny. The pages of my copy are sloppy now with hearts in pencil, dripping tears or blood.

Mattia writes about a desire between two people, between a narrator and her Ezekiel. But how could she not be writing about desire in general, about the movement of some I towards some You? Her book, and this desire, terrified and infected me. She writes about staring down into the face of someone

> not pretending to be measured, someone whose desires were so direct that, from the distance of dissociation, they appeared (in fits and flashes of which I felt ashamed) frightening and grotesque, all the more so if you loved them…

The force of her address in this book was such that I wanted from it a kind of love.

There are times when her book filled me with such protective anger, and deep fellow feeling. I felt the muscles in my leg twitch. There is a man in the book who I wanted to kick with more force than I've ever directed at another human body. How does a progression of sentences stimulate the nerves so immediately?

As transsexuals, we have a reader problem. No one knows how to read us. We give instructions, over and over, we construct our texts as pleasure palaces that embed a how-to in every crystalline flash. But there's some blockage. And that is the world. Their loss. And also: how lonely.

"Here's a fable in the perfect tense," Kay Gabriel writes in *A Queen in Bucks County*. The perfect tense describes an action that is complete, finished—perfect. In the land of ramshackle ever-becoming that is transness, a shocking arrival!

A Queen in Bucks County is a book of poems-as-(mostly)-letters, missives from Turner, "a heteronym of the author," "a persona in a bag." The letters are written to friends about fucks. And in that sense they're flirtations. Gabriel's book covers Viktor Shklovsky's *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love*. They skim the cream off other texts; they throb allusion and insinuation. They're laced with a politic, a poesis, a materialist praxis—and that's where the real lip-lick happens.

Each letter, each poem, is an acrobatic performance, skimming register, rhythm, and reference. If an Ashbery poem is a garden, it is a fairly domestic and enclosed one. Gabriel's poems are a train yard somewhere in Jersey, all trash, smell, waste, and wildflower. The speaker here is endlessly in motion—a comedian, an internet star, a high-school debate champ; seductively in crisis," and calls for "a private literature of recognition."

What does it mean for recognition to be private? Especially in the context of a politics of public space?

Shklovsky's love for Elsa Triolet, the love he wrote-by-not-writing in *Zoo*, was unrequited. For all the cum shots in *Bucks County*, there's a twinge of hurt I

Why Now? by Erin M. Riley. Wool, cotton 2021

working harder than any of us and getting laid too.

The virtuosity has work to do. As I say, we a have a problem, as trans writers, of how we are read. I'm not talking about passing. I'm talking about the traces we leave in language, the narratives we are invited to inhabit. We are always arguing with readers, insisting that they find other ways of reading us.

Why does it matter? We need space to breathe. We need space to be with the people we love. There's a David Wojnarowicz photo from *Sex Series* on the book cover, and one of the letters mentions that "David wrote about making the series to keep him company." We make things because we need them. "Keep" can be companionable; it can also be anxious, clinging. I'm keeping you. Language is a nest, a home, a snare. We have a history of being abandoned. Mattia writes to "trap [her] reader's precarious faith." Turner/Kay writes to a group of friends. That's a kind of keeping, too.

One of the many things I love about *Bucks County* is the way the Turner-Kay axis becomes an instrument for flogging time into a whimpering muddle. Kay reveals herself in the poems, comes in and out of view. We wonder if she'll ever sign them "Kay." There's a suspension, a gasp, and then Turner's name arrives again—a recurrent deferral, a joke, a fuck-you. Gabriel refuses to let identity settle into the chronology that transfeminine narrative conventions demand: of a boy who once-was and a woman that boy became.

There is always, in Gabriel's words, "that coy interval." She means between gays and trans women; she might be talking about the heteronym and the author. She writes, "I'm vexed at the tendency of writers living and dead to use transsexuals as the window-dressing of social decay, a metonym for public space

feel as the book spirals and lands, something unsatisfied. But a hurt isn't a failure. It's a part of being human. "It's a shame for words to be more vibrant than sex," Turner says. And that's the slippage both Mattia and Gabriel are engaging. How do we know when we are loved? Can we be loved when being misunderstood is constitutive of our being?

"Men buy me things." So begins Turner's first letter. Money secures relation. Later: "Men buy me things, // I return them for the cash."

Mark Hyatt's *Love, Leda* is similarly a book of restless transaction. It opens: "I have just stolen ten pounds." The narrator, "the brave one, god of any telephone kiosk," is on his own, huddled against London's morning chill. He notices someone, "the man of the day," and offers to buy him something. It's a first move towards sex.

Love, Leda is a novel of cruising, crashing, and surplus desire. Like *The Fifth Wound* and *A Queen in Bucks County*, it speaks from a body bruised by an often-hostile world. It ends up in a sweaty tussle with language itself.

Written in the mid-1960s, when Hyatt was in his mid-twenties, it is being published for the first time this year. Hyatt published some poetry while he was alive, but very little prose. He took his own life in 1972. (Editor Luke Roberts's afterword puts Hyatt's work in the context of a community of other writers, and of explicitly queer '60s literary production. It's a helpful guard against what Mattia calls "the rhetoric of sui generis by which so-called marginalized storytellers are tokenized, dehistoricized, and therefore isolated…")

Leda, the novel's narrator, has no permanent home and no consistent job. He stays with friends sometimes, he gets work as he needs it. Sometimes people give him money. Things are a yawning chasm of existential confusion. And also: things are often okay. There's awfulness, and despair, and also an exhilarating kind of freedom.

Financial transactions are meticulously recorded. We tend to learn exactly how much any purchase costs. The book's gentle march of declarative sentences sometimes feels like an extension of this spirit in which everything is accounted for:

> The morning is hazy. My senses tell me which direction to go. I cut down some backstreets and see the milkman hard at it. I pass a car with someone sleeping over the steering wheel. Five charwomen are walking on the other side of the road, talking and laughing. It seems mad to me at such an early hour, to be happy and going to work. I see a dead cat lying in the gutter, its body steaming.

To name something is to charge it with some significance. But Hyatt's narrative voice refuses to hold onto anything too tightly. Images come and go, the way money appears in Leda's pocket one way one day and is gone soon after.

> I pick a flower from a garden and stick it in my hair, cross the main road and walk straight into a policeman. He looks at my hair and then looks me in the eyes.
> 'What's all this then?' he says.
> 'What's all what?'
> 'That flower there.'
> 'I stuck it in my hair to make me look pretty, because I feel awful.'
> 'Have you been to a party?'
> 'Yes, I have.'
> 'Well, take that damn silly thing out of your hair and be on your way…'

Here the policeman stands in for the paradigmatic straight reader, demanding something of a text. What is the value of the thing? What are you trying to say? What's the meaning? What are the terms of the exchange?

Leda is in love with David, desperately, to the point of attempted suicide. Ultimately, David will only pay Leda to clean his house; will commit him to a psychiatric ward; will hand him, in a hospital bed, thirty pounds. The problem of this love is here, as in any book, the problem of a profusion of desire. Mattia's narrator addresses Ezekiel; Gabriel's addresses her friends; Hyatt's Leda addresses David. Something is wanted, something is offered. Will the offer be accepted? Changed for cash? It's a surplus, and that surplus floods language, floods reality, warps the redemptive possibility of narrative.

> Am I not the gentle speed in your action? Do I have to put it into black print and write? Must I chronicle my words, turning out my time on your God's ghost, pretending that ink is my blood and happiness?

Over and over the narrator crashes against his own status as a builder in language. (For a day Leda is a guillotine operator in a metal shop. The metal rectangles he cuts stack up like the sentences, accumulate in paragraphs.) "I'd

love to know," Hyatt writes, "the value of words."

There's a way of reading *Love, Leda* as an archival document, an explicit record of a certain time and place, of a queer world. But Hyatt's book is more than that. It's heartbroken over its own archival impulses. Hyatt knows what he's being asked to do, and knows that what he needs to do is something else entirely. "Everything inside me is too factual," he writes. He has to write the facts to be known, to be legible. But he wants, too, an escape from their ultimate falseness. He is seeking a form that can hold his own intuitive theology.

Even now, read against a lineage of gay male cruising literature, *Love, Leda*, doesn't quite fit. The name Leda conjures images of the Spartan queen, raped by a god; the word itself comes from the Greek for "woman," or "happy." Leda is "male by nature, not by choice." Leda's body and desire feel like they drift away from gender towards something more restless and provisional. "My head is filled with wind," Leda tells us, "and I hope the wind is of wisdom."

Love, Leda infected me with a funny sense of freedom. For a while I found myself worrying, with each cup of coffee or sandwich, that the narrator would run out of money. That each exchange of cash would go wrong. Why, otherwise, record each price and payment so meticulously? Name an event in a fictional narrative and some part of you wonders if it's a setup for a catastrophe. But when it comes to having a place to sleep and something to eat, Hyatt's narrator always turns out alright. The grief, and the crash, is elsewhere.

I see now that my reflexive narrative worry as the novel's accounting clicks along, sentence by sentence, has to do with a lifetime of reading a certain kind of novel: the bourgeois novel, a novel built on a logic of scarcity, in which the presumption is that property ensures freedom. But what if that's not the case? Hyatt's narrator may be trapped, but it isn't for want of a marriage or an estate. *Love, Leda* reminds us that ownership, like biological family, is nothing more than a series of demands the world makes of us. And however much heartbreak, isolation, and loss batter the spirit, those demands, at least, are always things we can manage to refuse.

Agnes Borinsky *is a writer and theater-maker based in Los Angeles. She is working on a novel about queer second-century rabbis.*

Dream of a Queer Future

The pragmatic anarchism of Evan Greer

Molly Torinus

On stage in a small indie record store in Prague, surrounded by queer teenagers singing along to her militantly anti-authoritarian lyrics, Evan Greer hadn't expected to be known or even recognized. It was 2010. An obscure transfeminine folk-punk artist from Boston, she had never been so far from home and was shocked to find the store packed with fans who had heard her songs on Napster. "There were like a hundred kids," she reminisced, "who knew all the words to my little songs about being queer." They'd burned CDs for one another, falling in love with the queer anarchist future her lyrics described. "I want something that's better than this," she sang, her acoustic guitar ringing out through the cramped room. As her young audience shouted back, "and I'm not sure exactly what it is!" Greer fell in love too—with the new audience she'd found for her queer art, yes, but also with the queer anarchist chosen family she would come to center in her music and organizing.

Long before she found community through music, Greer was a queer revolutionary seemingly by nature. While still in high school, she got her start in activism by organizing a protest against the 2003 Iraq War. Her passion for social justice grew further while she was a student at Swarthmore College, where she discovered her anti-hierarchical politics. Five years before the first Queers Bash Back convergence, when queer anarchism was only well-known in the context of early anarcha-feminists' dedication to free love, a college-aged Greer was fighting for abolition as a member of her local Anarchist Black Cross chapter. When she dropped out of college to pursue a career in music, she leveraged the power of technology to spread her liberatory message. Websites such as Spotify and Napster enabled her to "find my audience, authentically be myself, and pursue my dream of using music to support social movements that I cared about." Once she shared her music publicly, her DIY and primarily acoustic punk songs—exploring themes such as politics and the family ("Hey Dad, I'm An Anarchist"), trans identity ("Assimilation"), and classical anarcha-feminism ("Emma Goldman Would Have Beat Your Ass")—were suddenly beloved by the young, radical, and queer.

In 2021, Greer took her music and advocacy to a new level when she released the album *Spotify Is Surveillance*. This high-concept project critiqued online surveillance while celebrating the range of anarchist organizing spaces that liberated her. With songs such as "Back Row" and "Taking Down The Tent" honoring her folk-punk roots, Greer describes the sense of community that comes from both queercore and anarchism—the same affinity she felt with her young queer fans in Prague. In "Back Row," when she sings in her softly militant voice, "We were outcasts, we were freaks / We were idealists, we believed / When the band played our favorite songs / We felt like we belonged," she establishes anarcho-punk community as liberation in and of itself, conferring hope and chosen family.

Despite its community focus, *Spotify Is Surveillance* does not merely portray anarchy as a social force to be shouted about in punk songs rather than a political one to be continually prefigured. Instead, it elevates anarchism to a historically established theory and ideology. In the punk anthem "Emma Goldman Would Have Beat Your Ass," Greer harkens back to anarcha-feminist history while decrying nominally leftist strains of bro culture. Her interest in political theory goes beyond casual references in her lyrics. In addition to Goldman, she takes inspiration from abolitionist-feminist theorists of today. As she put it, "I think the autobiography of Assata Shakur is a book that every leftist-activist-person should read. I love Diana Bloch's *Arm The Spirit*. I'm obsessed with Mariame Kaba and Adrea Ritchie's book *No More Police*—and that constellation of Black-womxn-led abolitionist thinking that surrounds it, and Cory Doctorow and Rebecca Giblin's *Chokepoint Capitalism*." In her art, and especially *Spotify Is Surveillance*, she elevates queercore to political theory and vice versa, musically bridging the gap between ideology and practice.

As the deputy director of internet freedom nonprofit Fight For The Future, Greer has experience with the many contradictions of online organizing, and she explores this ambivalence in her music. In songs such as the album's title track, "Surveillance Capitalism," she uses her guitar and voice to carve out a vision of an ideal Internet that serves all its users rather than prioritizing corporate interests. Yet, despite her longtime work for online liberation, Greer is not unthinkingly pro-technology. When I questioned her on the anti-tech strains of anarchism, she said, "I remember when both primitivism and anti-civilizationist strains of anarchism became popular, and in some ways, I think a lot of those folks saw something that the rest of us didn't see—in terms of the enormous harm that even technologies that can be empowering can also bring, and that many technologies can amplify liberatory struggles and amplify oppression at the same time." Because of its co-optation by hierarchical institutions, Greer views the internet not as inherently radical but as a space to advocate for liberation—or not. In our interview, she lamented that "the internet has been something of a force multiplier for fringe ideologies. You can make a pretty good argument that that's why we lived through four years of Trump as our president. But," she added more optimistically, "the positive side of that is, you can turn on MSNBC and hear someone make an argument about abolishing the police."

Anarchism is often considered hopelessly utopian rather than necessarily transformative by those who remain unscathed by state violence. Yet, Greer's anarchism is refreshingly materialist while remaining centered around a dream of a queer future. She identifies "as anti-authoritarian first and foremost—that's kind of my main driving force—and as an abolitionist. It's a very pragmatic anarchism." This pragmatism is not only crucial to her DIY ethic but fuels her passion for both theory and anarchist chosen family. Unlike many adherents of insurrectionary anarchism, Greer does not solely advocate for the dismantling of oppressive systems. Instead, she dreams of building a new, liberated world in the shell of the old. In her punk rock music and ethos delivered through DIY media and evolving technology, Greer invites us ever closer to true queer liberation.

ARB's middle-school correspondent, ***Molly Torinus*** *is an anarchaqueer & xenofeminist organizer, performative poet and Laura Jane Grace fangirl.*