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"More than You Can Think"

Stephanie Strickland, *How the Universe Is Made: Poems New & Selected 1985–2019*. Ahsahta Press, 2019

"The universe is made of stories, not of atoms"—Almost daily, I get a Google Alert notification about some quotation of these lines by Muriel Rukeyser, yoked out of context and used as inspiration or apparent evidence for the value of literature over science, of feelings over matter. I set up the alert because I write about Rukeyser. One thing I write about is her capacious and rigorous investigation of the meeting-places between disciplines; in particular, what she calls "the rare union" between poetry and science. Why, then, does she separate these spheres so blatantly here? The answer is that she doesn't. It's not science that Rukeyser opposes to stories in this quotation, but singleness, disjunction, separation into our smallest units. The interactions between atoms make up the building blocks of our universe. It was so obvious to Rukeyser that science is just as much about stories as literature is that she incorporates atoms directly into her metaphorical work. What the world is made of is not *things*—in any domain—but *relationships*.

I couldn't help but think of Rukeyser's lines when I turned to *How the Universe Is Made*, Strickland's staggering—almost 300-page—collection of new and selected poems whose subjects range from Simone Weil to the Reimann Hypothesis to the Department of Homeland Security to the Hag of Beare. The book contains poems from seven of Strickland's previous volumes, a substantial collection of new poems, and a helpful 20-page gloss on some of her "procedural, generative, kinetic, and hypertextual" poems—a significant parallel body of work that cannot, by nature, be contained within the pages of a book. The title of this new and selected is taken from a poem in 1997's *True North*, "Presto! How the Universe Is Made," which gives a good sense of Strickland's equally serious and playful touch: "*On your Mark*, one first O/ riginal Form; *Get set*, a second / angular Segment."

Two small words in "How the Universe Is Made" underscore Strickland's enduring concerns: the ongoing nature of the present-tense "is" (the creation of the universe was not completed in the past—that title poem ends "Repeat:") and the process-oriented

"how." The rest of the book animates the rich possibilities and moments and perhaps even meanings that grow from and within this ongoing making across its myriad scales and realms. It is from this understanding that we can read Strickland's wide-ranging subjects as in urgent conversation and not just adjacent.

My linkage of Strickland with Rukeyser is not speculative: the elder poet appears several times in this book; first in the introductory "Lineage-Linkage-Homage"—two pages of cascading names that orient the reader in a larger conversation and attest once again to the relational nature of Strickland's project. The names—among them, also, Lorine Niedecker, Xu Bing, Bertolt Brecht, Audre Lorde, Mother Goose—float on the page. You can easily imagine them animate and shifting, like the elements of the universe, like one of Strickland's digital pieces.

Rukeyser's spirit hovers over much of this book, but she is most essential to the poems of *True North*, which take as a central subject 19th-century physical chemist Willard Gibbs—a difficult and obscure scientist whose abstract findings had enormous repercussions across a range of domains including chemical warfare—about whom Rukeyser wrote an experimental and largely misunderstood biography in 1942. Gibbs's investigations were, like those of Rukeyser and Strickland, concerned with understanding relationships between entities in any system (how do pieces interact, what are the elements of any story?). Strickland encapsulates Gibbs's orientation in poetic lines: "Truth not flowing down / from a source; but, an exact / accord that makes the whole / simpler than the parts." But even more important to Strickland's poetics is how she animates his thinking with the tools of her own. Gibbs's famous "Phase Rule" is an equation that describes how equilibrium is achieved within systems formed from unlike materials in various phases. Strickland's poem "Narrowness of Narrow Path Endured" tests this Rule within the system of human encounter, both intimate and political, asking: "Identical in nature, but different / in phase, are we at odds?"

Strickland's understanding of the motion animated by poetic form (even and perhaps especially when she is using the two-dimensional space of the page) is precise and masterful. In alternating tercets and single line stanzas, "Narrowness of Narrow Path Endured" has a kind of uneven, though unceasing momentum, as though the rolling wheels of each three-lined stanza were not entirely smooth, but caught a regular and rhythmic hitch. Here are some lines from the middle of the poem:

Can we be compassed by thought? "Let us imagine,"

said Gibbs, abstracting pure Rule, that will fuel
the Third Reich, "a great number of independent
systems … ." Most certainly at odds. Most certainly competing.

Can they be assessed? In a lab? At a desk? Can they

be changed? By a go-between? With their disastrous
capability of relaxing the entire, the major, the inherent
interconnection of this extended system back … to

snow, to fall-out in the dark, to frozen

rock surrounded by black pine …

The density of internal rhymes (rule and fuel; assessed and desk) adds to the poem's propulsion, creating—in this poem about relationships—relationships where they are not quite expected. When Strickland shifts to slant rhymes (back, dark, rock) she forces attention to the hypnotic act of linking, to the system as it is being formed. All these techniques propel the poem forward while making the reader intensely, uncomfortably aware: a necessary participant in this motion which follows the effects of the Phase Rule through private and public lives. The poem's final sonic link between Canaveral and Chernobyl hauntingly suggests the implications of Gibbs's discoveries, their use as the scientific bases of space travel and nuclear weaponry. In the last lines—"immolating stormflight of the young motherteacher / burned again and again before the eyes of her daughter / and her son; not narrow enough, the path of control, // Canaveral, Chernobyl— Not narrow, at all"—the slant rhyme between "control" and "all" performs with a final off-note click the limits and stakes of such connection.

Gibbs's discoveries are not exceptional for their deployment in realms of violence and exploitation. Indeed, Strickland's work evinces a constant awareness and unflinching examination of the ways in which arts and sciences, technology and government, medicine and capital are mutually imbricated. Take this poem from her 2013 collection *Dragon Logic*, which forces us to face the vast gulf between our purported intentions for our inventions, interventions, and engineered drugs, on the one hand, and their ultimate effects and uses:

Varieties of ecocide : does it matter
text 30001

viral vs. nuclear warheads :
answers at 10

we hear from gamers math professor
simulators those in actual rehearsal

involuntary
immersion in the real : a pharmal

target each blockbuster drug
to reach until

it goes off-patent
factoid : leeches make shocking comeback

In a recent *CounterText* interview Strickland asserts that "[w]hen electronic literature, created and performed in an environment infused with computation, engages its own means, it simultaneously engages the means by which war, production, desire, memory, and much else are managed around the globe. E-writers do not simply pursue provocative parallel play; rather they have their hands inside the lion's mouth, so to speak." Strickland's work is noteworthy for its dogged determination not to ignore, but to begin *from* this understanding. Whether on the page or on a screen, it relentlessly attends to "its own devices." That attention is, I think, a first step toward the contestation—the alternatives—that Strickland imagines.

The new poems in *How the Universe Is Made* are collected under the title "The Body Obsolete," a line Strickland has borrowed from the Cyprus-born, Australian performance artist Stelarc, whose dangerous, radical performances (which include surgically implanting an operational third ear on his forearm and ceding physical control of his body to electronic muscle stimulators connected to the internet) extend the body "beyond the local space it occupies." Claiming obsolescence is, for Stelarc and for Strickland, no lament for the bygone days when the body was whole, discrete, or contained—as it never was any such thing.

Strickland's final turn in her poem "Gormley vs. Stelarc" points to an obvious and ancient example of that un-containedness. The poem pits Stelarc against British sculptor Antony Gormley, whose installation "Another Place" consists of 100 life-sized cast-iron statues of a naked male form placed along two miles of shoreline, disappearing and appearing with the changing tides, suggesting not obsolescence but a shocking durability. Like Stelarc, Gormley exposes and makes vulnerable the male body, and Strickland's inclusion of a photograph from each artist highlights this aspect of their work. Ultimately, though, the real impact of the poem comes when she turns away from both of them:

> alone
> fixed staring staring out
>
> orphan seizes breath dancer step stalker game woman
> climbing
> birth mountain her pain "Becom[e] exotic"

How the Universe Is Made begins and ends with the mother's body: the ultimate technological marvel and extension of the self beyond the limits of the self; site of both past and future, profound distance and profound intimacy. The turn in "Gormley v. Stelarc" samples language from Mina Loy's 1914 poem "Parturition" which begins, "I am the centre / Of a circle of pain / Exceeding its boundaries in every direction." Within and without keep changing places—childbearing and mothering testing the limits of what is possible to convey by any means, in any language, form, art, or discipline.

In "Gormley v. Stelarc" Strickland seems most immediately concerned with physical experience (here is Gormley: "I treat the body as a place encouraging empathic occupation of that which lies the other side of experience: *what it feels like*"). But Strickland's poems are interested in emotion, too; and the mother's body is a site of this exploration and attempted communication beyond the limits of the self. Take the astute psychological observation and painful tenderness in her early poem, "Mother: Dressed Up," where the child is struck suddenly with seeing her mother as other than herself not just in body but in desire: "I am stunned / by your body, trying / to hide // its eagerness / to pull away / from mine." The collection opens with pieces from 1991's *Give the Body Back*; the body being demanded is both Strickland's mother's dying body and, aspirationally, the poet's own, our own: "Moved through / like a dune, become the sweep / of a palm through sand, my mother's body, became like sand,

breached, a memory of outline." The imperfect, porous body, defined by all kinds of limitations, including time, is the ur-device to which Strickland attends.

Strickland's work is simultaneously concerned with fathoming and unfathomability. As with her electronic collaboration with Nick Montfort, "Sea and Spar Between," which generates approximately 225 trillion stanzas (requiring as Leonardo Flores points out 6,421,232,876.71 years of reading), we must on some level just come to terms with the impossibility of capturing a totality. The harsh and beautiful truth is that you don't get points for trying to know it all—that is not the kind of knowing Strickland has in mind. "Gentle Reader," she calls to us at the start of her 2002 poem, "Errand Upon Which We Came," "begin anywhere. Skip anything. This text / is framed / fully for the purposes of skipping." And she continues, "Of course, // it can / be read straight through, but this is not a better reading, / not a better life." It is a sobering assertion and one that is deeply antagonistic to an ideal of expertise or disciplinary mastery. Instead, with Strickland, we must be open to discovering. Every encounter is different. The universe is being made; its "dimensions," as she shows us, "more than you can think."