

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

David P. Miller

Sunflower Sutra Variations

I.

I walked away from her, tracked my path back and up a different cross street. It was evening,

I was sick of seeming just another

Jack with an agenda, trailing a woman home from the subway. Hopskotching

the oily rain puddles to keep my distance. I know that

look. Fretful and sidelong, or icecold and penetrating, or the scream of a silent look away. Not that

I rush to conceal skin, gender or age markings. All these

and hells of presumption engage us, even when we play against type.

And the gray aura of baffled vision, the rusted

corolla of It's a Me Thing, You Wouldn't Understand, razor-edged

leaves of the forest of no return – Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Attempt

Another's Threshold. I've lived in that

unholy land, I know

the grime of my imagined type, soiling

all those attempts at gestures that failed, rebounded to my own confusion,

and those alien eye contacts that may have hurt:

a male stranger's *hello* still

entangled in family memory with death and humiliation.

A perfect mistake, to offer a smile to a man or woman outside your checkboxes.

How to indicate Prefer Not to Say when skin color and gray hair

precede like heralds?

Poor melting pot, poor patchwork quilt. Your recipe fails to bind, your threads dissolve.

You were dreaming Emma Lazarus' song

and you woke to find the New Colossus a ragbag.

So I retrieve a few of the homelier scraps, lift my clumsy needle, add pieces

not to an American Dreamcoat, but an American *rakasu*, Zen robe.

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And deliver it to who will try it on, alter and pass it forward.
We're standing together, taking hands and dropping them,
slapping away and clasping again. We strain to see the pattern
among ten thousand arcing sparks.

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II.

Sat down in another café, another Spanish latte finished, writing.
Huge aspirations, long sublimated toward the path I now walk, brought
me to this room filled

with music students clustered at tables.

Sunset nearly gone, light quieted by October overcast.

Sunflower Sutra tucked back in my bag. Almost nostalgic for its birth,
though I'd not completed a single year

of my own. Babies of my generation knew nothing yet of our own best
minds. Preteen rockers

surely felt the unrest.

Steel spoon scoops latte scrapings. Is this real

or merely a tourist version of writer's work, do I cherish

loco-motives? Half Spanish pun not referring to commuter rail back of
the music school or sunflower's antithesis.

Spiderwebs of desire rope across a life in the professions. It's been gener-
ous,

has braced me, but what of the

home-piles of music unheard, words unread, and which

will I never discover, shuffled between stacks? They'll need

wheelbarrows to tidy up my modest estate. The riddle of the

sphincters reminds, there's more to do before entering the concert hall

an hour from now. Is Ginsberg

mummied? Spelunk a writing-through to find him, use

natural artifice to force my fresh attention to his Whitmaniac tongue.

Sunrise will come soon enough and with it the morning muffin and poems
to read --

tincan, peacock feather, mourning crepe or birdsong as the poets have it.

Sitdown time completed, so declares my watch

and this Variation's seed word list

fnis.

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III.

1936. As the New Haven's roar faded, you could hear Ellen the knitter cry
from her second floor room. 2012. Earth turns over, burrowing animals
churn, Spring

brings us fresh glass shards and rust-patinaed pieces of forgotten machinery.

Recycling eve, the bottle-and-can men arrive. The earliest scoop the obvious left-out finds.

Others are wily,

slipping beneath porches, removing knots from trash bags, sifting sawdust.

Mid-August: uprooting ragweed where the ghost garage was, a rectangle seized by eminent domain

decades past,

among wind-piled candy wrappers and snack bags, a shard gem of ivory ceramic greets my eye,

edged with gold leaf. I reach through the broken spiderweb

to grasp this charm.

Imagined recollections in the mind's ear:

1970. Juan and Theisa fight on the top floor, shouts of enraged betrayal, then

1971, Theisa and Francis laugh together. Outdoors, the neighborhood's long-expiring hush,

houses abandoned, demolished, and locomotives

pass on the embankment above the dead zone, cleared for the planner's crown,

the highway never built, a fortunate abortion. 1980. These

house-frame-shaking crashes resound from Saturnio's old apartment. Not flung crockery,

but fifteen karate students in form,

upper floor all polished 1890s floorboards, studio mirrors, windows open to breeze,

sans walls, sans plumbing, sans everything but what pushes forward the transmigration of soul

a house possesses, now a teacher of Okinawan karate and his students.

1937. The knitter dashes

her teacup out the bedroom window. Yet another locomotive

calls to her, there's no further life here. 2002. Sunflowers overwhelm a vacant corner lot,

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fenced and empty, a landlord-arson-era cipher: the smart money expresses its characteristic psychosis. Vacant but not abandoned, fenced but not forbidden, green-mowed and bordered with scepters sprung from the earth and surmounted by gold. 2012. Listen to the shattering bass from passing cars, or listen to the guitar and *corazón* song strapped to the handlebars of a man's bicycle as he glides upstreet in a nineteen-seventies vision.

Note: these variations on Allen Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra" began with systematic word-selection procedures. In the first, each line begins with the first word or phrase of the corresponding line in Ginsberg. In the third, each line ends with the original line's end word. In the second variation, each line begins with a word selected from the entire text via a process inspired by Jackson Mac Low's "diastic" procedures.