

consists entirely of the repetition of a single sentence without any explicit discussion of the traditional tropes of fiction: characterization, narrative, dialogue and conflict. *All Work* is a documentation of process; the evidence of an obsessive writing



*Under the mental  
anguish of the  
Sisyphean task of  
nonlinearity, Torrance's  
grip on reality is  
weakened*



practice which reduces writing to the *act of writing*. The lack of narrative, character and dialogue makes *All Work* about material—the accumulation of text on a page. A novel, here, is anything that takes the form of a novel regardless of the content.

Beuhler chooses to construct only the first few manuscript pages from *The Shining* with obsessive detail, retaining every typographic error and idiosyncratic variation but, sadly, he only maintains that neurotic level of detail for the first few pages. After the introduction of such an obsessive practice, Beuhler erratically maintains the page form from *The Shining* without the content (the errant capitalization, mistyped letters and erroneous indentation), thus turning his manuscript into less a documentation than a translation. This version of *All Work* is thus a series of permutations of the original sentence which suggest the source text without quoting it directly.

Beuhler's *All Work and No Play makes Jack a Dull Boy* succeeds despite this erratic execution as a manual of

potential compositional structures—a 'pataphysical encyclopaedia of textual manipulation in concrete poetry. *All Work and No Play makes Jack a Dull Boy* not only rebuilds Torrance's fictional text, it also channels Charles Bernstein's *Veil*, Bill Bissett's and John Riddell's early typewriter-based visual poetry and Aram Saroyan's work.

The novel is presented as typed manuscript but strangely breaks this conceit for a 10-page section which—while cleanly aping Saroyan's minimalist poetry by including only a single word on each page—shifts the typeface thus breaking the illusion of a reconstructed manuscript. Beuhler's reasoning for this shift is not explained, and sadly, the inconsistency builds upon some already questionable decisions.

Beuhler's print-on-demand publisher blurb.com strangely categorizes *All Work and No Play makes Jack a Dull Boy* as "humour." This suggests that Beuhler himself constructed this novel as a satire or as a punchline. Outside of this project, Beuhler's oeuvre concentrates on the documentation and exploration of urban ruins, the last vestiges of crumbling hotels, industrial sites and developments. Instead of categorizing this conceptual novel as "humour," (suggesting the reader not take both the project and the author seriously) he could have seen this project as the exploration of an urban ruin whereby the author maps the possibilities of potential text.

In terms of contemporary poetics, *All Work and No Play makes Jack a Dull Boy* is ultimately a lesson for conceptual poets. A text should be written, as Craig Dworkin postulates, not in terms of "whether it could have been done better (the question of the workshop), but whether it could conceivably have been done otherwise." An enviable project, Beuhler has squandered this idea, producing a manuscript with regrettably inconsistent results.

## Marsupial

### Derek White

Calamari Press, 2008



### *The Behind-the- Scenes is the Scene*

*Review by Joseph Sacksteder*

DEREK WHITE'S *Marsupial* takes place on the set of a psychedelic film being shot in Paris, and I read a good portion of the novel while serving as an extra in a low-budget kung fu movie. If you've ever been on film sets, in any capacity, you know that they're an incredibly disorienting social phenomenon. A medieval caste system savagely transplanted to modern times, with the scrambling peasants willing to go to any lengths of duplicity or brownnosing to achieve screen time or access to the royal stars. Panicked bouts of urgent productivity interrupt

long periods of tedium with far too much time to think. All meals are called lunch no matter when they take place. Often you must silently pantomime conversation and laughter to whatever complete stranger the P.A. (production assistant) has paired you up with. In the morning, the circus rolls away without a trace, leaving a dazed citizenry in its wake.

White merges this itinerant community with the culture shock of a foreign city to create the grounds on which the triply-perplexed narrator's identity crisis plays out. Stu White leaves his job as a land surveyor in Savannah, Georgia to assume the role as the stand-in for John, his eccentric thespian brother, on the set of *Crawdaddy-O & the Heroine Heir to Notre Dame*. Stu is plagued by a variety of strange neuroses, such as an allergy to light, a fear of pants that aren't being worn, and a certainty that the entire film "is really all just a vast production to keep tabs on [him]." *Crawdaddy-O's* plot is as bizarre as its title, involving a drug-addled writer's struggle to finish a screenplay during his trip to Paris, and his subsequent descent into a seedy (and completely imaginary) underworld in which the key characters have a sort of anthropodic or anthropomorphic double nature. If, as the reader of this review, you have already started to get the plot of the novel and the movie-within-the-novel mixed up, the effect White achieves is similar. The delusions of the screen world begin to bleed into the production as the cast and crew start to exhibit strange physiologic traits. John, and then Stu, grow the fleshy cranial protrusion of the anglerfish, and John's girlfriend, Marie-Yves, begins to transform into John's pet name for her, a platypus. And while *Marsupial* contains a fair share of the *Crawdaddy-O* screenplay, White also presents much of the novel's reality in screenplay format, further drawing into question the division between the film's plot and

the making-of.

Narratively the novel starts out in a surprisingly clear and straightforward manner, given the unusual cover design – which lacks a plot summary, review quotes, and even the author's name. The skillful modulation that takes

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place over two hundred pages into the delightful trippiness and ambiguity of the novel's conclusion is at once dramatic and nearly imperceptible. White first presents the lapses into unreality as "dream sequences" (further appropriating film terminology), but gradually abandons the necessity of this buffered explanation. Suddenly you the reader find yourself in this strange liminal world, unaware of when exactly the shift occurred. As Bernard, the pretentious and drug-addicted director, spawns rewrite after rewrite, the line dividing John and Stu begins to disintegrate. First off, John is often referred to by the character he's playing and by his nascent stage name, Troy and Oph respectively,

and both John and Stu have French nicknames on the set, *Euf* (Egg) and *Jaune* (Yolk). The confusion is intensified by Stu's tendency to write about himself in the first and third person simultaneously: "Jaune is indeed wearing pants. In fact, they are Troy's leather pants he had left me. I don't remember having put them on."

In the hands of a less talented writer, all of these fracturings of form and point-of-view might soon lapse into simple gimmickry or pretenses of appearing avant-garde. But, in *Marsupial*, all experimentation and confusion lead to satisfying payoffs, and even the most outlandish hallucinations have an inherent purpose. The combination of screenplay and novel forms is both appropriate and well executed. As the surreality of the film intrudes upon the production, the screenplay format itself starts to infect the novel form until the two are so entangled that White as the writer and we as the readers stop trying to differentiate them. Even the most undaring films often employ discontinuities in chronology and fragmentation of the story's presented reality; the filmgoing populace has become so accustomed to these practices that we don't even notice – much less, are surprised – when they happen. Due to a variety of financial and logistical reasons, the act of shooting a film takes that already fragmented plot and shakes it into a shot order vastly different than the screenplay. White shakes up the chronology of Stu's life in the same manner, combining events from his childhood, the mysterious death of his mother, and his work as a land surveyor, with such detritus as false etymologies, bestiary vignettes, and a ludicrous recipe for *Poisson Cru*. The section about him and his brother torturing crawdads in a sewage treatment lagoon is a particularly fresh take on themes so familiarly collided in literature: childhood, summer, dusk, and death.

I might not have had a phalangiocyte sprouting from my forehead, but things on the set of the kung fu movie were a little strange as well. When I agreed to be an extra for free, I was under the impression that it was a student film, but the production seemed to be floating somewhere between proper and pauper. An unlikely member of a street gang, I was given a plastic hockey stick to wave threateningly and was coached by a fight coordinator who mostly worked renaissance fairs. Half the extras looked appropriately thugged out, but the rest were either, like me, unlikely, or, like the fight coordinator's band of merry men, downright comical. I've been on a lot of film sets, and – when four A.M. rolled around and they told us to “take ten” – that was the first set I ever walked off.

By the driving and epiphanic final page of *Marsupial*, it seemed to me that the book is essentially about the horrific difficulty of doing anything, the exhaustion of wrestling with even an artistic project as schlocky as *Crawdaddy-O* with the weight of history and identity in tow. It takes the childish solipsism of “I can't see them so they don't exist,” and translates it into the world of filmmaking: “If [the camera's] not rolling, we don't exist.” Witnessing the event that is a big film production has led me to a stark ambivalence: a respect for the amount of hard work and talent in the making of any film, and a deflating sense of the incredible waste of it all when the final product is simply shitty. The taste of the fruit is often unknown until the labor is complete. In this case, *Marsupial* is both right tasty and incredibly filling.

# The Occasional Troubadour

Victor Coleman

Toronto: Book Thug, 2010



THE OCCASIONAL TROUBADOUR  
VICTOR COLEMAN

Review by Michael Boughn

LET'S SAY A MARTIAN comes into your room, with children's blocks, with A, B, C, D, E which are English and he tries to convey a message. This is the way the source of energy goes. But the blocks, on the other hand, are always resisting it.

The outside does come in, as Jack Spicer showed us, sacrificing his life to it. And the poet had better know that or risk turning their language into glorified grocery lists or adolescent diary entries. Reading Spicer and Victor Coleman's recent writing is an exercise that leaves you marvelling at the sheer, perverse intractability of language. *The Occasional Troubadour*, Coleman's latest book, the fourth in his Letter Drop series (tho not technically a letter drop book) consists of 52 poem “portraits” composed for, or in relation to, people of significance to Coleman, ranging from cultural icons like Howard Hawks to intimate

acquaintances with illustrations by David Bolduc.

Different poets in many ways, Coleman shares with Spicer a sense of language's potential to open the world to forces beyond our meagre intentions. Take the pun, for instance. The pun is one of the crucial places where language, in seemingly trivial ways, disturbs the surface of the world, the given, disclosing dimensions of reverberating sense, knocking the floor out from under us. It is one of the joys Coleman and Spicer—for all their differences—share. Louis Zukofsky, who had one of the greatest ears of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, famously put it that poetry is a range of sounding he located as lower limit speech, upper limit music. The pun, as an event, relies on the intelligence of hearing that music in the midst of the constant noise, the constant use of language. It relies on hearing unimpeded by the demand for some immediate foreclosure of sense—say, the sense of hearing. Zukofsky's intelligence lies in an astute phonemic play, a delight in the sheer possibility of sounding.

What are these songs  
Straining at sense—  
You the consequence

Or

It's hard to see but think of a sea  
Condensed into a speck.  
And there are waves—  
Frequencies of light,  
Others that may be heard.  
The one is one sea, the other a  
second.

The playfulness of Zukofsky's intelligence is indistinguishable from the playfulness of his ear and both, as he puts it, strain at sense. Coleman's ear approaches the subtlety of Zukofsky's sonal intelligence. Here he is about a similar business: