

THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

Review: Something New

Reviewed Work(s): Fort Not by Emily Skillings

Review by: Alberto Manguel

Source: *The Threepenny Review*, SPRING 2018, No. 153 (SPRING 2018), p. 12

Published by: Threepenny Review

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44658066>

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Something New

Alberto Manguel

Fort Not
by Emily Skillings.
The Song Cave, 2017,
\$17.95 paper.

WRITTEN LANGUAGE was invented by accountants in order to record transactions in goats or sheep. When poets began to set down their songs on clay or stone, language did not entirely lose this accounting quality. Something in the need to document the commerce between the poet and the world or, as Ezra Pound would have it, between poet and poet, colors the poetic construction like veins in a stone, lending it a certain factual quality. Lists, sums, I.O.U.s are woven into the poetic texture, confirming for the reader the central authority of the text. From Homer's catalogue of ships to the erotic debits and credits of e.e. cummings, poetry has inherited the testimonial quality of such commercial transactions.

The styles of poetic accountancy keep changing. Dante tried out several: the formal, technical descriptions, the emotional monologues that put the speaker in debt to the listener, the love dialogues in one agreed-upon currency, the borrowed voice from other tongues, the childish babble of petty change, the grand wordless closing reward. We have inherited all these ways of writing poetry and, from poet to poet and audience to audience, we have preferred one to another almost arbitrarily, to give our dealings a more or less obvious contemporary voice. Emily Skillings, in an interview with Jonathan Hobratchin of the *Huffington Post* a few months ago, had this to say: "I often give myself arbitrary constraints. I write a lot on my phone using the notes app (or record myself while walking) and then compose in bed. I'm embarrassed to say that I use Twitter as a kind of early-stage drafting space." The stress is on "arbitrary."

After John Ashbery—who was one of Skillings' mentors—after Marina Tsvetayeva, Wallace Stevens, Oswald de Andrade, and many others, the poetic transaction is effected with common coinage, lines overheard on the street, found poetry of a sort. The idea behind the poem is negotiated with the reader, the second person singular brought in to haggle with the supreme authority: will you buy it?

While possessed by this overriding quality, Emily Skillings' poetry is in one particular sense deceitful. It sounds carefree and colloquial, as if the poet were sitting next to you, forcing her conversation on you, as in one of those New York subway rides in which strangers offer their opinions, feelings, views on anything in the

world, obliging you to react to the seemingly casual and erratic sequence of poured-out words. And yet, there is more. "I Love Wiping My Dirty Hands on Other People's Things" is the title of one of her poems. Underlying this sudden relationship, what her poems elicit in the reader-listener (this is Skillings speaking) is "the simultaneous ability to be held and held accountable, to be supported and challenged."

Fort Not is Emily Skillings' first book. Before that, she published two chapbooks, *Backchannel* (Poor Claudia) and *Linnaeus: The 26 Sexual Practices of Plants* (No, Dear/Small Anchor Press), both astonishing in the exactness of wording and brashness of tone. *Fort Not* begins with a poem ("Backchannel") that seems to be describing two banal objects, "an orb-shaped glass orb" and a "designer candle" that the poet has bought and is taking home with her, "to touch myself." Confessed memories of certain places, infected with "hyperbolic / Encyclopedia of World Mythology-sized feelings," lead her to try and reach a summoning point in thought, "but really there's nothing / in these texts to end on." Finally, inside her own body she finds "the exquisitely dropped beat / I've been searching for / in most holdable objects." The irresistible point lies within us.

As the collection's incipit, this poem gives us the theme that will resonate throughout the book. Throughout a series of casual conversations, in dialogue between two strangers, what is transacted? What is that "dropped beat" that the small talk is attempting to communicate in the thunder around us, gathering all memory and all experience in one single reverberating sound? Hobbes, denying the metaphysical universe, scorned the idea of a *nunc-stans* and a *hic-stans*, the point where all space and all time are found huddled together. Henri Michaux, on the contrary, defined this as the summation of all existence. "A human being," he wrote, "is essentially nothing but one small point. It is this point that death devours." On this concluding note Skillings' book begins.

Fort Not does not extend in a single direction. It advances, then retreats, then finds byways. In "When I was a Glacier," Skillings reverses the initial Michaux nightmarish notion:

A moment ago, I moved
something (not particularly
large) to the other side
of the table and felt
so old and immense
and in control. Like a truck
crunching on its path.

Now it is the world that becomes that devoured point, and the poet the devourer. In this vein, the poet

describes love-making with the ancient metaphor of a battlefield in "Siege of La Rochelle," which ends with this:

Your only goal should be to make her feel
historical.
One of the greatest things about battle is
when nobody is satisfied and everyone
dies.

Skillings has ordered the poems in *Fort Not* as variations or explorations of the initial question: what are we supposed to be negotiating? In "Shoprite," the individual (the poet) and the universe (the world of experience, the audience) share the power play in a supermarket: the poem exists in the tension between the buyer and the thing bought.

Like dead fish positioned
On a shaved ice incline
Mouths agape towards some vast white
space
I am curving muscular spines
Towards the monger of this century
I will not let him, nor anyone
Take their eyes off mine
My eighteen cold, wet eyes

And yet, the microcosm-macrocosm relationship, with its shifting viewpoints and changing authoritarian seats, is ultimately never satisfying. Neither position answers the primordial question, neither comforts or consoles. "The scenic route drowned / a long time ago," writes Skillings in the first of the poems titled "Fort Not."

"Didn't you know? Water froze / in the generation." And in the second "Fort Not" poem she instructs the reader:

Don't send money
Don't send thoughts
(...)
Don't send poetry, no
(...)
Send water
Send thing
(...)
Send sound

Send death
Then sound again

In the interview quoted above, Skillings confessed: "I don't know what makes a great poet. I think we've leaned away from preoccupations with greatness and this is a relief to me. I often become obsessed with things that are marked by what one might call 'badness,' that are sloppy or excessive or loud—art with leaks."

Of the many books by young poets that I have read in the past few years, none stands out for me as strongly as Skillings' *Fort Not*. It shows a certainty of tone, an intelligent curiosity, a lacerating (and at the same time healing) wit. It is moving and memorable. Gaps, cracks in the canvas, blanks on her pages, a deftness of touch, allow us to become active, and force us to be dragged towards Michaux's infinitesimal black hole, approaching in the Alice-like fall some kind of understanding. Art with leaks. □

Fake Pockets

Like doll
mouths they
don't work
except in
pretend;

you can't
actually get
a word out
or a spoon
in.

—Kay Ryan