

## An Ocean Drama

*The Dyzgraph<sup>st</sup>*. Canisia Lubrin. McClelland & Stewart, 2020. 176 pp. \$18.95 (paper).

While reading Canisia Lubrin's *The Dyzgraph<sup>st</sup>*—a genre-defying long poem divided into seven acts, with a dramatis personae list, prologue, monologue, and epilogue—I kept picturing *Plastic Ocean* by artist Tan Zi Xi. For this installation, Zi Xi collected twenty-six thousand pieces of plastic, ranging from milk gallons and shampoo bottles to Tupperware lids, and hung them from the ceiling like party balloons. The pieces of plastic blocked the white lights above, casting the room in a blue color, an eerie, oceanic hue. A small white platform in the middle of the room let viewers rise and stand face-to-face with the plastic.

This positioning of the viewer underneath so much plastic garbage directly parallels Zi Xi's inspiration: the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a mass of debris in the central North Pacific Ocean. Photographs show turtles and fish swimming under the shadow of floating garbage. For us, the viewer of these photographs, the garbage, while random, holds glimmers of familiarity—a logo here, a corporation's emblematic colors there, etc.—but for the sea creatures, the garbage is foreign and intrusive. At least at first. I imagine that the garbage becomes familiar to the sea creatures over time—obtrusive, yes, but part of the environment. If throwing something out is an act of forgetting, photographs of the garbage patch are stark reminders, awakening us to the consequences of our neglect. Zi Xi's installation pushes this awakening further by placing us in the position of a sea creature under the garbage. The oppressiveness of the garbage, our implied human presence, the attempt to forget—all becomes tangible in those moments on Zi Xi's platform.

Creating moments where the consequences of your own life and those of others blur together so that it feels personal and impersonal all at once—this is the charge of lyric poetry. In Canisia Lubrin's *The Dyzgraph<sup>st</sup>*, this charge plays out in terms of linguistic density, evident

even in the dedication, which reads, “For the impossible citizens of the ill world.” As a reader moves through the poem’s seven acts, the range of what *impossible* might mean expands: from impossible to tolerate (passages interrogating acts that “disappear a people, dignity by dignity”); to impossible to keep existing as is (poems meditating on the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill); and impossible to fully articulate (the meaning most directly engaged with throughout the project).

This theme of articulation is braided into the other threads in the *Dramatis Personae*:

i: First person singular.

I: Second person singular.

I: Third person plural.

JEJUNE: THE VOICE addressed, every page. The chorus, the you, the we/un navigable self. The character never leaves the stage. The character must always leave the stage. This is an ocean drama.

Just reading through this list troubles lyric poetry’s idea of the speaker. The way that the multitensed i / I / I all stream into the final character, JeJune, the voice of this long poem, is narratively disorienting. The disorientation mirrors the multiple reactions we have to looking at photographs of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and Zi Xi’s installation; only, instead of garbage and plastic, language itself hangs before us, implying our sense of self, our presence and that of others, and, later in the book, implying our guilt and helplessness.

The following excerpt from Act I serves as an example of how these polyvocal and polyvalent elements come together in a reckoning at the level of language itself:

JeJune has known I, they were children once  
children holding their heads up at the aquarium  
of ill-conceived enterprise, let that be all you need

to know, the dyzgraph\*st must lend the mouth  
to the flood of oil beneath the Gulf of Mexico  
the waves doing their best to save us from Amerikkka,

the premonition of coins, given plumage, red, jaune, blé ek  
owange, the children who know their job: know to never be  
done with answering the unanswerable: di nou ki les ki la

to never raise a hand or shield themselves against  
some agent of decay, lithographic forms of having  
to commit, to commit to the speaking, bluer

than perpetual lines of black tears, you meet I,  
now the elder one, wanting a haunting with Jejune  
though all of that is too much, too much to ask:

Here, the first stanza creates a mutual narrative of memory between Jejune and I, which is seemingly interrupted only to be taken up in the final stanza where the two meet again. I say “seemingly interrupted” because the polyvocal nature of the poem means the Jejune and I are connected. The connection, however, is purposefully threadbare. In the polyvocal narration of this excerpt, as well as elsewhere in the book, personal and public narrative wrestle. What we have here is a personal narrative interrupted by the narration’s need to “lend the mouth” to the more public issues of colonialism, capitalism, and oppression. The thread between personal and public is presence; by interrupting narratives, Lubrin evokes a sense of this conflicted impulse while also fulfilling it through inventory and juxtaposition. Born on the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia and living in Canada, Lubrin also brings multilinguality into play, using presence as a way to push against erasure, for example in “di nou ki les ki la,” which in Haitian Creole means “tell us which ones are there.”

Through this interpolation of polyvocal narration and multilinguality, we can feel the rich density at the heart of this book. Lubrin sets herself at the task of “[telling us] which ones are there” in the consciousness of this polyvocal narration while at the same time self-consciously interrogating what it means to be able to *do* this telling. Like photographs of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and Zi Xi’s installation, Lubrin’s project shows us what the human enterprise of language can cost and has cost on a personal as well as public level. Lubrin answers the question of what’s at stake over and over again with a paradox: everything and nothing. Everything, in that one’s personal

consciousness is alive and in peril in an “ill world” that everyone is implicated in making ill; and nothing, in that articulating this peril is impossible due to the limits of language.

This idea of language and its limits is key to understanding *The Dyzgraph<sup>h</sup>st* and its lyric multitudes. The book’s title alludes to dysgraphia, which impairs the ability to write as well as to create coherence. Lubrin is also alluding to the use of *dysgraphia* by Christina Sharpe, a leading scholar in Black Diaspora thought and cultures, who frames the word within the Black Diaspora as “the inability of language to cohere around the bodies and the suffering of . . . Black people who live and die in the wake [of slavery] and whose everyday acts insist Black life into the wake.” Thus, the book’s wrestling with language can be viewed as a push for presence in the face of Black erasure. And while scholars can wax about the mutability and fluidity of language, there are indeed limits to language’s capabilities when it comes to oppressed and marginalized peoples. These limits are resisted and overcome through the work of artists like Lubrin, but they are acknowledged there, nonetheless.

Lubrin showcases a troubled empathy for an imperiled world as well as for the imperiled self in the following excerpt from later in Act I:

but let I go, given the choice now to speak  
after five hundred years of dysgraphia  
let I approach the witness stand in any chosen language,  
  
let I bend into a touch of the supernatural, let that be all  
you need to know, where the heart is bruised with unfeeling,  
to delay the organ’s devotion to devotion, is not belief, or it is  
  
calling I to walk out of the sea, all of the world hears  
the surf supply applause, hears JeJune swimming in,  
JeJune outlawed in the notes of fifty generations  
  
far from that door of even more (un)openings,  
how to pay for the vocal injury I feels at the end of  
the Gulf of Mexico, the won wrecks, seeds still in jars after  
  
a century, how the sea hacks the compass still  
I feels how far is left to go, Sudan, Abaco, Aleppo, still  
before the self-same notes of dead musicians consider I

more than the pen, and to have never thought of  
the notes as autobio, and to have never built  
a better world to inhabit or break

Here, one can see the ocean drama move from strident agency (“let I approach the witness stand in any chosen language”) to a crisis of conscience (the split between “autobio” and the “better world” not built). Lubrin’s formal choices in individual sections as well as across all seven acts are the result of an ambition that necessarily risks aesthetic difficulty, yet her choice to imbue part of the polyvocal narration with pathos and self-awareness demonstrates the difficulty as an effort to keep meaning from being lost.

The expansive lyricism at work in *The Dyzgraph<sup>x</sup>st* presents words, phrases, lists, narrative threads, and lyric sequences from the perspective of a multibodied voice and lets them hang like so many loose pieces of plastic over us. The result is a discordant polyphony where we marvel, ponder, reflect, and regret, as language that holds up to us—near-simultaneously—what is beautiful and terrible about our inner and outer worlds.