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REVIEWS & PRESS

Kimberley Lyons. *Abracadabra*. Granary Books, 1998.



Wallace, Mark. "Review of *Abracadabra*." *Rain Taxi* 5 (Spring 2000).

This enigmatic book of poems, quiet yet intense, draws on an intriguing range of influences to explore the relation between ourselves and others, people and things. The work has an understated precision of detail, as well as meditative subtlety, that consciously echoes the traditions of Asian poetry and mixes them with a set of more recognizably contemporary avant garde techniques. Despite the historical underpinning, the subject matter is entirely contemporary; the poems focus on small daily struggles, intimate encounters, and startling juxtapositions of common objects, all of them framed by an informed social awareness.

Abracadabra concerns the inevitable interrelation between people—we are not separate from each other but irretrievably bound, in ways alternately comfortable and frightening. Yet it concerns as well the interrelation between people and objects; any notion of ourselves as subjective immediately must reckon with the way our consciousness is also created by the things we live among. Persons become intertwined with each other and with things, sometimes in indecipherable ways. These relations are constantly shifting—connections become traps, and traps become connections, and no situation stays stable more than temporarily. Yet Lyons manages to explore these philosophical implications through a language that never appears overtly theoretical. Rather than commenting from a safe intellectual distance, the narrator of *Abracadabra* talks intimately about a life she lives in thoroughly, for better and worse.

Lyons frames her poems with an understanding of social dynamics: "is it better to improve and/ improve at a defined game/ or to fuck up/ in continuous instances/ in a situation only possibly/ a game." Yet political protest stays in the background here; the poems focus more on "Details & Incidents" ("It's cords of appliances that thwart/ casual obfuscation of objects") that suggest political implications rather than overtly arguing them. The narrator of these poems lives in a world of complex daily navigation of people and things, one which often takes all her energy. "I want to be/ enveloped by you I tell/ him. Empathize./ A condition rather than/ motion," she writes in "Biscotti," yet it's clear she knows that motion is an unavoidable condition, that she doesn't expect a resolution to the longing she expresses.

Many of these poems are moodily dark; "I suck on my violet duck/ I hit my spoon with the floor. Call out to the/ shadow of a saint/ who has fallen under his horse" are the lines that end "The Concise History of Painting." Objects and people can overwhelm us easily; the danger of connections is that we can lose ourselves in them. This potential is highlighted by the long prose poem "Duration," one of the centerpieces of the collection. Taking place in different locales in America and Europe, "Duration" presents an extended exploration of the way people lose each other and themselves: "She feels herself to be provisional, easily rubbed away by their bodies knocking into hers. She cannot remember what she looks like, even if she has a face. She is duct of words she repeats to herself to become a body. The body sits in a chair." While "Duration" ultimately suggests the necessity of refusing despair, the mood of the poem is one of shadows upon shadows: "In the night there are no pictures, no memory."

Certain later poems in the collection do state Lyons' theoretical perspective more directly: "In detaching buds from the stems, stacks of situations and enigmas. Montage of chaotic, indeterminate surfaces/ as the rain diffuses" she writes in "One Hundred Views from Edo." And the book's final section, "Object Relations," makes clear the way she thinks of people themselves as physical, as objects in a world of objects, whatever our various subjectivities. All these objects are interrelated, as she writes in March 6: "and everything seems to be part of it/ in the Japanese sense as Patricia says." Yet even such direct statements are not answers so much as they are further situations to encounter, explore and struggle with. *Abracadabra* doesn't try to tell others how to live but concerns how the narrator herself is going to do it.

There is mystery in *Abracadabra*, a permanent sense of shadow and fog. Much of the book's power lies in its ability to explore this mystery without dispelling it. Never loud or insistent, these are the kind of poems whose resonance one could easily miss; a reader who doesn't pay close attention might dismiss them as amorphous and mushy. Yet they greatly reward the reader who stays with them, who recognizes that amorphous mush is often the condition out of which we must build lives and identities and connections, tentative but necessary. The great strength of this book is in its honest engagement with the narrator's involvement in this building process, and its refusal to make assertions about the world that, however comforting, would nonetheless be false.

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