

Introduction to *Live from the Mood Board*
—Kathleen Winter, Contest Judge.

Most first books of poetry are autobiographical, for obvious reasons. In particular, lyric poems enfold autobiography at their cores, minute autobiographies of consciousness. Any dedicated museum goer has encountered self-portraits by Dürer, Van Gogh, Cindy Sherman, Robert Mapplethorpe and countless others, whether realized in graphite, paint or pixels. Auteurs as varied as François Truffaut, Agnès Varda and Andrei Tarkovsky included autobiography as an element in their oeuvres. Artists are their own most irresistible, convenient and omnipresent subject matter, yet poets of insight and sensitivity discover continuities ensuring that readers are able to connect with, be moved by, their perceptions and time-stamped experiences.

The title of Candice Reffe's collection *Live from the Mood Board* suggests not only the vivacity and changeable emotions of her poems, but gets directly at an element that makes this rather autobiographical first book quite unique. Instead of focusing on an event of personal crisis, or the illness or death of a loved one, or the poet's experiences with her first family (as do so many debut collections), Reffe's book reflects on the life of a professional working in fashion design and merchandising—domain of the mood board, the sales cycle, the runway, the conference room. At the same time, the collection charts the yearning and frustrations of a woman whose drive to channel her energies toward making art is stymied by quotidian demands of making a living. Reffe's images and metaphors depict an insider's view of the fashion world, no doubt foreign to most poets and poetry-readers, with originality and perceptive depth. Employees returning from a winter holiday register "freedom as a luxury we're about to pay tax on. Each / of us entered into a cell on a spreadsheet, / confined by its border at desks or meetings." Charged with writing encouraging jargon to spur on her colleagues, one executive grieves the inaccessibility of her own creative logos, her restriction in the corporate "pen": "I flit my dream's hallways & elevators in stockings & suit."

A tidy band of exceptions proves the rule that published poets in the contemporary United States work in the academy, publishing industry, or arts-oriented non-profits. The stray pediatricians, advertising execs and standup co-medians who also write poetry collections jump quickly to mind by force of

the charm of their rarity. Reffe's poems likewise exude a freshness and pleasing oddity partially due to her ability to identify and develop aspects of humanity and humor in what some outsiders might assume is an antiseptic corporate vacuum. Reffe gives readers a curious, engrossing perspective on this distinctive pocket of the New York City business world and its corollary components, including the commute, the business trip, the weekend detox after a month of frantic crunch-time days.

Taking us "where I sink / a needle into another day's groove, to the record turning," Reffe weaves images and metaphors involved with design and clothes-making into many of her free verse poems. She compares a traffic cop to a yellow jacket in an extended metaphor that spotlights the woman's narrow waist, her chartreuse and black uniform. In an airport vignette, Sarah Jessica Parker's twins are revealed to be "bespoke, bestowed" as the amusingly envious speaker's sighting of this most fashionable traveler gives rise to "gauzy wishes, cloud-colored florets / blown back into a backyard dandelion." Elsewhere, the speaker presents her "larcenous sorrow zipped in a wet suit." Another vivid fashion-infused image is her "K-Mart mother / in a seal coat that shifts from dark to light & back again / with a child's pawed stroking." The section-length poem "The Drop Rack" explicitly contends with synchronicities between the mindset and activities of a fashion professional and those of an artist. Consciousness is prized, recognized as "hand-knit minutes."

Despite the professional nexus evident also in section titles such as "Earthling in Transit" and "Human Resources," this book is far from being a narrative-heavy, matter-of-fact account of events in a businesswoman's nonstop work life. Many of Reffe's poems make forays into the intricacies of consciousness as a woman explores contingent versions of self, some disturbing—a dog/woman futilely sniffing a mother's bones, a penis-biting snake—others delightful in their singularity: "I wouldn't mind being trees walking" and "I'd rather be the view of town from shore seen / from a dad's shoulders." Often, this speaker who wants "to un-become" herself tries out flight in the guise of a bird. Avian references abound throughout, one of several image sequences the poet deploys with artful, judicious poise. Rather than tiring of birds, readers are likely to appreciate the myriad ways they inhabit poems such as "Kink in the Polar Vortex: Letter to my Husband," in which both spouses morph into lousy pigeons, "shingled wing to wing on the lee / ridge."

Perhaps loneliness drives the speaker's impulse toward zoanthropy, another persistent trope, for this emotion shades the mood of several of the poems, from the child playing by herself in "Self Portrait in a Rental Kitchen" to the poignant portrait of a wife experiencing psychological alienation despite the presence of her husband in the same room, quarantined by his ear buds. Some of Reffe's most empathetic and passionate lyrics consider the fates of lab animals and victims of industrial farming.

The pleasure of this collection accrues in Reffe's deft, unique images but also in her harmonic and effective work with sound, amplifying the image with repetition, slant rhyme and assonance. Take for example: ". . . she'll become a rack of bones, bone / in my mouth, my mouth / a ship's bow water-trilled, a black- / lipped dog-mouth, foaming." Conceiving one office scene as a metaphoric soundstage, Reffe plays up the point with alliteration: "Each voice a string plucked, a lack amplified / from childhood. The past polyphonic / in the present: someone's operatic / mother, TV-remote father. Contrapuntal / in conference rooms, copy / rooms, corridors, layered into every office / encounter, counteracting the main melody, the actual / work day." This passage also demonstrates the poet's skillful, multivalent line breaks.

Reffe sustains the velocity of the book with her sophisticated soundscapes and surprising metaphors, highlighting conjunctions of the clothing trade and aesthetics in the mind of a woman immersed both in fashion's color scales and the poet's practice of observing natural and built worlds. She notes "the chromatic / collision of beauty and violence" in the smashed body of a squirrel before riffing on the history of red dye, its covert ingredients of arsenic and the cochineal of crushed insects. Supple syntax and subtle variations in poetic form also add to this debut collection's complexity and polish. Readers across age ranges and geographical and economic situations are likely to resonate with the struggle toward psychic and professional liberation that builds momentum throughout this book—the sense of consciousness taking wing to escape the mundane, as the conflicted self "becomes a hallelujah."

—*Kathleen Winter*