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## Performance Piece

Paula Koneazny

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PRESENT TENSE

Anna Rabinowitz

Omnidawn  
http://www.omnidawn.com  
117 pages; paper, \$14.95

*Present Tense* is the past and almost the future. This sense of ongoingness is aptly summarized in the “Prologue”: “where we were we are here and where we are and not to be and where there is a there not yet and still to be.” More a play than a book-length poem, *Present Tense* is made up of acts and scenes, its disparate parts meant to converse, to talk back to one another, while expressing discord and disjuncture—the violence that is built into mythology and history. In the story of Cain and Abel that opens “Act II,” “god was brutal waste, the taste / of ash and torrid stone,” and in “Act III,” in a hypothetical dialog between Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, man’s violence is attributed to instinct. There is little peace in Anna Rabinowitz’s new book.

The techniques and insights of psychotherapy have been and continue to be applied to war and torture. The poet borrows this lexicon. In so doing, she implies a correlation between the father figure of the psychiatrist (Freud) and that of the torturer. She establishes a certain equivalence among psychology, nuclear physics, war, and persecution, each with its grab bag of coercions and rationalizations. At times, all use language for nefarious ends. There are

prescriptions for torture just as there are for treatment of patients in a mental hospital. As for the torturers, there is always the chilling rationalization that “You are in the service of your country. // You are helping to make the world a better place.”

Although it takes on serious subjects, *Present Tense* doesn’t achieve the gravitas of Rabinowitz’s previous *Darkling* (2001), but something more comedic. In fact, these poems are most successful when most theatrical. The fact that they are presented in five acts emphasizes performance; perhaps they are best read aloud or sung. For example, “Present Tense V” includes an anaphoric chant/invocation of “Let it be”s and “Let it not be”s:

Let it be strangelove, strangeplace,  
strangewhere  
.....  
Let it be sunscrawl  
.....  
Let it be dismantled walls  
Weepdirge and bleat of denuded trees  
Barkgnarl, barksnarl  
.....  
Let it not be posthumous.

Parts of “Anna Speaks” in “Act II” satisfy similarly. Lines such as “Belated kerfuffle in a belated place, / And the opulent penny hunkers on the sill” should be read out loud to be properly savored.

***Present Tense is the past and almost the future.***

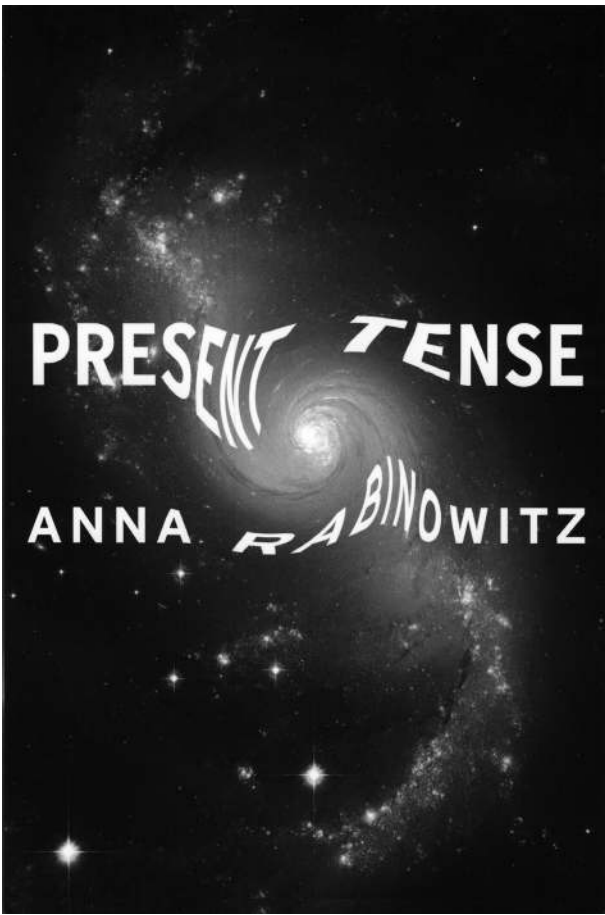
*Present Tense* is strongest when most formal, as in two sections of “Albert Sigmund Bitter Fruit,” the first of which utilizes end rhyme, singsong, nonsense, and repetition to good effect: “*The world’s a gas, so diddle dee. Oh nonny no the vapors flow. / The world’s a glass. It hosts our rub to rose its rosey glow.*” The next section of this poem could stand on its own as an abecedarian that cleverly trips along from A to Z, creating delectable excursions—for example, through the lands of *c* and *p*:

COULD WE HAVE CALLED FOR A CESSATION OF  
CLAMORS —

COULD WE HAVE CAUTIONED  
CRIMSON NOT TO COLONIZE ITS  
CURRENCIES  
ON CATAFALQUES OF

.....  
Postscripts of paid product placement, profit  
proliferation,  
and puce pandemonium  
polluting the port.

Unfortunately, the poet doesn’t provide such aural satisfactions often enough. Although there is plenty of evidence in *Present Tense* that Rabinowitz is capable of evocative and surprising language, such as “wandering the piled shardedness, the intersilvered skies” in the “Prologue,” too many of her poems’ claims and revelations are just not fresh or surprising enough. We have heard them so often before and elsewhere that they have become the equivalent of intellectual white noise: ideas such as “Lies are the intensest truths” and “the story has no center,” as well as twists upon stock sayings like “Invention is the mother of intention.” Perhaps the ideas themselves are still valid, but Rabinowitz doesn’t succeed in restating them so as to make them newly interesting. That said, her allusion to William Butler Yeats’s “The Second Coming,” itself a much overused and abused



trope, is pleasantly cheeky; she manages to put some spin on her version: “The center will not hold. Nor the peripheries...that are nowhere.”

Anna Rabinowitz is certainly contemplating her own mortality in many of these poems, and she is good when discoursing on time. In “A History of Time II” she writes, “When we are dead we are late // Perpetually late /// once we’re late.” When she says, in “Present Tense II,” “I have felt alien every day of my life,” there is a sense of looking back at an almost completed life. A few lines later she continues, “Only one more shot remains on the roll,” as if she’s fully aware that there may not be many more books to come, so she must say what she needs to here and now. Indeed, in “Present Tense III,” the poet warns (herself?) that “It’s now or never.” Occasionally, her tone is almost Shakespearean: “I am old. I am old. The good days grow cold.”

Despite its grand scope, or perhaps because of it, *Present Tense* doesn’t, finally, satisfactorily cohere. Its many finds remain a jumbled collection, somehow never gathering the force their collective weight would suggest. Whether the elements are poorly chosen or misstated is hard to say. Rabinowitz employs much artistry; she’s almost convincing; but in the end, I’m left with less than I suspect she intended.

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