Truth or

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superhuman strength. “It doesn’t hurt when the front end of the bus wraps itself around me,” Robert says in one moment—in another, “The fire incinerates my clothing, roasting me naked in the street. It hurts.” One despairs, a little, at reading about a man who can fully empathize with a Thanksgiving turkey, but who is tongue-tied, or tongue-singed. Seemingly, language is beside the point, and it’s genre that gives shape to the bulk of the work.

In the work is a whole tangle of genre—even within the exam format, we’re given crosswords, a telegram, letters, poems, comic panels, interviews, and a psychiatric examination, to name a few. There aren’t so many scenes as there are presentations. It is a deluge, and the freneticism of genre-leaping is mirrored in the plot: Robert tumbles in and out of relationships, characters rear up and retreat, and quizzes are pitched at the reader after each selection.

“In Document D, why was Sera willing to care for the narrator, Nelson?” The answer to each of these questions (it’s one of the choices provided in this multiple-choice format): “There is not enough information to figure it out.” These moments, tales, and caped figures are fleeting. These consequences were always bound at least by consequence? // To have turned this floating from time to time—occasionally.

And then floating from—

Similarly, line breaks recast a blind self into a self that’s not self-aware, then recasts the idea that a person is indistinct from her needs into the idea that the individual has the need to control. Likewise, “the urge / to have nothing” becomes the desire that “nothing // change.”

I have been all this while in transit which is to say without a clear aim in mind….

The speaker is already moving, and we keep step, watching images unfold and figuring things out right alongside.

The collection includes five études, three in the first section and two in the last. “Étude” means “study”; Hogue writes studies of love, power, listening, trust, and memory. Traditionally, an étude is a musical composition, relatively difficult and used to practice or demonstrate a particular technique. The technique to which I keep returning with admiration is Hogue’s use of line break. In the opening étude are the following lines:

Do we all go through this floating from time to time when the self cannot see the self so close in its need to control, which is the urge to have nothing change? This desire…

Each line carries its own sense, and also creates meaning with the lines before and after. We are first floating from—as a result of, away from—time and then floating from time to time—occasionally. Similarly, line breaks recast a blind self into a self that’s not self-aware, then recasts the idea that a person is indistinct from her needs into the idea that the individual has the need to control. Likewise, “the urge / to have nothing” becomes the desire that “nothing // change.”

If the reader is willing to get her hands inky with this work, then she should be prepared to heave out some sighs. The overwhelming trope of the work is desperation—or, in some documents, desperation’s more passive cousin, disappointment. It’s all cloaked in cheesiness. One of the superheroes receives a letter from a person who identifies himself as his “best friend from a time that doesn’t exist anymore.” The writer conjures up a description of his future self: “He was the butterfly that flapped its wings and no matter which way he flapped them, the world kept blowing up.” The letter rounds out with a PS: “I can’t tell you my real name, because that ends up blowing up the planet. Sorry.” What emerges from this frantic fragility of it is a strange pitch: the tone (barking laugh) is that of a cocktail party gone awry.

In one of the early scenes, we meet a member of Robert’s cohort—Irma, who melts things with her touch. She also makes mix-tapes. “Sometimes I have powers that make me dangerous to everyone around me,” she says. In another moment, Irma is made poetic: “Irma says, I want out of / this world / now,” and in this form—deconstructed sentences—she seems to helplessly slide down the page.

In The Sounds of Poetry (1998), Robert Pinsky observes of line breaks, “the syntax is trying to speed up the line, and the line is trying to slow down the syntax.” He calls this a “pull or dance,” and that’s what Hogue’s lines do. They dance together, pulling back and pushing forward to create richness of meaning. In The Art of the Poetic Line (2007), James Longenbach argues for the term “line ending” rather than “line break,” to capture “the shifting effects of three ways of ending the line: annotating lines, parsing lines, and end-stopped lines.” The lines excerpted from “Étude (on Love)” are beautifully annotating in Longenbach’s terms: “rather than following the grammatical units, the lines cut against

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**TRUTH OR**

**OR CONSEQUENCE**

Cynthia Hogue

Red Hen Press

http://www.redhen.org

104 pages; paper, $18.95

The title of Cynthia Hogue’s Or Consequence conjures the phrase “truth or consequences.” The game show by that name ran on and off on radio, then television, for decades. Contestants had to answer obscure trivia questions truthfully or, because they usually couldn’t answer correctly or quickly, faced consequences. These consequences were always surprises, sometimes gags or stunts, and occasionally sentimental reunions. Hogue’s poetry collection, of course, is no game show, but the poems recognize consequences. These consequences were always truths that are the true experiences of this world. Or Consequence embodies the effects we experience and our sense of their causes. The poems are inferences.

The word “consequence” comes from the Latin meaning “to follow with, to track together.” In Hogue’s poems, the reader follows beside, even from the first lines of the opening poem, “Étude (on Love):”
them, annotating the syntax with emphasis that the syntax would not otherwise provide.”

Another way Hogue employs line endings—annotating, and also parsed and end-stopped—is to dole out images or ideas line by line. The senses focus on one thing, then another, as a scene unfolds. The middle of section 1 of “Étude (on Power)” demonstrates this mixing of line endings and this pacing:

Your eyes scaling the wall, rappelling down the other side. Fear fear no more, the heat of it.

You sit across from empty cartons cluttering the round table of the new office. Cathedral-ceilinged. The burnished glow of veranda shades covering a porch’s antique calm.

The reader’s mind moves up a wall, then down the other side, each line creating distinct movement. The rappelling induces fear, but the next stanza redefines that fear. The reader imagines sitting, then notices the cluttering the round table empty cartons of the new office. Cathedral-

Do you? Do you?

Language is pleasurable for Hogue, even in the face of pain, even in the face of—or as a result of—ambiguity and its possibilities.

Some of the poems are more proxy (“On Bumps River”) or self-conscious (“The Fact of Speech”), but Hogue’s poetic technique serves each poem. And often, the poems are hard hitting, even political. “The Green Card Is Not Green” and “An Hour from Town (Terezín)” are two particularly poignant and historically resonant poems, both dealing with who is an insider or outsider, who has what sort of home, and who is right, has rights, practices rites, and can write. Another poem overtly historical-political is the middle section of the collection, “New Orleans Suite: Ars Cora/Under Erasure.” In the note that precedes this section, Hogue explains that she draws “upon a slave story I never forgot,” the story of Arsense, also known as Cora, the last slave to sue for her freedom and back wages—she “won her case and disappeared from all records.” Here, Hogue creates a new record for Arsense/Cora.

Cynthia Hogue is shaping contemporary American poetry.

Or Consequence is Cynthia Hogue’s sixth poetry collection and her second from Red Hen Press, a nonprofit literary press started in 1994. Her recent work also includes When the Water Came (2010), a book about Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath drawn from interviews with Gulf Coast residents, along with photographs by Rebecca Ross. Hogue edited, with Elisabeth Frost, the anthology Innovative Women Poets (2007), which includes poems and interviews. Cynthia Hogue, through her poetry and other projects, is shaping contemporary American poetry. Or Consequence concludes, then, with a linguistic and political trajectory: “What we know is / hope, and say, We are / hopeful, we have hope.”

Anna Leahy is the author of Constituents of Matter, which won the Wick Poetry Prize. She teaches in the MFA and BFA programs at Chapman University and directs Tabula Poetica.

Bernheimer’s prose is Spartan and frank, like that of a child, but gracefully, beautifully so.

Bernheimer’s tales are anything but cuddly and cozy. Her narratives hold a mirror up to Western constructions of gender, and the reflections disturb and chill. Bernheimer takes up the feminist charge of legendary writers like Angela Carter, adopting the fairy-tale structure to illuminate how our narratives, especially the ones we feed children, train women for brainless sexual domestication. Yet unlike Carter’s lush lyrical prose, Bernheimer’s is Spartan and frank, like that of a child, but gracefully, beautifully so.

Indeed, many of her protagonists are children—little girls who play games of suffering and rape and torture, who learn to find pleasure in deprivation, who replace sisters with dolls, then dolls with imaginary friends and never recover when their invisible side-kicks are kidnapped by men in the night.

One of the most haunting girls is Edith, from “A Cageing Tale,” a girl who lets her pet parakeet fly free in her room. After it crashes into a window and dies, Edith leaves home and takes a job at a toleless dance club where she perches in a cage of her own. When Edith is fired from the club, aging out at thirty, she gets a two-bedroom apartment, prostituting herself in one room and building herself a magnificent cage out of mechanical parts in the other. The cage is her haven, a quiet place where she can assume the familiar role of the mindless, hollow-boned bird, who eats and thinks little, a role she’s been taught. The degree to which girls internalize a Western model of femininity is captured horrifically in the following passage, which comes from the bird’s death: “The girl grew to love the parakeet so much it was painful. Sometimes she imagined roasting its sweet body, putting the poor thing onto a stick over a fire—it was so small and delicate, it was hard not to think this.” Though the men who pay Edith for sex are called “gentle friends” and “sweet men,” it is clear that Edith understands heterosexual relationships to be linked to possession, possession that is destructive, incinerating the female body, snuffing individuality out.

Another female protagonist who learns the masculine habit of keeping creatures is the girl’s wife in “A Petting Zoo Tale.” In this story, “the girl” builds a petting zoo in her basement, a miniature circus kept secret from her husband, who is obvi- ous to the animals living under his floor even while "catalogs to order live monkeys pile up by the bed," Though thematically akin to “A Cageing Tale,” this one achieves its resonance through lightness and humor. Bernheimer describes the husband thusly: The girl would never forgive herself for upsetting the husband’s sweet balance. He must try to keep calm, for how else could he daily don a button-down shirt, a checkered tie? Dress in a suit, as if to ac- company an organ grinder through town? All he lacks is the little cap! “Look at me! A working man! Yeep! Yeep!”

Bernheimer continued on next page

CAUTIONARY TALES

HORSE, FLOWER, BIRD
Kate Bernheimer
Art by Rikki Ducornet
Coffee House Press
http://www.coffeeshousepress.org
185 pages; paper, $14.95

As a physical object, Kate Bernheimer’s collection of stories Horse, Flower, Bird evokes nostalgia for the way books drew us in as children. The generous white space between spare, quiet sentences leaves us hungering for more pages. Rikki Ducornet’s chimeric illustrations coax our powers of imagination. The book’s slight size is light in the palms of our hands. But we quickly find that the experience of reading fairy tales has changed since childhood. Or rather, we’ve changed, our lenses now are drawn from interviews with Gulf Coast residents, along with photographs by Rebecca Ross. Hogue edited, with Elisabeth Frost, the anthology Innovative Women Poets (2007), which includes poems and interviews. Cynthia Hogue, through her poetry and other projects, is shaping contemporary American poetry. Or Consequence concludes, then, with a linguistic and political trajectory: “What we know is / hope, and say, We are / hopeful, we have hope.”

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Tessa Mellas

Innova-