

ON PUNKS BY JOHN KEENE

APZ Books

CARY STOUGH

Until the 2017 Las Vegas shooting, the deadliest mass shooting by a single person in US history occurred in the middle of the night of June 12, 2016 in an Orlando nightclub, Pulse. 49 lives were lost and countless affected, including those of us reading this.

*We are the foundation, the mascara, the blush.
We are the eyeblink, the heartbeat, the hush.*

We are the shades that never come off.

(from "PULSE: for the 49 murdered and 53 wounded at Pulse nightclub, Orlando, Florida, June 12, 2016")

If the grief with which we must now deal pertains to entire groups of individuals, then is it the multiplicative utterances of poetry which most legitimately capture the cries of this dying? John Keene's work, primarily fictional or biographical prose, can be situated in this space of contradiction between the individual writer's experience and the history that both pulses and destroys them. Keene's two best-known books in print, *Annotations and Counternarratives*, act out of the impossibility of ever resolving the deconstruction of received and hidden narratives. If there is a subject in Keene's writing who speaks—who writes poetry—its pronominal form, with and beyond Blackness, queerness, even the family-friendly togetherness, is "we." Keene's poetry in *Punks: New and Selected Poetry*, published by Song Cave, does the opposite work of deconstruction, grasping the Life out from which these aporias form—that vital space we share.

Keene grew up in St. Louis, as even a cursory flip through his work will tell. Though *Annotations* came out two decades prior, it could be read as a genealogy of the municipally-sanctioned racial violence of the city that sparked the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement. He then attended Harvard, becoming involved in the Dark Room Collective, a stellar group of Boston-based African American writers, including Carl Phillips, Major Jackson, and Tracy K. Smith. He went on to receive a degree from NYU and while in New York began a fellowship at Cave Canem, the legendary African American poetry advocate. From there, he appeared in journals and anthologies, translated works in numerous languages, and taught creative writing at several universities, including Rutgers, where he teaches now. In 2018, he received a MacArthur genius grant. Over the years, he has published small-batch collaborations with artists and photographers. *Punks*, spanning decades in content, follows all of this.

The selection, as an entity, is obscure. The "New and Selected" phenomenon always feels like a consolation to a writer whose massive creative output has nevertheless failed to regulate its speed to mainstream publication. One would have hoped to see fewer of the city-spanning narrative poems early in the book, which—although most

likely written in the phase of the poet's involvement with the Dark Room Collective—bear the mark of the Harvard-ish staleness that nevertheless earned some in that group National Book Awards, but does not gel with Keene's later masteries. Other parts could have been expanded, such as the prose poems of the "Recuerdas" series, which excite and contain the bloodiness the earlier narratives miss, and especially more of the historical persona poems from "Manzanita" and "Dark to Themselves," extending Keene's reign in matters of voicing. One wonders, though, where are the poems in translation? One keeps one's fingers crossed that this is just the beginning of a Keene retrospective. Expansive as the edition is along the timeline of the poet's life, perhaps there will come a time when our demands for a *Collected Works* are answered.

The frequency with which Keene dedicates these poems to and for other poets speaks to the community within which he has worked. It also attests to a vital poetics, one that borrows and makes known to whom its author is in debt. Poems after Ted Berrigan, after Miguel James ("Ten Things I Do Everyday"; "Blackness") mimic those poets masterfully while retaining the real evidence of Keene's life. "When I begin a poem I often do so / because I love black people."

There is no elaboration of a writing practice more suitable to its own love for itself and its others. The fact that Keene has also established himself as a brilliant translator of works from many different countries and in as many different languages speaks to his wide range of generosity, as well as a relentless search for peers.

In literary circles, Keene's art is considered an example of writer's-writerly experiment. Despite having received numerous awards, his read-

In literary circles, Keene's art is considered an example of writer's-writerly experiment.

ership consists of readers who are most likely already writers. This is not a strange phenomenon for those of Keene's stylistic generation. Half-sentences, descriptions of scenery as lush as they are labyrinthine, and the pain of restoration of memory through language, an author's only medium, put the language through torsion. Entering into Keene's writing, a reader expects to labor and rewire. For those accustomed to this Keene, the current selection will surprise by its presiding formal optimism. This is the rare poetry that believes in itself, its power: which is not to say it has any right. Which isn't to say it has no right.

Even when the verse becomes plaintive and elegiac, a startling directness accumulates and maintains itself in a performance of—most startling of all—full sentences.

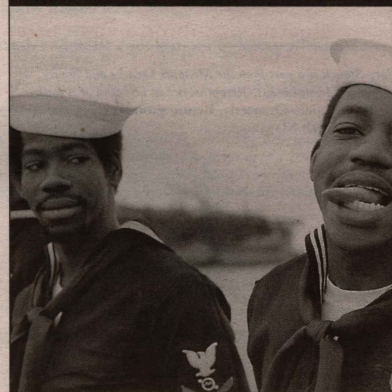
With exceptions, the bulk of the poems approach experience in narrative, whether recounting external activity or internal reflexivity, occasionally peppered by metaphorical gestures. Poems in memoriam of lost loves, lives, and the sensations locked behind memory interlink by their shared attachments. "The bar is a queer space, even though it's not queer," begins "Everybody Sets It Off Live Here," from the section titled "The Lost World." The sensual prose poems in this section hurl through the speaker's memories of clubs, hookups, skipped classes, and proximities that ultimately affirm, like a mother of the world, that "friendship, like love, is brutal." Other poems take command of the anaphoric phrase, such as in the final, profaning, poem "Beatitude," repeating "Love": "Love piss and sweat and shit . . . // Love your yesterdays and tomorrows . . . // Love in the absence of love." These are the poems of a writer who has sat with his memories, and who, by capturing something of his singularities in art, is ultimately faithful for some return; not totally in line with the painful return of flooded and flooding family history in *Annotations*.

One cannot help but draw similarities between the polyvocality of *Counternarratives* and the persona poems in the short section titled "Dark to Themselves," perhaps the most cohesive section of the book. The persona poem form can best be described as middle-brow, accessible, and, though performed by poets before, popular in the reactionary aesthetic era of the Obama administration. It is not as popular now for many reasons, one being the risk at which an artist operates when putting words in a dead person's mouth. Perhaps the final nail came when white "train-poet" Anders Carlson-Wee's use of ebionics made it through not only the editorship of the poet's mind, but also past two editors of *The Nation* and into print. Keene's persona poems, in contrast, rather than centering on some gesture of commonly-owned utterance, give breathing room to these spoken and unspoken heroes. Figures range across centuries, all descendants of slaves confined to the diaspora. By limiting the scope of each poem to the specific person in a specific place in their lifetime, Keene opens a prayer-like space in

Punks
New & Selected Poems

John
Keene

The Song Cave



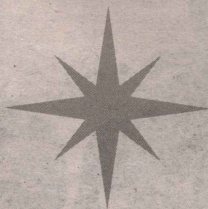
history. Much like the poems detailing the poet's own incremental transformations, these poems deny the subjects the possibility of being taken for monoliths, cut off from that most vital human potentiality: change. In this, they echo the masterful persona poems of fellow Cave Canem poets Monica Hand and Cornelius Eady, whose respective books *Me and Nina* and *Brutal Imagination* highlighted the necessary incongruity between the poet-speaker and the "real" mind they expressed through acknowledged extrapolation.

In "Carver, One Evening in Tuskegee," the focus is placed on one moment in the life of Keene's fellow Missourian George Washington Carver, the groundbreaking Black scientist whose anecdotal fame rarely surpasses his instrumental impact on the peanut butter and jelly sandwich. "Seldom am I mistaken for a metaphysician," the poem begins. For what, exactly, does the poem encourage us to mistake? Against the rack on which dominant culture places those minorities who dare to inform and transform it, Keene stretches for the affirmation of the genius beyond historical anecdote and reaches the conceptual. "I know that my thoughts are as vivid as an infant's lung," he reassures himself, "eyes closed, aware that I am here and not here."

Still, the prevailing mark of this selection is the ways poetry meets loss, or *can* meet it, throughout one poet's lifetime. As the late Jean-Luc Nancy said: "[T]he individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community." It is all the more powerful to encounter the poem "PULSE" placed so far into the book, an anaphoric eulogy (decidedly not an elegy) not only for those lost in the tragedy at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, but for those *who lost* in the tragedy and even those who, through the smoke-screen of media disarticulation, emerge utterly *at a loss* in the tragedy, unable to coalesce into the shared space of grieving. "We are . . . // We are" the poem intones, yet does not build momentum. It may not be for us to discern whether this is an homage to the plane of consistency drawn by techno music's repetitiveness or a tone of defeat brought on by the repetitiveness itself of mass phobic slaughter. It may not be, dissolved beings that we are, possible.

In some sense, to those of us who have waited long periods between books from John Keene, this selection comes far too late. Though even after a career as long as Keene's, no writer can ever adequately announce their own emergence. The poems in *Punks* express, above all, one writer's willingness to neither slow down nor be satisfied with a singular stylistic identity. Against the modernist myth, Keene proposes something truer to the experience of art-making: spastic and whittled as punk.

Cary Stough is a poet from the Missouri Ozarks and library worker in Massachusetts. Recent work can be found or is forthcoming in Tupelo Quarterly, Bennington Review, and Coast|noCoast Magazine.



PACIFIC MFA *in* WRITING

An exceptional low-residency program in the Northwest

Work one-on-one with award-winning writers:

CHRIS ABANI
ELLEN BASS
SANJIV BHATTACHARYA
CLAIRE DAVIS
KWAME DAWES
CLAIRE DEDERER
JACK DRISCOLL
PETE FROMM
CATE KENNEDY
DANUSHA LAMÉRIS
SHARA MCCALLUM
DORIANNE LAUX
JOSEPH MILLAR
MAHTEM SHIFERRAW
PAUL TRAN
KELLIE WELLS
WILLY VLAUTIN
KAO KALIA YANG

WWW.PACIFICU.EDU/MFA



Pacific University
Oregon

SHARA MCCALLUM

PHOENIX POETS

From Chicago

No Sign Peter Balakian

"Balakian is able to praise the world though he knows its 'bitter history.' And praise he does! The lyricism here is of utter beauty. *No Sign* is a splendid, necessary book."—Ilya Kaminsky, author of *Deaf Republic*

CLOTH \$20.00

Proceed to Check Out Alan Shapiro

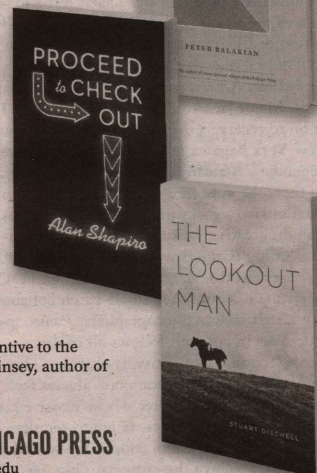
"Shapiro stays true to his lyric gift, his skill for carving art from the twists and turns of the individual voice confronting mortality. He is a genius."—Peter Champion, author of *One Summer Evening at the Falls*

PAPER \$18.00

The Lookout Man Stuart Dischell

"This tender, very human book is haunted by time, and attentive to the fragile, fleeting things of the world and the heart."—Ellen Hinsey, author of *The Illegal Age*

PAPER \$18.00



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
press.uchicago.edu