

MINNOWS SMALL AS SIXTEENTH NOTES

THE COLLECTED POEMS OF NORMA KASSIRER

EDITED BY
ANN GOLDSMITH AND EDRIC MESMER

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Minnows Small as Sixteenth Notes: The Collected Poems of Norma Kassirer
edited by Ann Goldsmith and Edric Mesmer

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Foreword

by Ann Goldsmith

*Vonnegut said that we have to be continually jumping off cliffs
and developing our wings on the way down.*

—Colum McCann, *Let The Great World Spin*

Take a stroll with Norma Kassirer, and wherever you're headed, indoors or out, the marvelous comes right along.

In these collected poems, sentience emanates from dolls, trees, pianos, trains, beach parties, Jell-O molds. Like a Charles Burchfield painting, the world is astir with strange, seminal energies. The very air blazes with awareness: a round table imagines its own chairs, a young piano finds its destiny in Chopin, a fish auditions in a dementia unit for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*; a linden tree on the poet's front lawn has issues with blooming, and young mothers in the 1930s metamorphose into Renoiresque Jean Harlows whose husbands are "light- / magicked into one man" during the day, "reassembling" into "Picassoed" individual men at night.

For Kassirer, magic is part of the real, a many-colored scarf entwined in the magician's hat with the scarves of memory and reflection, along with cats and sunsets, enigmatic assignations and punctuation marks. In, for example, "The annoying persistence of origami once it is introduced to polite society,"

A rage, a dark snow of commas fell over the page,
so tightly spaced the page was black,
a sort of complacent, glowing hell,
except for an area where a rogue comma
had stationed itself and left a space for hope.

Many of these poems mix surreal images with a matter-of-fact narrative tone, as if the poet is reporting on the everyday events we all encounter. Often, one such will take off from a faux scientific or technological title blown in from some fantastic self-help manual. Its travels may then open onto additional worlds or deepen into larger concerns. The smallest detail can be commandeered into one

of these titles or spun into its own narrative strain, sometimes to startling effect. In “Garden Etiquette,” narrator addresses reader as mentor:

Say you’re in a garden
And you begin to notice
There is one iris in the iris bed
Which resembles Edith Sitwell.

The true etiquette here is not this sly opening image but polite recognition of a garden as a “Democratic presentation / Of beauty,” which notion leads to a veiled political critique (“...have you noticed / That certain plants are now under copyright / And do not produce seeds?”), and finally to the deeper issue, which

reminds me of something
That surprised me in a garden many years ago
Well actually in a sandbox in a garden
Where I was aimlessly pouring sand
From one container to another
And so was my friend Betty
Who suddenly informed me that
Her mother was a Davenport.
The quickness of my response
That my mother was a couch
Surprised me.
I got more useful information
From the encounter
Than I could use at the time.
What has this to do with Edith Sitwell?
I like her tone.

You, reader, will like Norma Kassirer’s many tones: her wit, her ironic eye and ear, her insouciant mythmaking, her prodigious reach. You may choose to travel by train along the Hudson, “Elegant fog on river, / tentative, well-mannered, subtle / playing elaborate chess / with sixteenth-note trembles of light”; or join the children with “Little Marlborough at the Seashore,” where arguments lead to general pummeling and a decision is made to “Blame it on poetry . . . Beautiful but dangerous.” Or your sympathies may be kindled by “The twig-fingered child,” transformed by music; or by the way the scent of slowly unfurling evening primroses may move a quarreling couple to stop fighting, “remembering / that we’d once been fabulous.”

And in “White Night Cartoon,” “a proud child” who is working at “dreaming her father back to her mother,” is urged, perhaps by an older persona, to “dream past your careless parents / to your shining self.”

Moves like this, to retrieve and redeem a loved past, approach the personal and deeply felt through indirection. Her delights are in the play of the mind. But that brilliantly inventive mind may be haunted at times by the autobiographical, by dark presences suggesting themselves between the lines here and there. Sometimes, then, a tragic sensibility comes to full expression.

In a rare glimpse into private space, “Approaching Lethe at the Nursing Home,” a husband and wife are speaking:

My eyes are wet, says E
Are you crying, dear?
Yes
She holds him close
he who was her husband become her child...

In “Lines,” between a brother and sister:

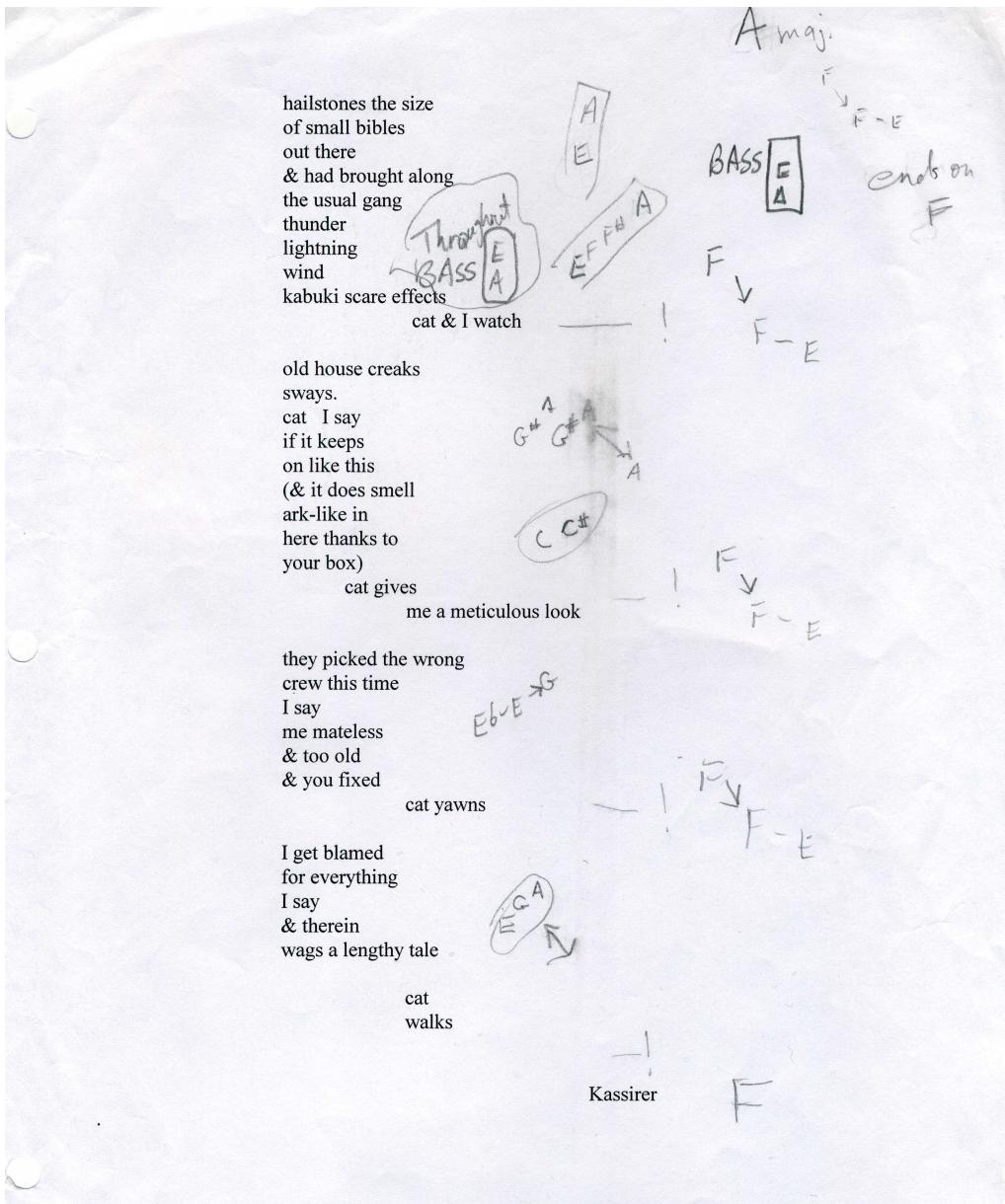
both of them hiding
in the lift and flow & sweet

snap of the sheets,
laughing to spy one another’s face.

a child’s game & they no longer children.
what were they playing at

that day in the sun?

Almost all of Kassirer’s poems resist such narratives, whirling and blooming in created worlds where a remarkable mind can make of heart scraps a collection of poems that turn the desert into a land of plenty, marvelous in every way but one. Even that one, however, makes it more than once into this shining collection of poems, and for that, the reader can only add praise to praise.



Poem with musical annotations by Ann Philippone

From a collaborative performance given as pre-party to the 2006 Cause for Celebration gala, a fundraiser for AIDS Community Services of Western New York, organized by Edric Mesmer and hosted by Dana & John Rigney at the Second Reader Bookshop.

Poems

Along the Hudson to New York

Elegant fog on river,
tentative, well-mannered, subtle,
playing elaborate chess
with sixteenth-note trembles of light.

Fog lifts as if bored.

On opposite shore
white hill-house emerging
from a children's book,
caught off-guard,
self-consciously assembles itself.
Windows attempt
a lace-curtain innocence,
but large askew thrums in there.

Train pauses, perhaps to consider.

Slight tremor of front-hall stairway?
Fancy slipper fallen fourth step up?
Outside on porch, woman unlocks front door,
enters house with proprietary aplomb.

Stares at strange slipper?
(Imagine deer-like startle, etc.)

Rude train snorts, moves on.

The annoying persistence of origami once it is introduced to polite society

A rage, a dark snow of commas fell over the page,
so tightly spaced the page was black,
a sort of complacent, glowing hell,
except an area where a rogue comma
has stationed itself and left a space for hope.

The story, therefore,
was gradually enabled to move in tiny arenas
to a martial music,
which increased as it summoned
adherents to its cause.

Unfortunately, a period of periods began...
(Human cells, the writer mused,
in the time provided,
are folded like origami.)

What does this mean, if anything?
Well, it must mean something—
algebraic, perhaps, or telegraphic or geometric—
precision, precision,
and the limits of my vision
are performing a slow dance
on my left wrist.

Approaching Lethe at the Nursing Home

My eyes are wet, says E
Are you crying, dear?
Yes
She holds him close
he who was her husband become her child
 while my little one
 while my pretty one sleeps

Dendritic leaps from string to string
spark our brief song
 &
we must linger here...
we are the instruments of ourselves
old skin embroidered with memories of pain
yellowed pages of a brittling narrative

Astonishment

/delight/so freely might
in the hammocky swing of love/what if
mystery/ if all the words the colors
& shapeliness of joy/raucous

in sing & hum/buzz & leap/
oh the breaking out/the rareness of being
there where it/what if/what if/the stuttering
of light/of wax becoming form/faint memory of wander/

magical making that lets go/must/
even as it swings out from nowhere/
birthed to a world enraptured by what can't be/
the purest song scuttled/its low & lovely hum become

a rising shriek of no/ the way it celebrates
& sobs for pain/lost plausibility/
stumble of agony/rapt explosion of trees/
in time made visible/ so brief it is

a chant of color/rare buzz of being/
middling mix of sorrow
how it was all there
in looking/making/

& more than simple saving/that too/that too/
wanting to keep/needng to lose/
the dripping colors that coalesce/smell & taste
of cadmiums/oh hear it at its singing/

the stinging moment compressed/defiant/
forever leaping in that time/so real/so felt
it had to shriek/say/here I was & am/will be
will sing forever/ yet less & less its/

sidereal shift along the wall/
we see/& savor the long note
that whistles on/
past possibility

past hearing/
all the shadows of the moment
in which the song stuttered & fell into now/
still bleeding.

At home in Cincinnati

The cardboard box, occupant of a backroom shelf
Was labeled BALINESE DEER (SMALL PARTS),
In modest penciled print.
No one cared to open what would have been disappointing,
No doubt, like so much else in that house.

Meantime, on what had begun as your typical evening,
People in compelling TV advertisements were defying gravity
When the Home Entertainment Center
Tipped over onto the living room floor.
Other tall pieces of furniture followed suit, taking turns.

Move the children to the unfurnished room. That would help
Though it's dusty and full of discarded Barbie doll parts.
Also cats, whose keen senses caught the rumblings of rebellion early on.
Some say the furniture had been meeting for months at midnight,
Disgruntled, mostly about the purchase of the maroon drapes.

Translators were brought in.
Everything was tried—ancient Greek, freshman Latin, tribal clicks,
The language of flowers as spoken by a robot daffodil
Purchased at an avant-garde children's store.
No go.

The family left, became wanderers. It was like vacations at the beach
Except for the growing accumulations of unexplained silt.
Later, the even-handed snow.

The box had been left behind, unopened.
It might have prevented a lot of trouble.
Though probably not.

Baby

The only way to begin is up the intricate mountain to its top. So say the rules of the dream. Down the chessboard complexities of the other side to deep waters—waves that leap like young foxes perfected in limb and tooth for a survival clearly not your own. A buoy flashes in neon a map to a pool calm as a hand mirror dropped glass side up. From a crack in its surface a brook emerges in the shape of a supple hand. Its fingers spread, tapping and trickling to a mild suburban island, built by instructions received by way of this extraordinarily detailed dream, in which the specifics of moving tons of topsoil and grass seed, full-grown trees, their roots burlap-wrapped, tulip and narcissus bulbs, lumber, bricks, etc. by clipper ship are carefully and clearly written in an old-fashioned script on sheets of fine rice paper.

On the island, children roll shrieking in extravagant delight down a greeny hill as a grey fox watches hungrily from a pen. The fox, however, is barely thought out. Its eyes, one presented in a complex swirl of clouded blue, the other new-leaf green, hint a possible carelessness of composition. Its tail, however, continues to evolve in a burst of vital energy so delighted with itself that it cannot stop.

The growling of the fox resembles the beginnings of human speech, at least to the large eager baby seated bunchily on the grass, alternately observing the creature and two sprightly young women, sunlit to a fare-thee-well, each of them grasping an end of a large, freshly laundered linen bed-sheet. They shake the linen, which the brilliant sun instantly reads as blue, blue as a length of silk in a Kabuki performance, held at either end by an actor, each of whom harbors the notion “river” and moves the silk, snaps and shakes it, as waves of tongue-in-cheek reality shiver from the cloth in the come and go of trembling Linden and Chestnut shade. Still, it is a sheet and ought to be hung and dried.

The baby has no words for these events. The baby shrieks, the baby sobs for such unfairness. Any passing fisherman might name them with ease, have concepts which would attach seamlessly to what is happening. The word metaphor comes rolling up a hill from a lobster net drying at the edge of the sea. The word engages the baby, who turns it over and over, bounces it, tosses it into the sky and screams with delight as it disappears.

“I am a tree!” announces a giddy flowering Linden. It delivers this message in scent. The shining baby breathes it in and shouts for the glory of the tree moving so exultantly through the shape of itself. The baby’s fingers burst in complicit blossom. No one notices. Not the young women, not a fisherman, nor the grey fox, now attempting a do-it-yourself assemblage. The baby watches its own finger-blossoms wither and fall off.

The grey fox breaks out of its pen and sits next to the baby, its elaborate and still evolving tail necessarily larger than the hastily-cobbled-together remainder of itself. The baby looks into the fox's strange eyes. The fox stares hungrily back. The baby and the fox, as if embarrassed, look out to sea. The dreamer stirs and wakes. She turns to watch through her bedroom window the gyrations of a large linen sheet caught on a boxwood bush. Her eyes close while she stretches and yawns. She opens them as a breeze lifts the sheet and carries it out to sea. The sheet rises and falls, twirls in the style of a water spout, fiddles with resembling a sail and sinks. The baby and the fox dwindle like sand castles in a persistent scribbled wash of Palmer Method waves as the dreamer follows the wrinkled stairway down to breakfast.

Becalmed

Somewhere a butterfly stirred.
At the same moment
we found ourselves unable to leave
the balcony of the Redeye Theatre,
a group of gumstuck children
thenceforth to be raised on a diet
of liquorice allsorts Necco Wafers and jujubes.

The kindly ticket taker visited twice a day
with garbled explanations. She was fat and comfortable
and certain of us clung to her, as to a
bounteous geography in need of population.
We listened, open-mouthed, to dubious tales
of children raised on penuche and cold popcorn
who later conquered the world, or, as she
put it, what remained of it at the time.

Mostly we sat in the dark,
occasionally raising our oars
to steer ourselves through another double feature
down there in the silver world.

Our punishment for less than attentive watching:
Listening to Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy
singing “The Rehearsable Manifesto,” one verse
in complex crochet, which we were obliged to
commit to memory.

We squabbled among ourselves and took sides:
e.g. Was the MacDonald/Eddy commitment worse than
having to translate (in the dark) *Finnegans Wake for Young Readers*
into comprehensible Morse Code?

The ticket taker denied with vehemence ever bleaching
her sparse straw-like hair. (One child was suspended
for ten minutes over the balcony edge by his toes
for calling her a bald liar.)

Often we whispered about the homes we remembered,
full of silver flatware and blurred views of redoubtable gardens.

Another butterfly incident somewhere and we were rescued.
Actually, this was disappointing in certain ways.

Bechstein

Windowed snowdrifts & one low cloud
roughly imitate twenty-two white plastic
busts of famous composers stationed by year
of birth along the closed top of the glowing

Bechstein in the over-heated parlor of the
harassed piano teacher's slightly off-key
house Sleek & restive as a rare horse in a
stall Bechstein quivers in an ecstasy of horror

at the expiring cries of notes in straits of
horrid mutilation by the jammy fingers of a
young suburban rabble careless of what had
been the ancient gods' own harmonies plucked

from the moving air itself by men now trans-
formed by evil spell to tiny truncate snowmen
imprisoned here with Bechstein in a vulgar
snow of antimacassars that will never

melt from puffy sofa backs &
fat chair arms Even so the teacher's
hopeful though never quite so fittingly
as on a stormy lamplit night when

Bechstein & she make music until
dawn from snow cheap sculpture
& machine-made lace all to the
clattering applause of winter trees

& she'd swear it on a stack of Czernys
those plastic figurines legless though
they were leapt to the floor to sing &
dance in complex fugues & elegant glissandi

& so it was that she & B slid into a fond
arrangement his theme deep & sonorous her
timid variations often charming & at certain
moments in uncertain weathers it all plays very well

Beckettry in Buffalo

Veiled in a scrim of falling snow
the stranger and I stand in Buffalo, NY
on the dim-lit platform of the locked
railway station at 7AM

He is English he tells me
& we talk about the superiority
of European trains They are dependable
Their stations are never locked

A young man near us is juggling
three sticks They appear
to be tree branches
chosen for straightness

The Englishman & I continue
to conjure up examples of excellent
European trains as if we are
in a play by Beckett

& cannot get onto another subject
In the thin sift of glitter
the flying sticks look burnished
Click click click they comment

When the train arrives from Canada
proffering a set of steps
deep-swathed in snow & ice
the surly conductor who

gestures impatiently atop
the impossible slope might have
been created by our conversation
The juggler has disappeared