

Poetry Reviews

Airstream Land Yacht
—Ken Babstock

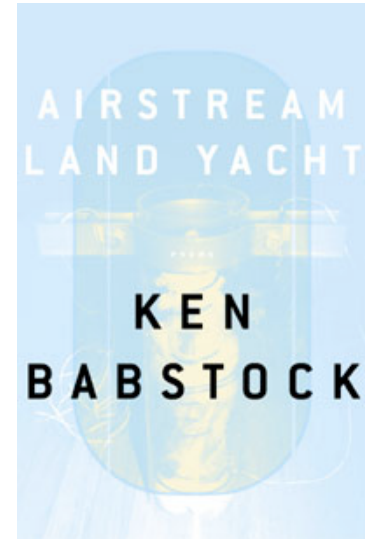
A Palace of Pearls
—Jane Miller

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Airstream Land Yacht

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Ken Babstock
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Reviewed by Christopher Doda



In “The Essentialist,” the opening poem of his third collection *Airstream Land Yacht*, a moment of cognitive dissonance at seeing a young soldier reading Thoreau spurs Ken Babstock into a poetic manifesto of sorts: “The singing’s not/to record experience, but to build one viable/armature of feeling over time.” Much of this book focuses on the intersection between the imagination, particularly the poetic imagination, and experience. And as the poems attest, Babstock is convinced that the poetic imagination shapes experience; it does not generate experience. While he is willing to write out of his own life, he is keenly aware that autobiography must be run through the dual mills of imagination and poetic craft to produce poetry.

The book is divided into four parts: “Air,” “Stream,” “Land,” and “Yacht,” which also contains the title poem, about a child’s toy wagon. Written in childish meter (This big old wagon’s slow, it’s slow/My beautiful wagon’s/slow//It shines a silver sheen, though/its silver sheen a-glow), “Airstream Land Yacht” recalls a time when a person’s thought processes are both crude and pure. If, as he told Toronto’s *eye weekly* in March, Babstock has become interested in theories on the origins and unordered nature of human consciousness, it explains his decision to scatter six unrelated poems with the same title in one collection, offering an atypical leitmotif to the proceedings. Each “Explanatory Gap” focuses in some way on the interiority of the mind and its lack of general coherence. In the second one, he writes:

The cracks,

the jinks, what won’t cohere or blend but bends, fissures,
falls to the fields
or becomes figure. A visual percept is degraded light,

highlighting the unreliability of memory in the creative process. In “Expiry Date” he writes, “It’s what we think we saw that sticks, never what we see,” downplaying reality in favour of the perception of reality as the final arbiter in the act of creation. “Anxiety

in Vigelund” is caused by culture shock in Oslo’s Gustav Vigelund sculpture park where

The energy density of empty Space
has actually been measured
and found to be valueless—
not of
no value

revealing that the invisible and intangible hold value by virtue of being blank and therefore a repository waiting to be filled by the poet’s imagination.

Indeed, Babstock’s insistence on the unreliability of memory and the fluid nature of consciousness finds a mirror in numerous poems that point the reader to the act of writing itself, drawing more attention to artifice than he has in previous work. An adolescent recollection of lost friends in “Hungerford Note” is interrupted by “I am writing by candlelight...” an artificial, almost Romantic, moment of contrived spontaneity. In his attempts to describe “The Tall Ships in Kiel Harbour,” he stumbles over the setting of the Germanic shoreline before even getting to the seafaring vessels:

A spectral mist had curtained the port and spread,
silken, dewy over the crowded park grounds.
Can we say *spectral* mist, or even *mist*, wasn’t
it more like greased Baltic fog?

In these and many other poems (like “The Brave,” “Stencil Artist,” and “So Hush A Mask”) Babstock relies on the aspect of performance in writing as he injects himself, his act of cognition, into the moment as it is experienced.

This is not to say that the book is a navel-gazing exercise; many poems grapple with the complexities of the external world as well. Babstock’s clean language and wily mutation of fixed forms give *Airstream Land Yacht* some strong and amusing moments. “Tarantella” is pure fun and if you’ve ever wondered just how many words rhyme with the title (Babstock finds around 20), this is the poem for you. As in the aforementioned “Anxiety in Vigelund,” the confrontation between Europe’s wealth of history and Babstock’s ‘naïve’ Canadian sensibility shows the strengths and deficiencies of both. “The World’s Hub” is a loose version of a poem by Italian film director and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini. His ‘translation’ is more an enactment, a Poundian rendering of a work into another time and place that summons the spirit of the original, rather than its literal meaning. In his interpretation, suburban Toronto doubles for the outskirts of Roma; the world’s hub “improbably” is Malton, an ironic substitute of the local for the pan-national, the cosmopolitan. The tone is one of bored menace and disinterest, and ably captures the state of hopeless yearning that permeates such places. Part way through “Miles of Europe went by, and then it was dark” the European narrator recounts how

He took a photo
in Berlin of Hegel
on a pedestal;

it was evening, and bluish
and his face
developed wrong

before coming to North America. The anonymous ‘he’ represents history and culture that finds itself moored in Canada, eventually to become hobbled and lame, “alone,

one leg is gone,” showing one place burdened by too much culture, the other with so little that culture cannot likely survive.

All told, I suspect *Airstream Land Yacht* is a transitional work for Babstock from his usual edginess to a more meditative style that we’ll see in the future, less Al Purdy than Al Moritz. It’s a bit of a shame though, seeing as Purdy (an obvious influence) did not make the leap from reactive to reflective poet until he was in his 60s, that we could not enjoy the angry energetic young man awhile longer.

Christopher Doda is a poet, critic and editor living in Toronto. His first collection of poems, *Among Ruins*, was published by the Mansfield Press in 2001 and he is currently finishing his second, tentatively titled *Aesthetics Lesson*.