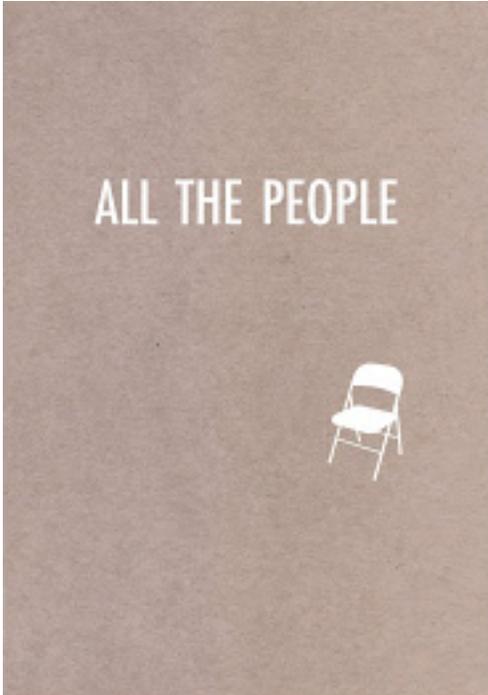


PORTRAITS IN FLASH

By Barrett Warner

December 11, 2015 0

All the People
by Stephanie Barber
Ink Press Productions, 2015,
48 pages, \$15
Reviewed by Barrett Warner



Stephanie Barber's *All the People* is a small collection of lyric flash in a beautiful edition created by Ink Press Productions on their late 19th Century letterpress. Each hand-bound copy is covered by inverted cereal boxes—mine was the former home of Heart to Heart brand honey toasted oat cereal. The press has been producing very limited run books and broadsides since 2012 for a select group of authors including Laura van den Berg, Mark Cugini, Tim Paggi, and others.

Barber's flair for writing in series perfectly inscribes these acid-free pages. In these "very short stories" it's all about using verbs to escape the nouns of who we are. To borrow a conversation from Gertrude Stein, "Believing a noun can either conceal or reveal the thing it designates, the function of poetry is to rediscover what lies behind nouns. Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun."

The personas and voices and characters in *All the People* began life as simple, almost plain nouns, but in each 50 to 200 word "portrait" Barber discovers and shares something unexpected. At times she's as surprised as the reader (or would let us believe so). We meet a young pyromaniac from rustic circumstances in the opening passage. No, it isn't to witness destruction or the thrill of sparks at night, or the disadvantages of her home life

which explains this mystery of lighting fires. The speaker coaches us: “I wanted to hear that fire sound. I like it so much.”

Nouns—pyromaniac, destruction, sparks, night, disadvantages at home—are contexts. While few of us are imprisoned by our contexts, most of us are at least *sentenced* to some form of probation. Nouns aren’t inherently bad, but making our identities dependent on our contexts kind of shoots the piano player in each of us. Why? In “Concession Stand,” the speaker confides: “My Aunt Beth...said bad people and good people have about the same odds of having a crappy life. She said it was like religion or something.”

Yes. Religion. The faith in nouns. Our reliance. Our fear of living without them. Barber’s 43 portraits show ways in which inner music slips through that noun camouflage. These sounds of identity make all the difference. The story of Icarus isn’t about the size of the sky or the depth of the ocean. It’s about the splash.

Want. Like. Love. Yearn. Ache. Desire. These are some of the words that transform Barber’s characters, and all of them are centered on the emotional side of the Head / Heart freeway. The point at which her characters stop being nouns and begin to be persons is the point at which they accept their own desire. They cease to be ashamed of the wanting, wanting, wanting. Action, doing and feeling are the only remedies against the stasis of context.

Two portraits blow hard on this reed. In “Lady Need,” the speaker wants “a lady to put it all up on me.” He concludes: “All I want is someone to put all their fears and desires and needs all over me. I want to roll around in all those lady needs right now. How is it I didn’t know how sexy all this lady need was before?”

The woman speaker in “In the Truck” seems to answer him: “...love’s so tricky. Maybe you want to get to this feeling and it’s with a person you might not get along with otherwise. But, well, can’t we just make it so you can drive around with someone and talk, just for a little bit, not like about EVERYTHING and not like for any reason but just like taking a bath for your brain.”

Those who make a decision not to read this book because they took a class about how repetition and method portraiture push back the reader would do well to consider that in Barber’s hands the natural push back is offset by the many ways in which she invites the reader to come closer. These are very intimate conversations and if there wasn’t a little push back we’d suffocate in their intensity. The feeling I had was similar to reading Joe Brainard’s 1975 memoir *I Remember* ...thousands of one or two-line paragraphs each begun with the charm, “I remember.” Like his work, Barber’s creations are so unashamed and so clear that the reader is drawn into each thrilling and catastrophic moment.

Being a prude, and suffering terrible bouts of sea sickness, I was particularly drawn to “Whale Watchers” which involves my greatest fears—sex and boats:

They could barely see the whale, just
knew to interpret the shadow beneath the miniature geyser as
whale and somehow that made them want to cry a little and
squeeze each other’s hands. Back at the bed and breakfast that

night they made love and she thought about the whale. The way he would move against her and how firm and sleek his skin would be. How undulant his pressing. She imagined coming like a man or like the whale, but from her chest, cracking open the bones and spraying up 70 feet out of her body.

Stein would have been pleased with Barber's pursuit of intuitive as opposed to apparent life, and the way Barber "gets at the rhythm, or *melody* of a personality." One way Barber does this is to stay out of the way of that melody as much as possible so that the intensity of the moment isn't squashed by those bossy narrative threads more typical of fiction proper. She's reaching with each one of these songs, and sometimes she touches her mark and sometimes she misses. The main thing is Barber's reaching, fully engaged in creating objective images but without relying on objectifying language to do so.