

## On Tim Peterson's *Since I Moved In*

by Thomas Fink

*Since I Moved In*  
Tim Peterson  
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Tim Peterson's first book consists of a fifteen-page poem, "Trans Figures"; a substantial sequence including prose-poetry and poetry, "Sites of Likeness"; a long prose-poem "Spontaneous Generation," as well as 22 relatively short poems. While "Trans Figures" primarily articulates gender/transgender issues, "Sites of Likeness" concerns a locale's social history, and "Spontaneous Generation" begins with the concept of *ex nihilo* creation and morphs into collagistic meditation on the interpenetration of individual physicality and environmental flux. Among others, the short poems include various topoi of the longer ones.

In "Trans Figures," self-division, a psycho-socio-physiological difficult for the "figure" who seeks to cross over, is the fundamental problem from which discourse arises:

The voice wants to turn itself into a body.  
It can't, though it tries hard —  
it brings you flowers, to engender a meaningful  
relationship. It makes you coffee in the morning.  
Here, have a cup.  
See? It likes you. It makes your bed  
And shows you this mountain vista. . . .

A marker of identity in western poetic/philosophical history, "the voice" combats biological determinism with rhetorical gestures. The "meaningful / relationship" it seeks is not necessarily with another person but with the representation of a differently gendered

body (“you”) than its predestined home. Along with the auditory component of the “trans figure’s” inability to unify the self, the visual underscores the disjunction between the figure’s elaborate effort at self-construction and ways in which others (with limiting preconceptions, imperfect sight) interpret *and judge* the authenticity of the attempted crossing:

Let there be breasts! (and there were breasts)  
Let there be a penis! (and there was a penis)  
or at least it looked like it from the viewer’s perspective,  
under those clothes. If only it were slim,  
with wide hips! (and it was slim with wide hips). . . .  
The people looked around  
and saw the abundances that language had given them.  
The voice envied them.

“Very conscious of efforts to pass / this trial,” “the voice” may assert its sexual differences from what is coded in the DNA, but it is part of the *object* of interpretation and lacks the power of self-authorization. It seeks anonymity, an ending to others’ questioning, by trying “on gestures that will get it / overlooked” by imitating “someone. . . who was a read body.” Achievement is continually deferred.

Mixing straightforward narrative, quick shifts in imagery, and passages of uncanny reflection, “Sites of Likeness” is an ‘archaeological” poem of places, primarily towns in Connecticut, where Peterson grew up. The poet begins by recounting an ancestor’s violent victimization (in 1775), moves to subsequent family history and a pastiche of historical trends and transformations (note section-titles like “The Commut” and “Malls Move In”) of Hartford and other Connecticut towns, and concludes with a three-part “Desert Litany” that characterizes the New Englander’s encounter with Tucson, Arizona, where he earned an MFA. When Peterson juxtaposes different narrative elements, we

experience a clash between democratic gestures — such as Horace Bushnell’s rationale for a (pre-Central Park) public park in Hartford where “cultivation of good manners and right social feeling” would occur when “rich and poor. . . exchange looks and make acquaintance through the eyes. . .”— and dominant groups engineering rampant class polarization: “the houses of poor residents leveled to build a stage for grazing. Families evicted to ‘improve traffic flow.’”

Among highlights of the shorter lyrics, Peterson’s title-poem creates a fascinating problem for readers on the level of the fragment: “saner and saner, alligator, bars on windwos, nut // Orpheus turned around and saw // bungled that too. Orpheus was plugged in // than you. But it seemed that girls were messing things // than your mouth. I wanted // ‘social change’ to attach meaning, although fleeting. . . .” Rather than breaking off a sentence in the middle and continuing it a few lines later — see Ann Lauterbach’s “Prom in Toledo Night” — the poet collages fragments that either start or end like a sentence, or resemble a middle. Sometimes two unrelated fragments meet in one line, separated by a period. Instead of futilely guessing “the missing words,” the reader must accept that s/he can’t exactly “move in” to the poem; this is confirmed by signals like “I’m finding it harder to continued this conversation since” and “the interface that has kept me from reaching you.” As in poems like “Hemlock,” which packs brief but numerous allusions to Eliot, Roethke, Ashbery, and David Shapiro into twenty lines — but without coherent syntax’s reassuring anchor — one must register how successive bits of trope, image, and abstraction comment on or displace each other: “The face, when turned at the right angle, become credit / drenching up a system out of clouds. The barometer / in my throat sinks I dilate the noon begonias” (“Glinda Prepares to Shop for a New Xbox”).

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