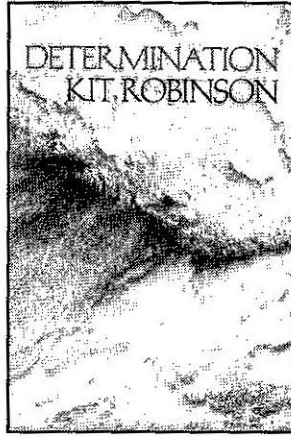


DETERMINATION
Kit Robinson
Cuneiform Press (\$15.95)



by Tyrone Williams

With the 2009 publication of his selected poems, *The Messianic Trees*, Kit Robinson reminded readers of the thoroughgoing consistency he has achieved during three decades of writing and publishing. From the beginning of his career Robinson has relentlessly poked at the membrane between sense and senselessness, form and chaos, not in order to puncture it but rather to send ripples throughout its structure. As he notes in *The Messianic Trees*, his "desire in writing was to push logic out of shape," to resist, as he writes in *Determination*, the "business end of this No. 2 pencil." That can be either the lead point or the eraser: revision can clarify but in doing so may erase the raw spontaneity of observation and thought. It's not about revision per se, then, but how one conceives of revision within the total process of composition. As Miles Davis (and other jazz musicians) often said, there are no wrong notes in music.

Like Davis, Robinson is a master of both the sinuous, insinuating, reflection and the punctuating one-liner; the poems in *Determination* swing back and forth from serpentine lines and elongated forms to laconic jokes and wry witticisms that flirt with the aphoristic. Normative poetics are crowded out by dense, head-spinning observations, so that, as he wrote in "The Dolch Stanzas," collected in *The Messianic Trees*, "you can see into / what's left / of what there is to do." Moreover, *Determination* celebrates the "nothing that is" a la Wallace Stevens's imperturbable "Snowman." In these deceptively smooth—as in Miles Davis smooth—poems, coincidences, accidents, and chance encounters constitute the "before and after" of ordinary life, what is stitched by language into narrative, history, and memory. For example, in "November Ease," the narrator stumbles upon, for the first time, a piece of concrete "buried in the yard behind the house / [he's] inhabited for the past ten / or eleven years." The concrete has the letters "EVENTH" stamped into it; lured into narration, the speaker recalls that he lives "on Eighth, not Seventh Street, / though [he] did once write a poem / called 'Seventh Street' . . ." Tempted by similitude, he risks conflating these disparate events into a mystifying narrative. His temptation is also that of the reader's; it's "just" a coincidence—right?—that the publisher of this manuscript is echoed in these lines: "my / days / prefigured / cuneiform."

Here, as in jokes and puns, typographical errors and mishearings, we feel the dimpled threads of language "above" the well-tailored fabric of our lives. But that's all they are—threads—not ghosts or angels. Robinson's refusal of the ordinary occultation of narrative—the preconditions for, among other things, epiphany—is one with his refusal to mystify the play of language as anything but play, "the nothing that intercedes between the one / thing and another." These lines are echoed near the end of the book in the poem "Live Air": "But literature is only that which isn't, cut into / strips and wrapped around that which

is." Over and over, Robinson shows us the ways language maintains its difference from the "real" even as the real is perceived only through language (which doesn't, needless to add, have to be linguistic). In titles like "The Devil Is In The Decals" or "From Alt I Can Gather," Robinson reminds us that jokes, puns, homonyms, and other linguistic "aberrations" are part and parcel of the very structures (phonetic, semantic, morphological, etc.) that compose languages. Without the possibility of error or misunderstanding, ordinary language and meaning could not function.

The larger point is that one doesn't need to know Saussure to realize what every child that begins experimenting with language already, in-

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stinctively, knows: "The words carry us / we are made of water / the tongue is a boat in our head." These lines dovetail with the last stanza of "A Rhythm of Out":

Leave mention out
Leave by front door
Birds sing when you
Come to think of it
In the tongue of leaves.

The echo effect of the metonym "tongue" induces the familiar dream of correspondences between language and the "actual," despite the fact that we always and only find ourselves amid the flux of representations: "it's a restless universe." The instability of linguistic systems does not meld with the instability of our perceptions of buildings, people, rocks, trees, economic systems, etc., but neither is each sphere of human activity insulated from the others; things do get done, do work out, are communicated. Thus the title of the book traces the border of its two common meanings: human willfulness (vs. obstacles) and prescribed limitations (vs. human volition). *Determination* affirms our desire to impose order, our desire for control, even as it insists that such desire can only, at best, acknowledge its implication in disorder. Thus the inadequate but integral necessity of "controlled / chaos."

Steering clear of the monolithic and homogenous, *Determination* distributes its thematic values—will and constraint—along a number of formal, cultural, political, and aesthetic axes. Neither a monument to a morose modernity nor the Cheshire grin of a flippant postmodernity, *Determination* affirms that a "shard of pavement," "dumped here in this yard for no evident / reason," is:

displaced in purpose and time,
in dubious relation to others of its
kind, neither self-sufficient nor adequately integral
to a larger project only barely perceptible
as such. But such is life.

Stripped of numinous values, the human scale is just us "extra-terrestrials / falling / through / space." ♦