



PROJECT MUSE®

Thought Balloon by Kit Robinson (review)

Larry Price

American Book Review, Volume 43, Number 4, Winter 2022, pp.
123-129 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2022.0153>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/892952>

THOUGHT BALLOON

Kit Robinson

Roof Books

<https://www.segufoundation.com/roofbooks/books/robinson.html>

104 pages; Print, \$16.95

Larry Price

Kit Robinson's *Thought Balloon* is a complex work in which apparently isolated particulars, observations, insights and idioms have a surprising way of turning up as overtones within others. And I appreciate the way the book presents both ends of a continuum—on the one hand, the gentle, almost delicate registration of specificities:

There are sentences sound doesn't mess with
So silent they are written into the body

and on the other, generalized jeremiads, such as we find in "Resistance is Joy":

When thieves rule the world
Only the outcast is trustworthy

But what's significant is that each particular in this book resonates with all the others. And the overtones bounce between the near and the far, bringing exuberance as we read.

The thinking often comes in utterly unexpected ways, as when "Imperfection is everywhere" follows immediately upon a short list of what I would take to be perfections: sun shining on a local garden, a spring in one's step, people to see.

Such are the pleasures of description
A kind of neutrality like Switzerland
That allows us to be with the immediate environment

For if there *is* a message in this bottle, it's going to be where "The eye sees what the mind cannot grasp" . . . and there's no doubt these poems entertain a great deal of looking out.

In preparing to write about *Thought Balloon*, I gathered up my thinking

and went for a walk. What did I see? What did I think? I listened to my right knee (as a runner I am always monitoring my moving body, in this case, the knee I injured three weeks ago). I saw some large rocks, painted white, in someone's front yard. I saw bits and pieces of decay from our industrial-consumer megachurch scattered on the ground. I thought about environmental degradation. I heard and felt water drops in the breeze as leaves shook last night's rain from their backs. Am I recording these in the order I encountered them? No. Am I recalling them in tranquility? Some yes, some not. Are they all emerging from some isolated, unitary substance called mind? Obviously not. And in the same way, *Thought Balloon* is a marvelous demonstration of variety: of the world, certainly, but equally of experience, of its forms, processes, and routes of emergence:

The poem doesn't care who writes it
It is waiting in the wings
A belt of ekphrastic energy circumnavigating the earth
The planet we are made of
While others struggle to be fastened down completely
By standard protocols of identity and access management
We enter an archway and just keep walking
It's good exercise
As opposed to war, pollution, greed, hate and delusion
Though these certainly have their adherents

and:

This experience of seeing
Is basic to being both awake and asleep
An insertion just beneath the skin
A workshop just beneath the floor

That is, *Thought Balloon* invites us to move through its pages while experiencing and thinking not just meanings but particulars that, in their resonance with one another, in whatever order, sometimes turn the unknown into the known (and sometimes back again).

For example, I appreciate how the Romantic sublime is brought to the immediacy of the existenz, the "of a life":

The shapes of mountains
Clouds and a lake
Wind moving light on the surface
Of a life
Which brings us to where we sit

I truly admire the ability Kit Robinson has to make that turn with such a light, unobtrusive touch. No rhetoric. No oratory. Just one thought turning to (turning into) another.

There is a lightness here that, in the midst of so much that's not bright in the world, is almost startling. And yet, there's also opacity, an unwillingness, it would seem, to do the reader's job, to force or carry the eye and/or mind across line endings from one thought to another. There are two points to that. As in the world itself, its specificity, all lines are equally and simultaneously in play. Moreover, there is an assumption in *Thought Balloon* that we are all privy to the same information, relieving these texts of any explanatory mandate:

What's on the line is immediacy
Divided by contingency
Equals transitivity
A key property of both partial order relations
And equivalence relations
According to *Wikipedia*

Every line begins with a capital letter, so that, in a fundamental sense, each is its own unit. There are no periods and very few commas. And yet—amazingly—there is nothing but relation in the entire book. Every line begs to be read simultaneously with every other line. This makes for tremendous semantic overload, which in itself is surprising, given the mostly short lines, like rapid mental breaths being taken upon suddenly realizing just how multiple and glorious the world could be (if only we'd pay attention to exigencies like rising seas and temperatures).

These initial caps and (only apparently) isolated lines work to insert spaces—not blanks, *spaces*—around which Robinson places tones that, on the surface, appear to have no relation to one another. But in the steady blinks of a mental eye as it registers first one thing and then the next, they

form a book in which the world in its multiple and remarkable specificity provokes us to ask: Why is that the case and not this? And what else might equally be possible?

Robert Grenier once warned against poets “gallivanting around in language.” Putting aside the residual Protestant ethic in that, Grenier was making an important point—not, in fact, one about language but rather one about method, the importance of the editing function. And that’s an important dimension of *Thought Balloon*: Individual lines (thoughts) stop, are snipped. They don’t gallivant. That’s the only sense of end stops in this book, so that all lines, all thoughts, are always in play. The gallivanting that is the world, the often irremediable whoosh of events, is given articulation in a language that, in its careful editing, does *not* gallivant. In the music and structure there is a constant, stately movement, that of a curious mind whose equanimity has been dearly gained. This is not a romantic stroll of strong emotions through a gauzy Garden of Eden, but the granular residue of perceptions gained through applied discipline(s): Zen, music, reading, attention to architectural and historical detail, a knowledge of signs, and, above all, poetry.

Language tends to congeal into fixed terms, momentary immobilities in the whirl and noise of the human condition. These terms become a transient’s—an immigrant’s—“fixed” points in a flight from one to the next. The writing act, like any act of transition (holding one’s breath underwater, for example), comes to be measured by the distances between immobilities across which (slight or great) subsequent reading can sustain itself. What we find in *Thought Balloon*, as equally in the music that informs it, is endurance, a pronounced ability to move through language and either stop short of the next fixed point or navigate ever greater distances without one.

Why would our poet do this? Certainly not merely to churn the collective language, to free it of habits. No. I think the answer is much more complicated. Where, for example, Charles Olson said that each perception was to follow instantly upon the one before, Robinson’s singularities, through their interplay, create an ambiguity, a structure without a single tonal center, adopting instead a complex chord having multiple centers. The resonance of individual strings, in their harmonies and disharmonies, pushes us past Olson’s phenomenological still camera all the way over into an *n*-dimensional experience of the world. Robinson locates the border between the existent

world and all the possible others not by fantasy but by recording particulars, then calling into question their isolation and forcing a semantic shift that dislodges immobilities in the collective language. Robinson creates a new and mobile commonality in poems that, in the complex relations of parts, ask only to be read and experienced.

That is, the real pleasure in *Thought Balloon* comes when, having gone through it several times, wrongly trying to decipher and bend the unknown into familiar shapes, the reader relaxes into finding just what's there and so discovers that

Beginnings are numberless
An end leaves one gasping for air

That's when we find a nearly unbearable beauty in the way Robinson records his encounters, as in "Deception Pass":

A dark glimmer of history slips the mind
Fog in the crotch between rises
Other side of the lake

I like the informal elision in "Other side of . . ." Like so much in this book, it's relaxed and yet exact. Here it underscores the indistinct quality of both fog and history, Robinson's point being that it's probably best not to take either for granted, else both "slip the mind."

Mostly, light shines from infinitely small encounters:

Gigantic metropoli
Wherein the mind
The luminous hydrocarbon
Of flesh and blood
A roar without a lion
The abstract truth
Read and remembered again

Without percussion
The voice sails

. . . which can be read either as unmoored or as a call: *à voyage!* A reader's choice. Certainly, seventy pages into *Thought Balloon*, Robinson isn't going

to decide for us. As writer and readers, we are conjoined in an improvisatory combo. It is the responsibility of each member to know when to come forward and when simply to open a space for the others, with or without percussion. Although again, the insistence is upon our common access. Specialization is not being privileged. Paying attention is. Which is when the whole book becomes

A gigantic intensity
Startled into life
Blunt statement of fact
In an elevated state

This could easily stand as the foundational method for all of *Thought Balloon*.

What this book has taught me in the most incisive way is that the more slowly and deliberately I read, the more lightly I tread, the more that emerges from its pages. As Robinson writes,

Poetry taught me how to listen
You can't say everything at once

But, having said it once (or, as here, having written it), each remains, sustained so that eventually there are, in fact, many things being said.

Every now and then
The spirit moves me
Off to one side
Everything goes on
Without me

Thought Balloon covers a remarkable range of subjects, registers—jazz, rock, television, forests, seashores, cities. This is not the closed territory of an “I” endlessly mapping itself and its adventures. Instead, what we have is the intense, always precise and nuanced articulation of what Blanchot called “the scattered totality of the world.” An infinitely complex polygon that in its *n*-dimensions preserves the coherence of that world. In Kit Robinson’s work, we don’t measure, segment, and market the wave. We *ride* it.

LARRY PRICE is a poet, book designer, and graphic artist. Born in California, he now lives in New Jersey, where he is the creative director in a graphic design agency. His own books include *Proof* (1982), *Crude Thinking* (1985), *No* (world version) (1990), *Circadium* (2002), and *The Quadragene* (2008).

THE BLUE-COLLAR SUN

Lucas Farrell

Green Writers Press

https://www.ipgbook.com/the-blue-collar-sun-products-9781733653459.php?page_id=21

80 pages; Print, \$16.95

Laura C. Stevenson

Lucas Farrell, whose *the blue-collar sun* won the 2020 Sundog Poetry Book Award, is a Vermont farmer. The combination of farming, poetry, and Vermont may conjure up an image of Robert Frost, but a century clearly separates Farrell's generation from Frost's. Big Picture Farm, which Farrell owns with his wife, the artist Louisa Conrad, includes a B&B and a confectionery as well as a flock of forty goats. Farrell's poetry is similarly twenty-first century, inclined to experiments in form and structure that extend considerably beyond playing tennis without a net. Like all good poetry, however, it is based on nuanced observation of the world. The prose poem "Sugaring," for instance, begins with a wittily apt description of the conditions under which sap is collected: "The snowy fields have softened to a raw chèvre." The poetry also contain startling lines that linger long with the reader once the book is closed, for example, "The world is hard to find once you start looking for it."

The book is divided into four parts. The first, "this is your animal," consists of nine short poems, mostly written since Farrell and Conrad set up their farm. The next three sections are products of the artist's residency the pair spent in Skagaströnd, Iceland, during 2009. The second part, "i approached a little farewell," is an erasure set in nonconsecutive pages of the Nobel Prize-