
Digigram by Barbara Henning (review)

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(Article)

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DIGIGRAM

Barbara Henning

United Artist Books

<https://www.spdbooks.org/Products/9780935992502/digigram.aspx>

92 Pages; Print, \$16.00

Kit Robinson

For a long time, the poet, novelist, and teacher Barbara Henning has made a career of violating genre boundaries, mixing fact and fiction, prose and poetry, autobiography and chance procedure to compile an utterly original body of work. Written in the pre-COVID teens during the hellish rise of Ubu Trump, her new book, *Digigram*, is an homage to public life, a celebration of the energy, movement, community, anonymity, and freedom afforded by our erstwhile urban existence. At the same time, through memory, dream, and reflection, Henning opens the door to her private world, a realm of love, joy, sorrow, and deep, if fraught, relationship.

Digigram is a sequence of prose poems titled and dated from 25 February 2016 to 24 April 2018. Each entry is a verbal construct of phrases recording the events of one day through a series of flashes. Henning's use of the em dash to link the phrases frees her from the constraints of standard syntax and creates an equivalency across disparate referents—public and private, personal and political, past and present, dreaming and waking life. We join her on her bike, in cabs, on the subway, and in apartments and restaurants while she makes her way around the New York City of her continuous present, as well as the Detroit of her youth.

Interspersed among her daily observations and encounters, news items appear like a running subtext injected into the flow. Trump, a looming, ominous presence throughout, is named only as “the bully.” Strains of racism, oligarchy, and corruption interlace with verbal snapshots of quotidian events. As inner and outer worlds collide, feelings of anxiety, tenderness, and outrage animate the narrative.

Two aspects of city life permeate the text: simultaneity and coincidence. One has the overwhelming sense of innumerable things going on at once. Street scenes commingle with states of mind in a kaleidoscopic *mélange* nav-

igable only by a quick-witted, intuitive narrator. Coincidence, a natural by-product of complexity, arrives early and often, as identical structures of feeling coincide:

—an old female orangutan—locks eyes—with a young woman—
breastfeeding a baby—yes, she nods, *me, too*—(“Me, Too”)

Henning often uses words as hinges to swing from one realm of consciousness to the next and back again. In “Let Me Know,” the narrative shifts from a bike ride by the shore of Lake Superior to immigration law to a soccer match to electoral politics. Each shift is triggered by the word or concept “pass”:

—as I pass the woman on the bike . . . many mothers are unable to
pass on—their citizenship . . . when a pass is made—four defenders
charge . . . a committee of American men—will meet to decide—the
rights of women (“Let Me Know”)

The em dashes remind one of William Burroughs, but with an important difference: Henning’s work is proudly feminist. The poems act as both argument and anthem:

—the outlook for 2016 somewhat gloomy . . . a NYC policeman
forces a man to stand—outside—in his underwear . . . another bully
wants—to be liked by the alpha bully . . . ugly and frightful haters,
bashers, hucksters—he-who-must-not-be-named . . . tear gas fired
at children . . . 14,000 Syrian migrants—in desperate condition
 (“Wham!”)

“River God” begins with a description of the book’s cover image, a 1984 photograph of the author’s young children posing on the “belly of a river god,” a statue at the Detroit Institute of Art, “looking over a baby angel—then over—the ruins of Detroit.” The poem ends with “the boys reclining—beside my grown daughter—watching TV—feet overlapping.”

Past and present cohabit in Henning’s kaleidoscopic prosody, which morphs and spreads in all directions, only to execute a poignant return:

—at night—a cold-air bath—thunder—the sound of rain on the
pavement—turn off the lights—lie in bed—in the dark—and

listen—my arms crossed—over my bare chest—the child I was—am now—Mama and Daddy—I say out loud—(“A Flower, An Olive, An Idea”)

In this poem we find overlapping time frames: the day (morning to night), the month (weather turning colder), the year (advance of the Trumpist right), the life (childhood to age), and the epoch (climate change, environmental catastrophe).

Whether describing a fleeting moment with a former lover (“So Do I”) or moving day from the East Village to Brooklyn (“From Every Angle”), Henning’s words and phrases serve as touch points for gliding from frame to frame. An owl drops out of the sky to snag its prey, then the bully’s education czar imposes predatory fees on defaulted student loans. When owls “whistle bark shriek scream hoot” in Prospect Park, the author internalizes and redirects their cries toward the bully and his czar. Meanwhile, the “dismantling and reassembling—boxes of books” leads to a waiter who “writes down #15—brings a #13,” quizzical moments in the age-old battle of order and chaos (“Phantom of the North”).

Henning’s writing is essentially social, and it is political in the best sense. Her days—and, we might say, her psyche—are defined in relationship. We meet her deceased husband, Allen, an ex-lover or two, her children, and her parents; she has known a different kind of intimacy with each of them. Yet her feelings of empathy extend well beyond her private life to include fellow passengers on the subway, cab drivers, denizens of the street, and refugees worldwide. An expansive spirit and a lively imagination afford her access to the lives of others, not excluding the pain and sorrow of the everyday lot.

In the course of a day, or even “In a Six Minute Stretch,” the narration leaps across a range of momentary emotions—anger, sadness, longing, amusement, surprise—often ending in a state of suspended animation. After attending with Henning to the rough edges of existence, her own and that of countless others, the reader is returned at the end of each day to a tentative sense of balance, and an irresistible urge to continue.

Reading *Digigram* now, in the wake of Trump’s defeat, one recognizes the angst of the past four years all too well. Something else also comes through: a sense of moral courage. On every page we read defiance in the face of tyr-

anny, open-hearted fellow feeling, and an embrace of myriad possibilities for love and enduring life. I take courage from Barbara's sagacious outlook, her unflinching reckoning with the harsh realities of twenty-first-century life, and her optimistic spirit of joyful resistance.

KIT ROBINSON is a Bay Area poet, writer, and musician. He is the author of *Quarantina* (2022), *Thought Balloon* (2019), *Leaves of Class* (2017), *Marine Layer* (2015), and twenty other books of poetry. His essays on poetics, art, travel, and music appear online at *Jacket2*, *Open Space*, and *Nowhere*, and at www.kitrobinson.net.

OUTSIDE FROM THE INSIDE

Anne Whitehouse

Dos Madres Press

<https://www.dosmadres.com/shop/outside-from-the-inside-by-anne-whitehouse/>

122 pages; Print, \$19.00

Hilary Sideris

Anne Whitehouse's new collection of poems, *Outside from the Inside*, is a book about joy, grief, and transcendence. Whitehouse writes in the spirit of Bob Kaufman, the Beat poet and Buddhist who is quoted in the book's epigraph. Kaufman, who took a vow of silence when President Kennedy was assassinated and didn't speak again until the Vietnam War ended, believed the job of the poet was to experience the universe in all its injustice and absurdity and to transform it not only into art but into an alternative consciousness.

Like Kaufman, who wrote in mantra-like rhythms and jazz-infused incantations, Whitehouse often celebrates the pleasures of physical being—heartbeats, drumbeats, dance steps, trance-like contemplation of the ocean in ourselves, and hallucinatory states of consciousness. In steady, end-stopped cadences, against a backdrop of rivers and forests, Whitehouse weaves narra-