

Fighting Words Lyn Hejinian's *Saga/Circus*

If there is one ultra-narrative (and ultraviolent) poetic genre, it is the saga, the Northern European form given to armed struggle, sea voyage, and obsessive genealogical accounting. As its title suggests, the mood of Hejinian's saga, "The Distance," is not one of action but of meditative stasis. Unlike a conventional saga, there is no historical or geographical GPS at work here; the speaking voice is simply at sea, shipbound, in motion but adrift.

. . . I won't pretend

To be an historian, how could I, when I

have no idea

Of today's date. Though I know we

embarked one morning early

In May, I have no idea how long ago that

was

And I don't care. I breathe, I twist my

hair. I watch

The sea. At times it resembles an eye

But it isn't watching me.

Lineageless, battleless, the female speaker shrugs off the patriarchal requirements of saga even while her free verse is gathered up in a rhythmic, graceful full rhyme ("me," "sea?"), which stands in for ancient, songlike sound structures. As with "Lola," here genre itself is at once medium, material, and subject, the pliant, immersive sea in which craft sails. In "The Distance," genre's mutability and capacity is figured by the literal sea. As the speaker notes, "the sea absorbs our inexplicable feelings. I suppose / we are drowning in saga." The shipboard setting is resonant to the Anglo-American reader, recalling everything from the Seafarer to Homer to *The Tempest* to *Moby-Dick* to the Ancient Mariner to Henry Martinsson's *Aniara*, reversing course, at times, to *The Voyage of the Beagle*. Thus the ship seems to sail right through the anthology, through canonicity itself, through such conventions as *medias res*, as the illusion of voice in first-person narration.

The languorous pacing of Hejinian's lines points up their philosophical fullness and contributes to the poem's dreamy mood. Like so much of Hejinian's oeuvre, the text is recursive, rich with images of its own writing, and makes palpable its effort after knowledge:

. . . I move to see,

Montage to understand, I pass the
camera
To others so as to emancipate the point
of view. Trade is relevant
Everywhere. We can't escape economy,
economies.
As far as we can see the world
Is unsparing of things to see,
reality
Is profligate, ubiquitous, vivid, prolix,
it's all too much, vista
Without terrain, *the* too much, the
neither given nor giveable?
World we can neither approach nor
leave. We live
Then through . . .

Here, the impossible relationship of writing to knowledge spurs the quest, but it is a quest of betweenness, not of arrival or departure. The same theme is restated elsewhere: ?I want to understand / What I have seen and understand / That nothing I have seen explains what I have seen. Like that.? In this version, that gestural ?Like that? underscores language's excess to its own project, the way it adds to and even doubles the world it would describe, thereby constantly extending its own task.

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