

Love, War, Fire, Wind: Looking Out from North America's Skull (poems)

By Eliot Katz

Drawings by William T. Ayton.

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Reviewed by Tony Trigilio

For years, Eliot Katz worked as a housing advocate for homeless New Jersey families, and many of his poems, especially those in his breakthrough collection *Unlocking the Exits* (1999) are inspired by this experience. His poetry of witness in the New Jersey social services system often recalls the work that Martin Espada composed from his experience as an attorney for immigrant and low-income families in Massachusetts. Like the poetry of his friend and mentor Allen Ginsberg, Katz's work fuses political activism and artistic experimentation within an oral prophetic tradition in U.S. poetry traceable to Whitman. *Love, War, Fire, Wind*, Katz's sixth collection, articulates the social inequities of its historical moment with a vatic sensibility earned during Katz's two decades as a poet, editor, and publisher. Katz locates poetry at the center of a culture of redemption that Ginsberg imagined his own work could inhabit—a tradition in which the care of the other and the care of the self are coterminous pursuits.

This collection is a reminder that Ginsberg conceived of prophetic prophecy as both a materialist and transcendentalist artistic endeavor: Buddhism taught him to find a sacred particularity in the material world that would match the power of the poet's visionary idealism. Katz, like Ginsberg, crafts a spiritual poetics from this commingling of the material and ideal. In doing so, his work often resembles the Objectivist poets, for whom a poetry of concrete particularity rather than didactic abstraction revealed the nuances of social and political conflict without lapsing into dogmatism or sloganeering. In a critical early turn in the poem "Thor," for instance, Katz invokes the narrative strategies of one of Ginsberg's most important Objectivist

influences, Charles Reznikoff, to dramatize the collapse of a man both aided and ensnared by the New Jersey social services system. Recalling the technical savvy of Reznikoff's two-volume history of the United States, the poetry collection *Testimony*, Katz's deliberately flat narrative underscores the man's fraught relationship with his community in the poem:

When his motel stay ran out the next week,
he threw a brick through the window downstairs,
tripping alarm, and sat on sidewalk
waiting for cops to arrive to take him
to only warm bed for which he was still eligible
under Central Jersey's safety net.

(75-76)

Like many of the poems in this collection, "Thor" attempts to speak for those who have been rendered invisible by an instrumentalist culture. In doing so, these poems often suggest that the most effective vehicle for representing this intersection of politics and culture is the body—which, in "Thor," is relegated to the "warm bed" of the prison.

Katz's serial poem, "The Logic of War," is one of many poems in this collection that extend this trope to global proportions. He charts a course familiar to both Ginsberg and Whitman, exploring how war conscripts and, eventually, devastates language in the name of common sense during wartime, and how the conscription and devastation of the body follows nearly in lockstep. The embodied effects of war on a culture are suggested starkly in a sparse, crucial pause in Section 6 of the poem, which is comprised of just one ironic line: "A 15,000 pound bomb is called a daisy cutter" (108). As the only moment of speech in the entire section, this isolated line creates an ironic, brooding effect that echoes throughout the poem in ways that

recall Ginsberg's sly haiku bursts in "Nagasaki Days." Katz's poem reminds us that language is never more dangerous than when it claims to be innocent or free from consequence. Katz is aware, too, that ironic gestures such as those in Section 6 potentially could obscure the straightforward, individual suffering that the poem otherwise portrays in earnest. Indeed, the subsequent section of the poem depends upon Katz's bare enumeration of the dead and wounded in the Afghan refugee camp of Maslakh and on his sardonic evocation of the anonymous burial plots that suddenly appear in the Afghan town of Dehdadi after a U.S. bombing run. Katz avoids a common, colonizing trap of political poetry: he does not purport to speak of what he cannot know. More specifically, in poems such as "The Logic of War," he does not claim an authentic voice for the experience of alterity of Afghans caught in the sights of U.S. bombs. Katz's concern is the interpenetration of self and other, rather than only solitary lyric reflection or political reportage. When the poems narrate the effects of aging on his body, they are more than just songs of the self; instead, they reinforce the urgency of social action when the body politic is under siege. As he writes in "The Weather Seems Different," the pressure history exerts on both the individual and state is like a vulture that "has eaten us alive and regurgitated us back into this world" (113).

The visible Beat influences on this book are not without their problems, all the same. At times, Katz's appropriations of Ginsberg's language do not go far enough to revise—rather than reproduce—the voice of his mentor. In "Letter to Allen from North America's Skull," for instance, Katz's invocation of "Wichita Vortex Sutra" reduces the distinct form of the letter-poem to a privatizing gesture that seems out of place in a collection that otherwise effectively merges poetry and public life. The poems also can adhere too rigidly to Ginsberg's omnivorous editing of articles, pronouns, and prepositions in his work. When replicated by others, this

conceit appears arch and self-conscious, and often results in poems overshadowed by the debt they owe to Ginsberg. For example, the editing of “In Defense of Lateness” produces an awkward shift at a crucial moment in the narrative, when the speaker enters The Knitting Factory looking for the date he is scheduled to meet: “I looked every left-side profile seated in the bar—none was hers” (25). Similarly, the over-compression of language in the opening lines of “When the Skyline Crumbles” causes the poem to wobble at the precise moment when it should establish a crisp referent for its subject matter, the 9/11 attacks: “Was sitting Astoria kitchen chair about to vote mayoral primary, / then would’ve hopped subway to work Soho’s Spring Street” (103). It is difficult to see what is gained by such elisions. Instead, in these moments Ginsberg’s voice overwhelms the poems to such an extent that Katz’s linguistic and formal choices risk sounding derivative.

Still, as Katz reaches back to his precursors, he contributes in his own right to a mode of contemporary narrative poetry that requires of itself, to borrow from the Objectivists, a sincerity to material language and to the particulars of the external world. Katz’s long breath-line strophes, lyric narrative block-stanzas, and his use of William Carlos Williams’s triadic line reimagine Ginsberg’s legacy within an historical moment defined by global warfare and profound economic struggle. The poems, accompanied by William T. Ayton’s haunting illustrations, answer political quietism with powerful representations of the conflict between resistance and privilege. The book is tender, too, as in “No ideas but in moving hands,” Katz’s transformation of Williams’s famous poetic axiom into an affirmation of the poet’s faith in the human imagination and its capacity to love: “move hand—let the gods know you’re not afraid / [. . .] age the wine and smile gracefully / move hand—try to imagine a utopia no one has yet written” (15).