

Pieces by Hank Lazer

(BlazeVOX, 2022)



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The poems in *Pieces*, Hank Lazer's new sequence from BlazeVOX, are presented in the form of a journal for the autumn and winter of 2021 and they offer similarities to the way in which Walt Whitman worked an early section of 'Song of Myself' in which the unseen is proved by the seen.

With its title also offering a nod in the direction of Robert Creeley's 1969 collection of the same title the first section of these new pieces presents the reader with a quotation from the earlier volume which offers a spur to the movement of thought:

"All I knew or know
began with this –

emptiness
with its incessant movement"

The movement which pushes Lazer's meditative reflections forward is the pulse of how individual ideas accumulate with 'aggregated singularity' and the derivation of the word, arising from the Latin *gregis*, holds both a sense of the speed of flight (as in 'flock') and the

holding of these thoughts together as they move. It is this movement which also offers the reader a paradox of both containment and expansion which echoes an essay by Emerson, 'Circles', in which 'The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end.' In the second section of his sequence Lazer asks us to contemplate this movement by considering 'some portion' of his mother's ashes:

make a circle
around the cedar tree
is this what
being becomes

The image of the circle being presented as both inclusive and exclusive is taken up in section six where 'some joined the circle' whilst others 'stood outside & / observed'. When I read this I was reminded of Stephen Fredman's comment in his 1993 book about Charles Olson, *The Grounding of American Poetry*:

In Emerson's world, the eye is the first of senses, and its work is not only visual but visionary; when uncorrupted, the eye looks inward as well as outward...

It comes as no surprise that Lazer's deeply moving sequence of poems should be dedicated to Fredman.

Some months ago I received an email message from Hank Lazer concerning the opening page of *Pieces*:

I had finished writing in one notebook & was looking around in my writing room for another & found this leather-bound notebook. When I opened it, the first page (and only the first page) was written by my uncle (who had passed away a number of years ago). I have no recollection of how or when I might have received this notebook. I read that first page & began from there.

From here on outwards there is a sense of the poet's perceptions opening from an individual standpoint and he writes

it simply isn't
 the same sky
 from day to day
 light is time

Of its very nature light 'diffuses itself in every direction in such a way that a point... will produce instantaneously a sphere of light of any size whatsoever, unless some opaque object stands in its way' (*De Luce* by Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln). And Cid Corman wrote a review in May 1971 of Frank Samperi's *The Prefiguration*:

Always in a room, looking out a window, or from a train, or even on the street, eyes peering out of the flesh, the stranger within, trying to compose, discompose or recompose, the scene. The seen.

The contemplative tone of Hank Lazer's writing possesses a sense of word-painting and it might be worth thinking again of Samperi's comments on this careful act of vision as he wrote in *Crystals* in 1967 about contemplation being 'a prefiguration of the very activity that pertains to the Kingdom of Heaven'. Lazer's attention to moments is an active engagement which is profoundly spiritual and one might well think of another notebook entry from March 1871 written by Gerard Manley Hopkins who suggested that what you look hard at 'seems to look hard at you'. That particular notebook entry concludes that

Unless you refresh the mind from time to time you cannot
 always remember or believe how deep the inscape in things
 is.

Just as in Hopkins's sonnet 'As kingfishers catch fire' where stones dropped into a well 'ring', sound and sight in this sequence of *Pieces* merge:

yes
 there is
 something underneath
 emerging words

bringing them
to the surface

Words evoke a past and 'what / still / hangs in air / invisible texture /
memory' is connected in language

making this place
now
& then

Emerson's 1836 essay on *Nature* gave emphasis to 'he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other' and this requires the retention of the 'spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.' It is no wonder that Charles Bernstein should have commented on Hank Lazer's poems that they are 'lyric utterances, journal entries, and aphoristic gleanings' which are 'set in a holographic space of the imaginary's shapes':

Human readers, hearken to these calls as they echo into
silence.