

SISTERS & BIRDS & THE SOMNAMBULIST'S WORDS:

a conversation with Eric Baus

by Jacob Knabb

All your gambling debts are forgiven." Imagine. If such a thing were possible; if these sorts of kindnesses could well up in the hearts of birds, as though one could flock with the and a. While many contemporary poets bide their time with poems of small moments, placing whitewashed patio furniture in just the right patches of sunlight, and honing in on the minutia of daily life, Eric Baus has channeled his poetics into a discourse founded on questioning the possibility of understanding the patio in the first place. Can one express an emotional response to a flower or a brick, when the very articles of speech that allow this posited emoting to play out on the page are so volatile?

In his first book-length collection, *The To Sound*, Baus explores the mental machinations that create these given truths through metaphor. In his citation of Baus's work for the 2002 Verse Prize, Forrest Gander notes the "lovely, subtle shifts in the lexicon...words replacing the words that context suggests, as pyrite can replace bone." It is precisely this kind of displacement of meaning, this re-articulation that makes Baus' poetry important. But from where do these obsessive confusions derive? And what, exactly, is his fixation with birds?

Eric Baus: One of my reasons for using so much bird imagery comes from actually watching groups of birds and seeing how even though they are all separate animals, they move as a single entity when they flock. I like the idea that there is a kind of shared consciousness that is larger than the individual. I'm amazed that birds somehow know to bank left at the same time. I like to think of that subtle but powerful relationship as a possible model for the hidden connections between other things in the world. I wanted to make clusters of language that came together, dispersed, and recombined in new patterns as a performance of that movement.

Jacob Knabb: Where did you learn your sense of form?

EB: I had a great teacher, George Kalamaras, who introduced me to some of the work that's most important to me (such as Lorca, Breton, Vallejo, Tzara, etc.) as well as his own neo-Surrealist writing. Actually, a handful of the poems in the section called "Your Recently Collected Saliva" are my half of an epistolary collaboration with George. He's one of the persistent voices I hear when I write.

JK: So what other voices inform your poetic sensibility?

EB: While I was writing *The To Sound*, I was thinking about specific works by Lyn Hejinian, Rosmarie Waldrop, C.D. Wright, Dodie Bellamy, John Yau, and Nathaniel Mackey, among others. The manuscript I just finished is more influenced by Stein and Roussel, as well as writers working in between experimental narrative and poetry such as Carla Harryman and Renee Gladman. Outside of poetry, my sense of form has been expanded by the films of Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner, and Charles and Ray Eames.

JK: It seems that a part of what *The To Sound* attempts to articulate is an exploration of the language of the places between the numbers, between two magnets where all of the energy is palpable, between is and was or life and death. You are experimenting with Phoenix imagery in the title poem, perhaps in an effort to articulate these ineffable places. Are you using the Phoenix myth consciously to allow you a way of delineating the moment when the flames become ash or the ash becomes birth?

EB: I'm definitely interested in creating a mythic landscape for the poems, but I try not to rely too heavily on direct reference to existing mythologies. I prefer the poems to become a cosmology on their own terms. For me, those moments of recognizable, mythological figures are undertones or resonances that come together unexpectedly rather than as a conscious effort to use mythology as a device. However, I'm aware that much of the vocabulary I use in the book has a lot of associative baggage tied to it. The word "bird" alone calls up a long list of ready-made connotations and myths that I'd like to complicate. "Bird" has such a heavy symbolic load that I thought it would be challenging to have it recur in a constantly changing landscape of other highly charged words ("sister", various body parts such as eyes, etc.) I'm interested in re-contextualizing words and images so that they can have a new life. So, maybe it's not possible within a single poem to get at those "ineffable places" you mention but within a larger sequence it is possible to create a constellation of ideas that make a magnetic field, a zone of activity.

JK: In "The Sisters Of The Broken Candle", the reader is confronted with an anti-oracle, a broken oracular socket, which is worshiped dutifully by a host of Sisters. They drape X-Rays of the rupture over the windows, and Sister "working backwards from the sky," claims to "follow every fissure until it's time for the stitches to come out." Nothing is to be thrown away. In fact, it is precisely from this blinded eye that these sisters pray for vision or substance or meaning. Why do you find this lack of sight to be something so compelling, so worthy of worship?

EB: At least one of the things happening in the poems is that perception and communication always seem to be obstructed in some way. I feel

that struggle every time I open my eyes or try to explain something to someone. I don't think I'm alone in that difficulty. So, instead of writing in a way that eliminated that struggle, I wanted to include it because it's such a huge part of how the world is experienced. I wanted to make something out of that static, that dissonance. I wanted to use those inarticulate or blinded moments to make an imagined space that doesn't necessarily alleviate them but might suggest some new, more active way of experiencing them. Although, I'm sure when I was writing the poems it was much more subconscious and intuitive than that.

JK: The somnambulist poems seem to be an extension of this struggle. The poet, ostensibly you, claims he could "stay up for days enumerating the movements in [the somnambulist's] eyelids." How does the visage of the somnambulist become a part of this worshipful blindness?

EB: I'm attracted to the figure of the somnambulist because he is someone who is acting involuntarily. He is in two places at once, in the world of sleep and dream as well as walking around in the real world. It's a wonderful and terrifying situation. When I was a kid I had a few sleepwalking experiences. I'd wake up on the floor of my closet totally freaked out. One minute I would be grabbing someone's arm in a dream and the next I'd be holding an empty shirtsleeve. That moment when the arm transforms into the sleeve is something that scares and excites me.

JK: How do you approach the crafting of a prose poem?

EB: In *The To Sound* I tried to merge familiar and strange elements together. Prose is a good form for that because it's the language of newspapers, labels, instructions, argument, letters, etc. It approximates (or pretends to approximate) the language of speech. People are used to hearing the rhythms and seeing the shapes of the sentence and paragraph everywhere around them. It's the perfect disguise for poetry because it is so approachable. I find that I can get away with a lot more leaping by writing in prose.

Since I write almost exclusively in prose, I don't really think about the prose poem as a genre very much. It just seems to be the most natural way for me to get things down. Within the boundaries of prose I'm always making other decisions about form such as whether the poem will be a page long quasi-narrative, a one paragraph epistolary poem, a more abstract poem that works with repetition and permutation as a kind of music, etc. So, it's more likely that, for example, the various manifestations of the epistolary poem will be more of an influence on how I'm writing than the larger category of the prose poem. The prose poem is almost invisible to me at this point. It's the air I walk around in now.