

Foreword

by Stephen Beachy

ABOUT FORTY YEARS AGO STORIES AND POETRY BEGAN to appear from a composite entity, a “collective” formed by Sheila Ascher and Dennis Straus and publishing as Ascher/Straus. They began in the late 1970s by creating “space novels,” which were reminiscent of the happenings of the 1960s and 1970s. These “novels” were interactive performative text-events structured by the spaces in which they occurred, galleries or air field hangars, and were designed to disappear once they were over, an attempt to release the book from its binding. By the mid-1980s, however, Ascher/Straus had embraced the binding, and to date they have published five books, a chapbook, portions of a largely completed forthcoming novel, and a vast and mutable on-going text online — a fascinating and complicated body of work that has remained largely unknown and unheralded.

Their first, enigmatic chapbook, *Letter to an Unknown Woman*, bears an oblique relationship to the Max Ophüls film of almost the same title (in turn based on the Stefan Zweig novel, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*) and announces what will be a continuing interest in the intersections of identity and popular media, especially old films. Themis, for example, whom we know only from other characters’ conversations and letters to him, starts out as “a beautiful boy who looked a bit old for his age, like Victor Mature in *Samson and Delilah*.” But after he’s picked up by a sugar mommy and moved from Greece to Florida, “he’s living ok, but

still it doesn't quite remind him of the movie he saw with Dean Martin or Alain Delon." Then his wife spots a new kid on the tennis court who looks exactly like Farley Granger in *Strangers on a Train*. The other characters are equally slippery, both to others and themselves, haunted by the sense that something sinister is happening on the edges of their perception, or while they're asleep, something frighteningly similar to the things that happen in movies about tough guys, cops, and hardened dames. The story is haunted by hovering helicopters that make the conversations barely intelligible even to the characters actually having them. Throughout Ascher/Straus's work it sometimes feels like you are walking in and out of theaters at a multiplex where each is showing fragments of the same dream, yours or somebody else's.

Dread can become comedy, and comedy can veer into unexpected horror; Ascher/Straus constantly force their readers to abandon expectations. In their later work, those expectations are foiled more subtly, and within structures that resemble more traditional plots, but whose ambiguities and multiple possibilities are all the more striking for that reason. *The Other Planet* is one of the indispensable novels of the twentieth century, a complex and unsentimental examination of the tensions created by rapid social and technological change. Carefully constructed possibilities may be gleefully abandoned or lives that seem coherent in their design may be suddenly eclipsed by larger forces. Something sinister is still happening at the edges of perception, something both desirable and terrifying. In *The Other Planet*, the most common name given to that thing that inspires both longing and dread is "the future." Valeria is haunted by the sense that there's a completely different way to live, akin to living on another planet, a future that one can enter now, through sheer force of will. *The Other Planet* examines the way futurist myths create a profound disillusionment and a yearning for the impossible. It critiques those myths while harboring no nostalgia for the forms that trap characters in the present, the habits of family and full-time employment. Valeria finds herself in a traditional romantic plot, receiving attentions from two radically different suitors: Liam, the nice inarticulate working-class guy who's desperately in love with her, versus the

creepy evil genius-entrepreneur-rapist, Humberto Vilanescu, who offers her a part in his vague and improbable “future” as an escape from the relentlessly barren present.

“We long for life to be like a waking dream, an adventure whose coherence, whose ‘plot’ provides something akin to meaning,” Humberto tells her. It’s exhausting, everyone’s need to resist a monotonous present rooted in an overly familiar past, and offering only the clichéd scripts of family, job, romance. “Mass agreement = History,” Valeria’s dying mother scrawls on a pad, unable to speak. “It happens. Again and again. There’s no resisting it, though it takes you by surprise every time. Now everyone is talking about marriage again....” Valeria’s not having it either. The nice guy gets left behind without a trace of sentimentality for the contrived and narcissistic “love” he offers as some emblem of what it is to be human. Human, as currently configured, is not okay.

Valeria would rather take a journey into strangeness, even if the future is an obvious con or magic trick—somebody’s always making a lot of money, somebody’s always living large off the surplus value extracted from somebody else’s misery. As it turns out, such a journey isn’t difficult to undergo. It is a journey through Ascher/Straus-world, a world where film, TV, dreams, and brief conversations collide to create a hyperreal and moody landscape. It’s the sort of strangeness that comes from actually looking at the world, detaching from the comforting habits of the self and its history. The future’s promise is something like immortality, but haunting that pursuit of permanence is the nagging question of what sort of false coherence actually projects the self’s shadow through time. “She didn’t understand the mania for self-knowledge. She longed for nothing more than the chance to go on generating herself blindly for centuries.”

This is fiction driven by ideas, ideas about the future, the self, and the relentlessness of the everyday. These ideas are often manifest in conversations, and so every idea is refuted, complicated, taken to its absurd extreme, or mutated in an unintended direction so that we are constantly reminded of the unavoidable self-referentiality of our own ideas, the degree to which they are trapped

in a corner: the corner of our bodies, our histories, the pictures of reality we most like to look at, the stories we put ourselves to sleep with at night. While each sparkly new technology rushes toward banality, the deep historical roots of other habits, beliefs, and attitudes (we're all morons surrounded by morons) can still captivate us with the idea that razing the present might not be the worst thing in service to our "smothered yearning for a zone where things were, at last, truly different than they'd ever been before."

In *Red Moon/Red Lake*, a collection of stories published around the same time, we follow a constellation of characters whose sense of coherence and plot is tied to monster movies, movies in which alien pods blow their seeds across suburban lawns, movies in which dark figures who hunger for living flesh haunt the dark spaces in between the shoddy houses of suburbs that seem to have been designed for nightmares to take place in. It's a feeling that pervades everyone and everything, so that in midsummer heat, under a blinding sun, Nora meets an old woman who speaks of how the cicadas are louder than ever before and the heat somehow darker, in a relentless monologue of horror. Nora thinks the old woman has lived too long: "Or had neither died nor survived the winter. A sort of corpse within which a tiny vocal kernel had sprouted, its roots on the other side." The old woman's daughter laughs and translates. "What Ma means is that the air is dead and the trees are dead, and the sweat that pours off us gets filthier and fouler every year. Yet we stand out here and we keep talking and talking. We can't shut up...." Ascher/Straus-world is haunted by the belief that one's own story is composed of all the stories others tell us, especially those we'd rather avoid. As the most sinister possibilities eclipse the willful banality of these lives, *Red Moon/Red Lake* crests in the strange and complicated title story, as emotionally satisfying and dreadful as anything in contemporary fiction.

Among the contemporaries of Ascher/Straus, the tone of *The Other Planet* and *Red Moon/Red Lake* is most comparable to the work of Joy Williams and Don DeLillo. They share a similar dark sense of humor and write the same sort of dialogue, dialogue at

once so real and so unreal that it seems like the way people might talk in dreams. (The way people would talk if they were possessed by a rare intelligence—if the most ignorant and thick-headed among us became articulate in the expression of our ignorance. If our ignorance could speak.) While Williams' and DeLillo's oddly structured and quietly surreal novels have been nominated for several National Book Awards, Ascher/Straus's oddly structured and quietly surreal novels have been interspersed with even more oddly structured and loudly experimental novels or novel-like things; it isn't surprising, therefore, the degree to which they remain unknown, despite the intelligence and vision that crackle from every page. They've resisted the primary mechanisms of corporate publishing, which are not so different from those of most indie publishing: the creation of a recognizable stylistic and marketing niche. Instead of capitulating to the cult of personality that drives literary production in America, they have obscured and undermined the idea of themselves. Their experimentalism has been playful and evolving, depending on the shifts in their own interests more than on the requirement to be consistently "experimental enough."

The Menaced Assassin is their most obviously experimental published book, and its characters—Celeste, the Dane (or the Swede), the taxi driver, one or several men named Antonio—are the shadiest. Freed from the pretense of plot, they are troubled by similar questions as the other, more plotted characters who will follow. Like Valeria, they are obsessed with the future and with the unlimited sense of possibility. Like Valeria and Valeria's mother and Liam, these characters exist in precarious worlds, at the edge of 20th-century catastrophe. The clouds might turn oddly yellow, "a kind of phosphorescence that makes one wonder if a chemical factory hasn't been dynamited somewhere on the outskirts of the city." We can't even count on the reality of Celeste, her hair color or her continuity within the space or time of the novel, but the repetition of certain stories creates a substitute for plot, the sort of mythic space of a Kathy Acker novel.

Their most recent books are the two volumes of *ABC Street* (*ABC Street* and *Hank Forest's Party*), released by Green Integer

and placing Ascher/Straus where they belong, alongside Stein, Wilde, Poe, Celine, and Michaux, in a line publishing “Essays, Manifestos, Statements, Speeches, Maxims, Epistles, Diaristic Notes, Narratives, Natural Histories, Poems, Plays, Performances, Ramblings, Revelations and all such ephemera as may appear necessary to bring society into a slight tremolo of confusion and fright at least.” *ABC Street* combines the journal with the novel, a chronicle that isn’t about the self that produces it but about the context that surrounds that self and about the act of chronicling itself. Its author, “Monica,” is re-creating conversations that happen among constellations of characters who surround her, strictly realistic New Yorkers who seem only slightly less surreal than the characters of the previous books. Their dark sense of humor is familiar. Yvonne, herself the mother of a baby who’s sucking up her life energy, confronts her destiny with words that say life stinks, a voice that says it doesn’t matter: “Yvonne wants to know if Monica can figure Janey Hedges out. Janey’s little one Jo Andy’s not even a year old but she’s got another one due in June! Janey’s not stupid so why’d she need two nooses to kill herself?” Simultaneously, *ABC Street* sends out ripples that change our reading of the other Ascher/Straus books, blurring lines of memory and realism and imagination, while it forces us to confront the way writing itself, and the sorts of perception that drive writing, is a medium conducive only to very particular ways of understanding. Monica discovers that “what interests her as a chronicler has as little to do with what’s ordinarily meant by realism as it does with what’s called imagination.” Chronicling is a form of editing, creating order and meaning out of disorderly experience. “But another path eludes both reader and editor, arriving in every text as if of its own free will.” The chronicler’s intentions go awry. Thinking and intending to write about one family, she ends up starting a book about people she hadn’t thought about at all—a collection of stories titled *Red Moon/Red Lake*. As much as the chronicles are about writing, however, they are even more about remembering, remembering through writing or at the edges of writing, and about the vast sea of unremembered, unchronicled, unknown events or non-events that surround the thin little

streams of meaning we create with language. The two volumes of *ABC Street* explicitly raise questions about the function and intent of fiction and present themselves as models of something else: “a necessary aesthetic argument for a radically different basis for fiction, even more so than in the sense that every work of art is an argument for itself and against everything else.”

Despite all the thinking that goes on in these books, they are never pretentious, boring, or incomprehensible and are consistently funny. Ascher/Straus have chosen their own canon and manifested that subjective history as a unique constellation; they are a crossroads where *Doctor X*, *Shadow of a Doubt*, *The Damned Don't Cry*, and *Lola Montes* come together with the sort of “European” fiction that involves a devastating intellectual engagement with the world. Their forthcoming novel, *Headless World*, promises more horror, more dread, and more defamiliarized identity, as Junior wanders from dreams to various Dads as a result of forces he can't control or maybe even remember. “Are they outside the light of society?” he wonders at some point. “Is there a place outside the light of society? Wouldn't that be the same as finding a place outside time? And even a moron sometimes feels that wherever there's human life there's time: that time is a problem introduced into the universe with every birth. So, if time is a human problem, how can we get away from it? And the same with the light of society.”

Inside or outside, the future or the present, the enigma that haunts these characters usually concerns the question of how to live, even if they don't believe their own choices much matter. In one of *The Other Planet's* final images, two canoes row across one of those sad, domesticated lakes that sit outside the city of the future. In one, the hurried man and woman row with “an inexplicable urgency and terror.” In the other, two women cross with a radically different attitude. They paddle randomly, “going a little forward, drifting sideways, turning full circle, narrowly escaping getting caught in the sedgy border of a forested island. Laughing, they made their way sluggishly across the lake toward the narrow opening.”