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The Exit Show

by Anne F. Walker

[Palimpsest Press](#), 2003

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Reviewed by Sarah Bonet

Sex, in this book, becomes a vehicle for comprehension. Anne F. Walker's fourth collection of poetry, **The Exit Show**, draws on multiple sexual and romantic partners as a way to explore and articulate complex social and poetic forms. Walker's collection flows easily through a variety of formal and not-so-formal constructions (prose poems, emails, individual lyrics, and lyric suites), tied together by a powerful rhythmic sensibility reminiscent of a jazz drummer.

The prose poem, or short story, "chiasmus," tells a fractured fairy tale of love and meeting whose many players transfigure the primary protagonists' interpretation of one another. "Footnote 21" is a odd parable from an orgy, in tight and edgy language:

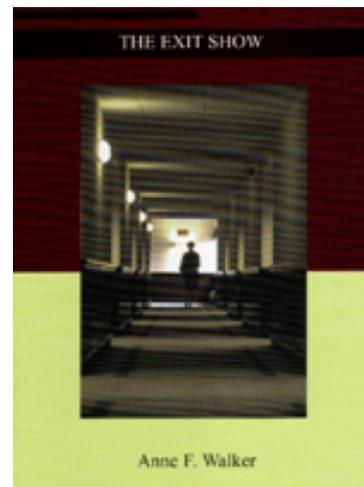
footnote 21. recognition. couples and who they are in bipartite equations, routines, the blonde 36 year old Marin doctor's wife who looks 21, her slim strip and dance routine by the pool, with muñequita, pat's wife. pat all buff upstairs in the kitchen smoking in the kitchen smoking and. we look down to the hot tub spa. muñequita moves and sits naked on the thin edge. a woman with beautiful brown store-bought breasts puts an orange-red plastic lobster between muñequita's shaved legs, over her shaved lips. pat upstairs shouts *now you've got crabs*. laughs.

These varied sensibilities, in which form both echoes and transforms content, illustrate a method of poetic sexual comprehension. The multiplicity of forms evokes a world of shifting connections; they move within and around each other like bodies at a party- touching for a brief transformative moment, discovering a personal, private language, and then breaking away and sending out new tendrils in search of another connection.

Walker is an established Canadian author whose previous books (**Into the Peculiar Dark**, **Pregnant Poems**, and **Six Months Rent**) have examined illness, poverty, pregnancy, and birth, all with a strong presence that expresses the breath of the body in a manner that transcends the pages. As she turns her eye to experimenting with sexual norms (much of the poetry is set in the San Francisco Bay Area... need we say more) she continues to present a tangibly embodied sense of language that is truly breathtaking. This collection won several awards in manuscript form, and clearly pushes Walker's work past previous thematic and aesthetic boundaries.

The title poem "The Exit Show," a ten page linguistic collage, is perhaps actually closer to a filmic montage. Like the figures within the text, the many poetic forms appear to be in motion, creating a dance in and out of one another. The text deals directly with sexual multiplicity, "i've been wanting you for two weeks /and the girl on the couch with my shirt /up and the man on his side to my side / his shoulders so built, they are electricity / in these hands that reach toward your face. / we all had something / *one line* / to say to each other."

Movements in the collection include the opening section entitled "The Poetics," "Next," "Snow Suite," and "Star-Lit Suite." The final poem, "1/11," stands on its own, outside of the preceding sequences. This choice



is suggestive of what is left after all is said and done throughout the collection. The lines are simple, lyric, and evocative:

raindrops on the clothesline hang
like christmas lights

my body is joined to yours under
my nails
the taste of the skin of your back.

Use of space on the page is also worth mentioning. For example, here in "1'11," the space in line 4 creates a pause, a place for a breath, that emphasizes and eases the hinge quality of the line as the line makes sense to the preceding and proceeding, though the whole stanza does not present a linear flow of consciousness. At York University, Walker studied for several years with bpNichol. I believe this is an example of his aesthetic moving down through to the next intellectual generation. This is not to say that the lines appear derivative, but they do appear well-tutored.

Walker's use of rhythm is also worthy of note. Often, with younger poets, there is a struggle to find a cadence both individual and rhythmically fresh, and this effort to break into a kind of improvisational flow strains the poem. Walker's cadence, on the other hand, is elegant and sure. She is not trying to do—she simply does. Her linguistic drum solos both serve the poem and elevate it. In "San Andreas Fault," her use of fragmentation, missing language, and rhythmic repetition echoes themes of fractured place/person/connection:

Zero is minus 20 Celsius,
or something like that. I don't
want to see you. I've seen you
naked as a starfish, naked in a nest of seven like
you've seen me in a three
that same night that night
in a house of flesh, I've seen
your bare voice each night
the other end my phone
your dailies appeared and we spoke and spoke and she
and she and she

Finally, I believe, the collection becomes about movement and transcendence. These are the foci underneath, the pivots. There is a montage sensibility of the long poem "The Exit Show" which emphasizes having and letting go. Use of various forms is in dialogue with the many characters coming and going, with themes of possession and of loss. The collection's third poem, "start sequence 8. selling a car," embodies these bipartite ideas of having and letting go with water imagery that moves gently through sounds and thoughts:

a glide of space above a boxy red jeep cherokee beneath
a white heron slides through air above freeway next to
(you were a bird. you were) next to the estuary

those constant small motions, of the series of docks
in which your boat is tethered, begin to suggest
how delicately (to me briefly, you were the ocean

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