

BOOK REVIEWS

TWO ELEGISTS

by Garth Greenwell

Isobar, by Louise Katz. Chapiteau Press, 26 pp., \$12.

It Does Not, by Julia Suarez. Bright Hills Press, 48 pp., \$8.

The chapbook is a curious creature. It has tended, until recently, to occupy a place somewhat below the radar of contemporary American literature, rarely receiving notice in the major venues of critical attention. In its origins ephemeral (the earliest “chapbooks” were the broadside ballads of the sixteenth century), it still holds out the possibility of a democratized literary process—anyone with access to a Kinko’s is a publisher—though this dream would seem to have found a more effective realization online. More recently, the chapbook has accrued to itself the status of art object; once a vehicle for the cheap dissemination of popular culture (the word is linked to commerce: “chapbook” derives from “chapmen,” the itinerant merchants who included them among their wares), it has become a thing of coteries, the limited edition of literary culture, its value inhering in its position to the side of the main stream of things. It came as something of a surprise, then, when a chapbook was a finalist for the 2002 Pulitzer Prize: Frank Bidart’s *Music Like Dirt* was the first in the wonderful Quarternote Series from Sarabande Books, which, in printing collections by Louise Glück, Robert Pinsky, and Charles Wright, among others, has done much to reassert the importance and vital centrality of the chapbook as a major form for American verse.

This is a happy development for the art, as the chapbook, at its best, allows for both a concentration and a reach difficult to achieve in the other platforms readily available to the poet: the glimpse of the two or three pages allowed in literary journals, the vista of the full collection. The best recent chapbooks—like those of Bidart and

Glück—have made full use of the middle territory the medium offers, writing cohesive sequences the grand ambitions of which are made more pungent by the modesty of their presentation. So too with the two poets under discussion here. Louise Katz and Julia Suarez are both debut poets, or nearly so (Suarez published an earlier chapbook, now unavailable, in 1981); neither has appeared widely in journals. They are also both excellent, emerging here with a sureness and maturity that have much to do with their use of sequence: in both of these little books, poems are set in poignant, complex relation with each other. Despite their stark divergence in manner—it would be difficult to find two poets more different in their methods—these chapbooks ask to be discussed together because of their remarkably similar approach to one of poetry’s oldest tasks: each of them, in ways that now embrace, now ironize or reject the conventions of the pastoral elegy, engages in the work of mourning. For both poets this work centers on an individual—for Katz, a mother; for Suarez a grandmother—and on the task of making new sense of a life rendered senseless by loss; for both, this requires returning to the landscapes of childhood, landscapes constituted and made intelligible by the presence of the beloved lost. But these collections are not so impoverished as such a description may suggest. Rejecting the limited palette that can damage the elegiac voice, Suarez and Katz are poets of great emotional range, and though fixated upon and always returning to the elegized object, these poems radiate outwards, encompassing both the larger world—a social world for Katz, predominantly a natural world for Suarez—and the self that sings it.

I

The poems of *Isobar* are decidedly eccentric. They are difficult to get hold of, and it’s easiest to approach a description of Katz’s manner by way of negation. The tone of the poems approaches flatness, avoiding the shifts of register—in diction, in pitch, in emotion—that help to structure our familiar experiences of poetic reading. An “isobar,” the book’s epigraph tells us, is “a line in a diagram that represents states or conditions of equal pressure”—something most of us know from weather reports—and it’s a canny figure for these poems, in which the pressure of the voice seems even, imperturbable, though their speaker can come to appear at times unhinged. The poems eschew the familiar techniques of the lyric, and can seem almost anti-lyrics in the way that

they thwart our expectations: there are no epiphanies here, no vatic voice offering moralities, happy or sad; there is very little of the kind of consolation promised by form, the chaotic world brought to order by the restraint of pattern. There are no lovely redemptions, and while there is strangeness, fantasy, hallucination, there is no mysticism: these phenomena never claim to be messengers from a realm other than our own. When the poems sing, as occasionally they do, it is not with the grand fluency of the pentameter but rather with the simpler music of the nursery rhyme.

If there is a striking sameness to the voice of these poems, it does not follow that their speaker is uniform. While always utilizing the first person, the poems often leave one unsettlingly uncertain as to who is speaking them. The poems are short on explicit autobiographical revelation, but it seems clear, as they build their various portraits, that the primary speaker is a New Yorker whose family's roots are in the South, in a Louisiana whose dialect wonderfully colors some of these poems; that she is prone to self-disparagement and self-ridicule ("Alcohol and disappointment have / Made me obvious and clumsy"); that she struggles with mental illness. Several of the poems take place in hospitals, where "Children would gather outside the fence calling out / Hey crazy, say your ABCs." She is oddly superstitious, living in a child's animate world of magical gestures and bedtime stories. The girl who was told that "Coach whip snakes...take their / tails in their teeth / and make a wheel. / Then they chase bad people / through the fields and down the roads" will become the woman who stays inside during a storm for fear that "a boxwood smell from the inland / Gardens . . . Will draw the lightning." But some of these poems seem to be vehicles for other voices, offering biographical details that charmingly strain credulity: "Nowadays I am a divorced woman / Who trains dogs. / They're so easy, unlike my heathen children. / I like cold vodka at all hours / It helps me sleep / And makes me patient with the puppies."

It's appropriate that these poems should set their pulse to the rhythms of nursery rhymes and children's games, as their aim is the distillation of the world of childhood. To this end, the book's portraits are at least as concerned with others as they are with the self, and their goal is a sort of family album. "Our house had three superstitious women," Katz writes in "Hoop Snakes," "and two somewhat sensible men." Mother, father, brother, and a woman named Inez who seems to be a maid

or nanny (elsewhere the speaker refers to her as “my best friend”), all receive the speaker’s attention. Katz’s portraits stake their claim, both to verisimilitude and to our interest, by means of detail, and her great gift lies in her acute, if idiosyncratic, attention to the specific, her ability to produce details that stand as tokens for—or even guarantees of—the real. In the opening poem, “Shades,” the speaker describes one of her mother’s paintings:

In it the evening was gray and pink around her friends,
 Who held glasses with limes on the rims.
 The women’s dresses were flowered
 With shades that matched the sky.

The rain pounded against
 The porch that wrapped the north side of the small white house,
 Floorboards were springy in the dampness.

Much of the pathos of this passage lies in the fact that the world depicted in the painting—an urbane, sociable world where women hold “glasses with limes on the rims”—is nowhere else in evidence in the poems; it suggests a time when the speaker’s mother enjoyed a happiness now denied her: the poem’s last lines find her “shuttered, shaking under the summer quilts.” But the poem’s authority, for this reader, is garnered by the second set of lines quoted here, where the speaker turns from the painting to describe the setting in which she remembers it. There’s nothing extraordinary about the description, and certainly nothing extravagant: a simple mentioning of a house, “small” and “white,” and “the porch that wrapped” its “north side.” There’s a touching sense of security in the verb, a feeling of having been tended to; but the remarkable detail is in the last line, where we move from visual description to an experience that engages our most intimate, tactile sense: “Floorboards were springy in the dampness.” We’re no longer merely looking at the house; we’re transported within it, onto boards responsive to our weight.

It seems odd to say of poems that are so often fanciful, imaginative, quirky, “off,” that many of their lines can serve as case studies in realism. Not, perhaps, in the sort of naturalistic realism of conventional mimesis, but rather in a more impressionistic, experiential notation of the real. Many of these poems are invested in just such notation, attempting to

endow detail with a significance sufficient to make objects into relics. “I wanted to stop summer, / The season of mother’s death. / But relics gave me courage / I kept a few of her things carefully wrapped / And placed in a steamer trunk.” Such relic-making, for Katz, is a crucial part of the work of elegy—a work that requires, as Peter Sacks writes in his classic study *The English Elegy*, “finding a compensatory object,” an object that allows for consolation. The power of those “relics” is shown by the end of the poem, which, after a rare stanza break (most of these poems move down the page in a single, unbroken verse paragraph), offers the collection’s most hopeful affirmation of the power of memory. The speaker has just described “the last sheets” used by her mother, “White with scalloped, watered edges”:

The depth of the waters,
The bare temperatures at the bottom
Preserve at times what we have lost,
Whale oil and wicks that still light
After so many years in the blue shadows.

This is Katz at her most lyrical, and that lyricism seems to be the mark of triumph, of elegy achieved: “what we have lost” has been, against all odds, preserved, its light waiting to be carried up from the ocean deeps. But these lines also ironize that achievement. If the aims of the elegy are both to “preserve” the one who has died, allowing her in some way—here, through her “relics”—to live on, and also to release the griever from the burden of grief, allowing her to continue her own life, then Katz suggests even in this moment of affirmation that success defined along these lines is impossible. The beloved object exists here only in “The bare temperatures at the bottom,” at the farthest possible remove from the surface of daily existence. Preserving her memory, then, requires that the speaker abdicate her own life.

Indeed, in many of these poems the speaker, more than happy to dwell nostalgically in her past, seems to attempt just that. The correlative of nostalgia is, of course, dissatisfaction with the present, and the modern world is a place of impoverishment and disorder in these poems, a world always in the process of being dismembered. “Now they have razed the park, / broken the five-sided gray stones, / removed the green benches painted over with countless layers,” she writes in “Bluie,” realizing that this renovation disturbs “the thirty year old secret,

/ a graveyard / where my parakeet Bluie was buried / in my mother's size-seven shoebox." In a beautiful poem, "Come Get Me," Katz writes of a world in heartbreaking domestic disarray: "Who will talk to me afterwards? / Things will lose their place and shape. / The forks and spoons will be mixed in the drawer." The modern world is one from which the very idea of greatness has fled, leaving nothing but emptiness to supply its lack: "I keep that frame on the wall empty," Katz writes in "Likeness," "Waiting for a likeness of a modern hero, / Lord Nelson or Marlon Brando."

Yet the emotional tenor of these poems is not merely nostalgic, always praising the past at the expense of the present. (It is worth mentioning, even if only in passing, that these poems have the rare virtue of being genuinely funny; this is all the more impressive because for Katz such humor is bound up with, and not merely a break from, the pathos of elegy.) One of the many modern innovations upon the conventions of the traditional elegy—its structure of lament, praise, and consolation—is to refuse to idealize its subject, claiming instead a new psychological honesty and rawness. The history of the elegy in Modernism and after has been a history of psychic states particularly indisposed toward romanticization. The grand example of this may be Ginsberg's "Kaddish," with its grief indistinguishable from rage and its mourning music of crows. A much more muted version of a similar ambivalence is evident in "I Keep Seeing My Dead Mother," a poem in which the presence of the mother, longed for so intensely elsewhere, becomes a torment to be fled:

I keep seeing my dead mother
 She is all over the city.
 Last week I saw her everyday.
 She buys newspapers on Horatio,
 Then reads them on a bench
 In Downing Park.
 I hide in crowds, hotels and phone booths,
 The places she won't go,
 Now I'm uptown
 I hope I've lost her.

In a wry reversal of the *ubi sunt* tradition—and hinting comically, in that "Horatio," at the posthumous parental visits endured by Shakespeare's

greatest and most stymied griever—here the mourner is pursued by the dead, and the relationship between mother and daughter is one of antagonism, the depth of which is clear in the disturbing image delivered a few lines later: “I told the doctors here I was haunted, / That she is a sneaky bat / Trying to tangle in my hair.” The extent of the speaker’s derangement is clear, both in “the doctors” she addresses, and in the terrible figuration of the mother. (These lines may recall Eliot in *The Waste Land*, another touchstone for twentieth century elegy: “A woman drew her long black hair out tight / And fiddled whisper music on those strings / And bats with baby faces in the violet light / Whistled, and beat their wings.”)

However she departs from elegiac conventions, as Katz grieves, familiar elements of the mode persist in their assigned roles, even if bearing the weight of an often affecting irony. “Silver Hills” contains a remarkable and raucous take on the traditional procession of mourners. Here is the poem’s ending:

Tonight my bed is afloat with company,
The usual jugs, leafy limbs and mossy stumps,
Lots of livestock (strays and herds).
Cats and monkeys
And one whale drops in for drinks.
Crowds of cattle and sheep and hogs
Circle in a dance, circle and drink,
They all ask for you.

It is a passage that feels at once improvisatory and perfectly orchestrated, decorous and deranged. The elements of the procession are arranged according to an order, from the inanimate “jugs, leafy limbs and mossy stumps,” through the familiar domesticated beasts to the exotic “monkeys,” ending finally with the outrageous whale. It is the stuff of a child’s fantasy, a bed filled with familiar spirits; this jars, of course, with the whale’s urbanity as he “drops in for drinks.” It’s difficult to read the penultimate line—“Circle in a dance, circle and drink”—as anything but a description of a joyful motion, a motion in which the verse participates, establishing in the first two lines of the final sentence a powerfully marked tetrameter beat. This makes the final line all the more moving, and all the more masterful. An absence reasserts itself as

the tetrameter is broken: the dance stops, and the joy of the previous lines turns back to elegy.

The collection's final poem, "Careless World," ends the book in a mode of melancholy, but it does suggest, if not an elegy successful in the classical mold, then something like consolation, or at least closure. Its addressee, significantly, is not the mother whose death is the subject of so many of these poems, but rather the father who has not been explicitly mourned before now. Here is its beginning:

This is a careless world without your voice.
 Courtesy is gone; nobody tips their hats.
 There is no one to name the shrubs and birds,
 To suggest a heavier coat.

While this passage echoes sentiments present elsewhere ("Things will lose their place and shape"), there's a new sobriety in their voicing here. *Courtesy*, that Yeatsian word, appears nowhere else in the collection, and it suggests an adult longing for a world of consideration and order, reflecting a sensibility quite different from that of "Silver Hills." But this poem, too, returns us to childhood, where it attempts to find its "compensatory object" in a kind of magical gesture. The speaker remembers herself as a child watching Sixth Avenue be renovated ("The pavement was always being torn away"):

I kissed the glass four times;
 Once for you and mother
 And Richard and me.
 You knew that four was a special number,
 My number for watching things end.
 You, at the door, made the room mine.
 In five months I have lost your voice.
 Its tone, a clearing throat;
 Trailing off, "be a good girl."

Recalling the double bind suggested in "Blue Shadows," this poem does not propose a solution, whatever comfort it takes in its "special number." Instead, the poem seems to resign itself to the less satisfying therapy of forgetting: "In five months I have lost your voice." For a poet so invested in voice, her own and the voices of others chronicled in these pages, this is a devastating realization; it may be, however, that

in the absence of a resolvable grief, of a sustainable elegy, forgetting is a tolerable replacement for consolation: forgetting may be this poet's best chance for something like healing. It is a bracingly clear-eyed ending for a collection whose many enchantments never feel like defenses and for poems that seem finally to look at the world with a stunning, wounding immediacy. This is not merely an excellent, exciting book. These are poems to break your heart on.

II

If Louise Katz's poems startle with their strangeness, those of Julia Suarez emerge from the center of an assimilated lyric tradition. They speak in the measured, formal tones of an adult civility that never raises its voice, a voice always mindful of the "courtesy" whose absence Katz laments. And yet this voice is anything but flat, and its slight modulations convey worlds of emotion. Suarez's poems are rich with allusion, and the voices of other poets frequently ghost her lines. She is steeped in the romantic tradition, both English and American, and finds herself in a world that speaks ("The same bird / has been singing to me all these years. // He is the teacher, solicitous and wise"). But her poems also reach further back, sometimes striking a tone of placid, graced wonder they learn from Herbert: "I didn't think a season of such / fullness could come again," she writes, recalling the earlier poet's "Who would have thought my shriveled heart / Could have recovered greenness?" But the primary tutelary spirit here is Bishop, whom Suarez resembles both in tone and procedure, in her care for luminous details of the natural world and her eager interactions with that world, her willingness to be taught by it, however enigmatic its teachings. One senses the presences of these writers without resentment: their influence doesn't feel like imitation in Suarez's poems, but inheritance.

Part of this inheritance is a comfort with lyric utterance, the epiphanic voice that Katz avoids, and Suarez does not hesitate to direct us to realms other than the workaday world. It is part of her strength as a poet that these realms are always accessed through exact and exacting attention. Suarez is a poet remarkably alive to the natural world and its seasons, one who notices the "Little bowl the sparrow's breast / makes in the dust"; who can still see in spring "where the snowbanks lay, / long sleepers, their imprint clear / in the deep grass of slopes until // the first good rains"; who can read in the morning grass "where the

deer come down, // does and fawns, cresting the chest-high green.” Seeing a deer dead by the road in “How Like a Sleeper,” she thinks of “the marks they leave in snow and soft earth / deep, and deepening as they age, eye holes // black into another world.” This final gesture to another, subterranean world suggests how Suarez’s investment in the natural world is allied with her work as an elegist. Throughout *It Does Not*, it is precisely this investment that allows her work of mourning to be successful in a way that Katz’s is not. (I speak of psychological success here, as measured by the expectations of the pastoral elegy, and not poetic success.)

Suarez’s poems, like Katz’s, often focus on childhood, and she can write of happiness as few poets still can in an age convinced that the language is inextricable from grief: as Robert Hass would have it in his poem “Meditation at Lagunitas,” “a word is elegy to what it signifies.” (“In American poetry,” Stanley Plumly has argued in his contribution to *Radiant Lyre: Essays on Lyric Poetry*, “...the elegy has been less an issue of occasion than an expansive and inclusive way of processing emotion. It has been less of an occasion than it has been the condition under which the life of the poem comes into being”). In “Saturday Mornings,” Suarez offers as quietly beautiful a portrait of childhood contentment as I know:

Into the gully between the backs of Mama and Papa,
on Saturday mornings we would climb and lie

in that place that was like the line along the shore
where the waves break. Papa, a wave turned over,

broad shoulders wrapped in white sheet surf, Mama’s hair
tangled on a pillow of foam...

One can argue that in the context of the collection this poem benefits from the elegiac poems that surround it, and it is difficult to deny that at least some of its force is owed to the book’s acknowledgment, elsewhere, that “everything is fuel” for time. But what is so striking about “Saturday Mornings” is that it is entirely without conflict, that it dwells unconcernedly in happiness, that any explicit anticipation of elegy is left out. “Childhood is health,” says Herbert, a claim this poem ratifies with its final image of “each of us in our separate // sleeping,

a pod of seals, a floating constellation.” Familial harmony is cosmic harmony here, the family unit sounding, as in Shakespeare’s eighth sonnet, the grander harmony of the spheres.

But childhood is not a time of uniform contentment for Suarez. In “Down” she recounts the kind of casual, apparently inconsequential childhood trauma that can remain decisively imprinted upon a life. It’s a familiar story: a girl, frightened by an escalator, whose “slotted steps // [were] so like the skeleton / neck of the brontosaurus we’d seen at the Museum / the day before, it was as if the creature were // swallowing,” hesitates, and is separated from her grandmother in the press of department store shoppers:

... and she

was gone, passing over the crest of the wooden treads as if
taken by a waterfall. I called to her, but she
couldn’t come back. Her face grew smaller

as the steps moved her along until she passed
beneath the neon display of a gigantic
coffee pot pouring itself steaming into a lit-up cup

that never filled. She disappeared. I have watched her
vanish night after night
just before I pass into sleep. Her face grows smaller

and smaller, like a child’s—

This early separation foreshadows the more permanent loss of the grandmother, one that provides *It Does Not* with a primary object for its elegiac attention. As in Katz’s poems, it is not just the loss of an individual that causes grief, but rather the loss of the world that that individual stands for. In the collection’s second poem, “Fit Subjects for an Elegy,” Suarez lists examples of her title, beginning with “The Garden State” where the speaker grew up and “The gardens of the Garden State,” where her grandmother worked. The list continues, including objects her grandmother owned: “the cut glass heart / ...that I promised to cherish,” “Her Victrola records, brittle as slates.” But the poem gains its greatest force as it expands beyond place and personal possessions to include less graspable emblems of memory: “The only person / who

remembers my mother when she was a baby. / Slang from the 1920's. Hats." Only in the throes of such devastation, and only two or three times over the course of these poems, is the measured control of this voice lost. In "The Shape That Absence Takes," the speaker stands in the grandmother's "empty house," searching for a tangible memory:

my eyes go back and back through

decades of redecoration to the designs
of wallpaper I traced with my fingers
in the early hours when I lay still,
waiting for you to call me

down to breakfast in the yellow
kitchen that is beige now and broken and
looks out on the garden that is not there—

Syntax tumbles through these lines almost entirely without punctuation—a single comma in the fourth line is the only guide—and, while no rules are broken (this voice is too delicate for solecism), the piling up of participial and prepositional phrases and relative clauses raises a tension that peaks with the polysyndeton of the penultimate line (beige now *and* broken *and*) before drawing itself up short with the dash, as the speaker pauses to regain her composure. A wonderful moment, it illustrates nicely how the usually unruffled surfaces of these poems serve not as impediments to but as facilitators for emotion.

It Does Not is a larger book than *Isobar*, not just in length but in theme. Katz's poems are intensely personal and private; their concerns are with the family and the self it shapes. Suarez, by contrast, has a number of poems that engage public, even political, themes. At their best, they do so with profound understatement. "Documentary" takes as its subject the speaker's uncle, a veteran quietly traumatized by his service. Only after decades does he speak of "the battles, the wounded lying / out all night, calling for someone to come; // bodies of men he knew, face down / for days in green water. . . ." A better poem, "Coming Home, September 11, 2001," stands as one of the two or three best poems I've read about the attacks on the World Trade Center. Its title is the poem's only explicit reference to the event, but its effects are registered throughout these lines with profound subtlety:

The trees on the south side of my house
still stand. That afternoon

I sat on the back porch steps
and listened: No planes, few cars.

Only the traffic of birds, the transactions
of leaves. My garden was growing. No early frost

had cut it down this season.

These sentences beautifully register the surreal quality of the day, the disjunction felt as the speaker turns from the epic tragedy of the television to a world offensively—even so near the event as upstate New York, where Suarez lives—unchanged. Far from showing signs of atrocity, the garden grows, beneficiary of the world’s mercy. “No early frost // had cut it down this season,” the speaker tells us. And so she extends her own mercy:

On the shingles

below the dining room window a praying mantis
with his spiked feet; the first I’d seen

in years. I helped him into the flowerbed, where
he’d find something to eat, I told him, and he’d be

safe.

Mantes are charged figures for Suarez, who writes in “Making the Bed,” the poem immediately preceding this one, of her childhood fear of them, eventually overcome: “...and death was like the praying mantis / I would watch and eventually let walk up and down / my arm.” Here, the encounter with the mantis allows for the poem’s most powerful reference to a changed world: “and he’d be // safe,” the stanza break before the adjective registering a new, sudden uncertainty. The speaker’s gesture, promising safety to the mantis, is her compensatory response to an event that has underscored the illusiveness of her own safety.

In *Radiant Lyre*, both David Baker and Richard Jackson argue that American elegy is somehow always, whatever its other aims, *self*-elegy.

There's nothing especially new in the observation, and it seems to me that there is nothing especially American in what they describe. The self has always been one of the elegy's concerns. It has long been acknowledged that "Lycidas"—the poem that, along with "November" from Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*, most powerfully inaugurates the elegy in the English tradition—is much more profoundly concerned with Milton's own fate, poetic and otherwise, than it is with poor Edward King's. More profoundly, the elegiac impulse, even divorced from the conventions of the pastoral elegy, always acknowledges the self's implication in the inevitable process of dying it mourns. One thinks of the "Lay of the Last Survivor" in *Beowulf*, the fount of English verse, or of any number of poems that engage the *memento mori* tradition. Yet in making such a claim, one would seem to disagree with Peter Sacks, disagreement with whom is always a perilous undertaking. In *The English Elegy* Sacks argues that "few elegies or acts of mourning succeed without seeming to place the dead, and death itself, at some cleared distance from the living. Hence, in part, the sense of distance marked by the processions in elegies or by such related items as the catalogued offering of flowers."

No doubt Sacks is correct about many elegies, but his account fails to describe how elegiac conventions are put to use in these poems. It is surely significant that in Louise Katz's fanciful take on the funeral procession her mourners "Circle in a dance, circle and drink," engaging in a motion that will lead them nowhere away. For Suarez, who makes grand use of the flower catalogue (and surely she is thinking of "Lycidas" as she does so), the convention does anything but distance her from the dead; on the contrary, it affirms the identification with the grandmother that will, in a wonderfully complicated process, both allow the speaker of these poems elegiac consolation *and* implicate her in an act of self-elegy. The poem is "Making the Bed," and the speaker is remembering gardening with her grandmother:

... When we
 were tired, we swung in the hammock, you singing
 to me about the garden, stringing all the old-fashioned
 flower names into songs that went on and on, *ageratum*,
bachelor's button, *columbine*, *nasturtium*, until
 I drifted off, wrapped in the heavy woven hammock
 like a chrysalis....

This passage helps to make sense of the collection's previous poem, "Rubric of My Grandmother's Garden," whose short verse paragraphs are punctuated by couplets of flowers' names:

*Cranesbill and Columbine, Dianthus,
Stonecrop and Harebell, Liatris.*

You in your apron and open-toed shoes,
I stood high as your hand while you arced
the hose in twilight, and we watered.

*Bee Balm and Bleeding Heart, Lambs Ears,
Four 'o Clocks, Lavender, and Loosestrife.*

Easily. So easily.
Everything remembered can be forgotten.

Later, in "Making the Bed," the poet makes clear the extent of the identification: "I am making this garden. I'm the one who's planting / and pulling and transplanting now...." The speaker of these poems finds her way toward the "compensatory object" that is the goal of elegy not by distancing herself from the dead, but by recognizing a continuity between herself and the dead, seeing the actions and patterns of her life as those bequeathed her; she finds her consolation by *becoming* the dead. This means, of course, that she must acknowledge the inevitability of her own death, and in the book's penultimate poem, "The Angel at the End," she turns her imagination to her own ending. The angel of the title is indifferent to her "eloquent plea—*O / Great One, grant me time!*" It responds with a gesture beyond appeal: "She put her head beside my head and drew / one gigantic wing around my shoulder."

But the book's most profound opposition to death lies finally in the natural world to which the poems have so lovingly attended. *It Does Not* closes with "Around a Small Lake in April," a poem that finds Suarez at her most Romantic. The poem begins like a crisis lyric, the speaker facing a world still gripped by winter, despite the day's "bright water, full sun": "Beneath the surface the blue steel edge, / and in the shadows, cold stones. Cold to come, / and the plunge to darkness, even after this light." But, as always in the Romantic crisis lyric, nature intervenes, here as so often in the form of a bird:

I listen.

Now my ears are full of light, cups of sun.

Now birdsong.

The same bird
has been singing to me all these years.

He is the teacher, solicitous and wise.

The intervention is an odd one. Where one would expect a lesson delivered, a lyric offering of epiphanic consolation, this poem gives us only incomprehension, another year of failing to understand the offered lesson: “I am so slow. / Maybe this time, maybe this season...” The exchange between poet and bird is mysterious, then, untranslatable into the poet’s medium, but its effect is clear in the poem’s end:

My hair, blowing across my face
shines as sunlight moves up and down each shaft like water.

When this newness (this old newness) does not make me new again,
where will I go?

That change *has* been effected, that the work of elegy has resulted in “newness,” is clear, but this is hardly the triumphal rising “to fresh Woods, and Pastures new” of the traditional elegy. Instead, Suarez emphasizes the imperiled nature of her response to the world, questioning its lastingness even as she acknowledges its force. Ending the poem, and the book, with a question, Suarez registers the indissoluble fact of death’s mystery: short of the promises of divine revelation, it cannot be mastered. And yet this speaker does find herself consoled, made “new,” and her renewal, her ability to answer the reawakening world, is what warrants these poems’ making. The oxymoronic formulation “this old newness” is a recognition of the poet’s participation in a long tradition of lyric responsiveness: one hears Herbert again in these lines, and also Bishop in the marvelous use of the iterative parenthesis: “Why, why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?” That Suarez can invoke such forebears without bowing beneath them is a sign

of the extraordinary strength of the best of these poems. One waits impatiently for more from this poet. I suspect that this little book, for all the modesty of its presentation, may prove to be among the most important debuts in years.