

## Four Instances of Masculinity

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Like Kevin Holden's dazzling debut, *Solar*, *Pink Noise* is another beyond-the-borders experience. It draws readers in with sublime glints, only to push them back, as he himself is pushed back, by the complex multiplicity of the world he wishes he knew how to inhabit. Reality, the following lines imply, will become a thing of strange conjunctions:

say there is a word no one can pronounce  
but every word in the language rhymes with it

or birch bark  
the waterlogged book

covered in cicada winds – wings

or his limbs are covered in the genitals of butterflies

wet increase hay, coins

the heaped summer harvest  
sunglass blown to chords by wind

In this set-piece from the section called “glinting,” the ambiguous connections of the butterfly-quick fragments, the mixtures of categories from linguistics to biology to agriculture and its profit, to meteorology and more, dip it into gnomonic waters. The human is unsexed (the genitals belong to butterflies). The Anthropos is passive while winds blow and hay and money increase. Will is pacified or annulled. The passage portrays the human *gone down, if not taken down, to nature or brought back to it – way back*. The human has no ascendancy here. On the contrary, empupling glass and wind and sun take the closing bow. Logic is superseded. Thought riddles.

Holden's writing often feels inborn with the sublimity of the uncanny, as in the first stanza of "glinting": ". . . money changing in the throats of the people / their breath / heaping darker capital in darker cities / to flow." Strangeness roams around what is left of us as a species, opening eyelids, turning over the debris for a look. The human slips farther and farther away from a sense of being at home as the knowledge of the complexity of the universe increases, that which isn't our property, which doesn't acknowledge us, or often ease us from our dreadful self-importance.

Passivity: how assert oneself amidst the darkness of physical behaviors, "the limits of being"—a problem addressed in the section "grid" (though strictly speaking Holden does not "address"; he lands like a skydiver amidst the peculiarities):

the ontology of elms go on in the garden go  
on into light a bit of moth the particulate eyes  
breaking like waves say the cliff of the object it  
is nowhere therefore a bit of lumen the filling white

"Ontology," the discreteness of objects, holds, the elms "go on," you can see that they do, but in the sense both of enduring and moving on, processural, processional, into the light, heliotropic. Physics says that objects consist of particles so fugitive that, as if disdainful to be fingered by the the gross fingers of the mind, they dissolve into ungraspables if your instruments try to locate them. Every object is a "cliff" against which the waves of vision break. Anyway, it isn't there. Another puzzle. Constituted by innumerable nonlocatable particles, it's "nowhere." Each moth eye contains thousands of individual eyes or ommatidia, up to 17,000, each a *working* eye; even so, it can't see the actual "where" of the object ("eyes . . . say the cliff of the object . . . is nowhere"). A "bit" of lumen won't make a difference. Being drawn to white light, sans "object," conveys a drive to get into its fugitive essence. In the latter part of the book white moths are drawn to white light. That great spreader, light, at last and at least fills the void where solid objects — which are something-nothing — leave off.

Two pages later, "two men together" are navigating a relationship on this quantum floor of elusiveness where "Euclidean space" is aswim, the leaves are "falling upward," and intimacy is suffering, a passion: "the song / / that tin cry in the throat of the birds rubbing my neck / now my throat and flowers on his lips or dust or ashes / and the dead lover the *pompes funebres* .

. . . all the grieving or nothing all the / empty feeling the . . . white linear / algebra  
 . . . if it is true that the circle / opens or if the sigma-ideal if the white sy-  
 mol sigma- / algebra this is a theory of or if *der Raum raumt* . . . / and we hold  
 something it is a tabernacle no it is roses / no it is memory no it is atoms or  
 ions or rows this / is a mathematics spreading itself on a space that it makes /  
 and it is always defining a notion of almost everywhere" ("grid") – the every-  
 where being nowhere in particular. Here the real itself is a heterogenous conti-  
 nuum (bird cry and human neck and tongue, lips and ashes), *the course of love*,  
 so short-lived here, becoming *the course of death* (poignantly in the prediament of  
 lovers with AIDS), feels "empty," is an emptying out, not increase. As in Badiou's  
 thinking, mathematics is looked to as a ladder that "spreads itself on a space that  
 it makes." And what if the room should room, space spread: it's not an escape from li-  
 mits. Dark infinity lies ahead, or so Holden suggests elsewhere. Pascalian abysses.

Such intellectually challenging poetry, such "experimental" daring,  
 seems to open like leaves from Holden, who, science-encrusted, is nonetheless  
 like the salvation-seeker Paul Celan, another thinker often thwarted from  
 thinking *through*. Rarely does the writing slip into an easy glide (but it can  
 happen, as with the whole of the final section of "glinting," which has little  
 of substance. "I had mistaken / the snow for your hands." For several pages  
 the movement is patchy and desultory). But in the main, and very much so,  
 the poems are full of marvelous invention, as thorny as beautiful, as if made  
 of coldly burning material, post-periodical table, that has fallen late on the  
 planet. With confidence and finesse, with refusal to dummy down knowledge  
 with outdated perspectives, Holden writes on the threshold of the future. He  
 goes about bringing you your friendly neighborhood "bulging infinity car-  
 taract." And if any readers should want to throw stones, they just don't know  
 their science or that around the corner, "the stones & air [are] burning black."

Holden writes a poetry consonant with abstract expressionism,  
 with divergences and indeterminacy, with cosmic winds; but he is catholic with  
 regard to static geometrical forms. He can't seem to get enough of hexagons and  
 poly-anything; he was trained up to respect them. He is fond of the cube, but  
 we note a bit of impatience: "o a rounder cube . . . hot boys hustling in the snow."

He is a sexual writer – in that respect, as in others, up to date  
 with the atonal currents of our time, indeed well ahead of them. He is  
 perhaps the most talented of recent writers who place phronomy above  
 statics. His sexual philosophy is democratic in the latest (rainbow)  
 manner, free of what Badiou calls "points," snagging sharpnesses in  
 what is otherwise open, unjudged, nonprohibitive. But he has pragmatic

respect, not to say sensual enthusiasm, for muscularity ("bulge in his white jeans / veins in his big arms"), perhaps partly as a response to the effect of unmanning that modern technology and physics and homosexual prejudice encourage. (We may recall the man dressed in butterflies.)

Beset as it is, the spirit itself must be like a muscle, toned. Holden brings the ever-more-patently-inhuman universe down to the streets of gay rights, to *that* divergence (though it is, at the same time a further development of equality). Young though he is, he stands with those "spreading their lovers" ashes on the White House lawn," and sees the "tear gas cascading in rainbows across their bleary eyes." He builds tension between his glimpses of future passivity and present "presencing," growth now, lest there be only static "snow snow snow." Why should the human, why should a gay man, play the part of the 99-pound weakling on the beach in the old Charles Atlas ads? Opposition is presencing. The cops? How do you see "a slab of quartz in the snow? "By a sort of directed rage." The everlasting police assaults of yesterday, not to say the memory of the extermination camps' pink triangles – enough! In the mad anguish of defiance, Holden says of incarceration, "break it apart / with your bare bloody hands / and thank your mother for your name."

Holden is also concerned with the "greening" of the psyche, which again places him at the forefront of contemporary culture, where opposition to the Anthropocene's intoxication with human supremacy and technological power is vocal and seems to be increasing. Muscles and greening, including poetry's greening – these are his answers to a universe running farther and farther away from the organic culture of cells. Also a conception of something like divine bi-sexuality:

rhombicubicosachoron the antipodal  
variation for Vyvyan &  
wheels within wheels take him  
from behind thrusting in infinite  
variation the god splits in two  
& is in front & behind this  
perfect green man, cut out of  
wood

The "rhombicubicosachoron," a geometrical figure with twenty-eight sides, combines with the antipodal feminine figure of the wheel ("Vyvyan"), in a yin and yang relation, or say math and sensory pairing, to penetrate the god from be-

hind ("from behind" is a minor motif in the poems), and in a bisexual insemination anticipating "infinite / variation." For no one thing is king. The world is multiple and various. Ontology isn't hierarchy. The lines invoke the effect of time in space, which proves to be, not entropy, but greening. To affirm both time and space amidst their queerness (in the old sense) shows fiber, a huge comprehension. To escape the hard and fast definitions of the tonic, to find oneself somewhere between "seraphim & synapses," as the preceding poem, "nephilim," puts it, is to be greening. In "spaces between" lies a green freedom, there on "the backside of the databarn." The "perfect green man" is spans the past and future sides of the fecund god. The green is now, vital. We are because the god of perfect wholeness has been fucked in the rear and broken out greenly into time.

Is Holden then a Romantic Modernist (they do indeed still exist). Is he always already a native of storms, inclined to (if falling short of) exaltations? Both the natural world and geometry are friend to this speaker who weeps "into happy cubes / feet untethered," somehow reconciling extremes. The phrase "greener algorithm in his mind" is in the same list as "bulge in his white jeans / veins in his big arms," that is, with dancing in the clubs and with poetry. "You shower in rosy shadows, . . . the negative / space of being, . . . / vortex for the fistful flowers." Contraries are rhythmically united, like the front and the back of the green god.

Holden's unapologetically original writing seeks "to play [the] piano into mesh" ("dihedral mum"). If the world is like a rubics cube, a puzzle divided into facets (this one part chemical, that one geometrical, and so on), sporting different colors, then diverse things ought to thought of as all-together-at-once, acknowledged as interlocked – something of a brain-braking assignment. There is no abbreviated scheme to represent it, except maybe in math (hence its appeal). But given the promiscuity of language, poetry can at least mimic a mesh.

Holden isn't a Blakean ball of gusto. Withal, there is sadness in his work, the common consequence of time, which both supports greenness and penalizes it for its luxurious departure from the statics of minerals. Art cannot stop time, though the dance can flow into it: "Multiform dances / flow out / in a dress of graphemes open at the door." The becoming or anyway alteration of things through flux is not just a "violet moving in breezes"; it's "a flowing toward dark infinity," which, for human beings, is "human comedy flowing blackly" ("lyotropic series"). Borne along also is "phlox" / twisted

gay, a deeper sex,” with “mad queers making noise” in a “sad country.”

In all, *Pink Noise* brings tremendous massiveness to the small boat the psyche is in. Holden seeks perspectives, writes with *that* kind of hope. As he said to me in correspondence, “we . . . search ever for / a window frame for the world.” Artists, scientists, and philosophers generally need disclosures of the nature of things. “Mathematics and science are axes along which one can grasp/see/experience/feel reality. Or they are means of approaching it, almost entering into it, into something other or hard to grasp or ‘beyond’ us. I don’t know if any entrance is possible, but perhaps there are lines along which one might approach that asymptotically.” And so “something visible at the edge of the darkness / this is the best way to go” (“adihedral prime”). At moments, meanwhile, there is in him a tenderness toward life that has yet to find full expression:

wander little sea meat  
little weed fish