JOURNEYS INTO FOREIGN TERRAINS

By Barbara Goldberg

Katherine E. Young, *Day of the Border Guards*, University of Arkansas Press, 2014, 64 pages, paper.

Mary-Sherman Willis, *Graffiti Calculus*, CW Books, 2013, 90 pages, paper.

Women's poetry in years past was often derided for being "domestic" in nature—with children, hearth, and home as its subjects. There were, of course, notable exceptions (Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop among them), and in any case, who ordained that "domesticity" is not worthy of the high art of poetry?

New books by two women poets—both at mid-career, both highly intelligent—focus on territory beyond domestic drama. Both take readers on journeys far from home into foreign terrain: Katherine E. Young to Russia and the former Soviet Union, Mary-Sherman Willis to a mythic Underworld in search of her prodigal son.

Young is an established, award-winning translator. Her translations of the Russian poet Inna Kabysh succeed in capturing not just the meaning but the emotional tenor, the *spirit* of the poems—as any translator knows, no mean feat. Young's own book of poetry, *Day of the Border Guards*, explores the emotional tenor and spirit of the former Soviet Union as well as the early days of the Russian state. This compelling collection, a finalist for the prestigious Miller Williams Arkansas Poetry Prize, is especially relevant as present-day Russia opens its hungry maw to gobble up its former states. Where does that swagger come from?

Young provides a view of the essential Russia that abides despite regime change and internal politics, an empire that has never lost a sense of its own greatness. She comes to her knowledge through di-

rect experience. While visiting the Soviet Union on and off during the 1980s, she had a ringside seat to *perestroika* and *glasnost* and the euphoria people felt at the prospect of greater individual freedom and a less rigid economy. But the reality was not to be. Despite the fact that the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, promised reforms were ineptly initiated, and the country was frozen in its ways. Young lived in Russia for five years during that early period of statehood. She worked in various fields: interning for CNN, running a small business, meeting Russian entrepreneurs. Her encounters varied enough to give her insight into the everyday Russian mentality.

Though Stalin's legacy was pervasive and difficult to dismantle, change was afoot, albeit at a glacial pace. In her opening poem, "Old Maps," Young predicts that the town of Rostov-on-Don, like the Soviet Union itself, will slough off its Communist and Bolshevik past:

> Soon Engels Street
> will go back to being
> Garden Street, I guess;
> And Kirov's bust
> (its nameplate comically
> misspelled) will be leaving
> the park.

Sergey Kirov was just one of the millions who died in Stalin's purges. He would disappear from history like the others.

Though factories would replace fields, winds of political change would not alter the Russianness of the town: the river Don would not change its course; the town would keep the column commemorating World War II, when trauma and suffering reached such a grand scale that an indelible mark was left on the country and its people.

Young lived in Moscow during those last days of the Soviet empire, when the country ran on rubberbands and spit. Winters were brutal.

Centralized heating was about as effective as the centralized government: when uninsulated pipes ruptured, people burned to death—and all the pipes were uninsulated. These poems are bone-chilling: looking out her window, Young sees "leafless birches // shivering the ice-covered courtyard" ("Centralized Heating"). But Russia isn't all about bad weather and feeling out of place. And Young's poetry is anything but drab and dreary. This is also a world of vodka, tea, and hand-knotted rugs. In fact, the poems are so deeply imbued with Russianness that Young might be a Russian poet herself, very ably translated by the American poet Katherine Young! There's such a sense of authenticity—a familiarity with the environment, the people, and the great Russian writers themselves—that the reader never feels these are travel poems.

Young's eye is especially attuned to landscape, which accounts for many rich, lush descriptions:

> The road from Samarkand
> slices blue-black and bored
> through the salt-veined desert,
> past cotton fields bleached
> copper green and white,
> past mulberries massed
> in dusty ranks like soldiers
> of the Great Khan.
>
> ("The Cow")

In "Nearing Chernobyl," she speaks ironically of beauty:

> For there's enchantment aplenty here:
> the cold wheeling of comets, breath
> of the sun howling down on the rump
> of a woman peeing by a tree in Ukraine.

And she evokes Shakespeare in an earthy description of the Caucasus:

> …this sharp-boned, sheep-clad
> shoulder of the world—even the clouds
> drift murderous here. From a nearby church spills
> the pink-gray scent of sheep guts and sour wine.
>
> ("Lady Macbeth in the Caucasus")

But more important than her acute observations of landscapes from Moscow to Siberia is the fact that Young cares deeply for the Russian language—not as an academic, but to take part in daily conversations, become friends with ordinary citizens, negotiate with those first Russian "entrepreneurs" and hold her own in a sleek car with a "bandit" who sells everything from pickles to Mickey-Mouse towels:

> Cigarette dangling, Ray Bans cocked, he's young,
> smooth-shaven, with something slightly vulpine about
> his cheek and nascent jowl. The kind of man
> who rarely looks at me, which is best
> because one glance in those ferocious, needy
> eyes and I'm a goner….
>
> ("Driving the M8")

Her bandit is the kind of guy who's so bad he's good: "he's beautiful wild, / beautiful as feral, beautiful / as fear…." With a few deft strokes, she paints his portrait in language both rhythmic and sensuous. People manage to survive, some even in good cheer. Young admires the ordinary citizen who rises and does something when the incentive is to do nothing—the person who can manage to fix things when most everything is broken.

That is, most everything *except* Russian literature. Young's heartfelt desire is to study the language more rigorously, to immerse herself in its poetry, to go over it line by line. Bulgakov, Lermontov, Pushkin, Akhmatova, Tsvetayeva: Young imagines them as companions, risk-takers, and deeply tragic. She imagines herself as witness or a character in their poems. In "The Arrest: May 13, 1934" Anna (Akhmatova) has come to M's (Ossip Mandelstam's) apartment at his request: "She smells of cigarettes, of damp /wool, of comfort." Here is Nadya (Mandelstam's wife) pouring tea as they wait tensely "on this night /when booted strangers will rifle // the secrets of three lives." They all wait for the "sharp, explicit / knock."

And here she is any one of a variety of Russian women—one of the hundreds named by the promiscuous Pushkin before his marriage, or Bulgakov's Margarita, daring and passionate and solely devoted the Master:

> …today could be
> any spring day in a thousand-year span:
> I could be myself, or any one
> of Pushkin's women, or Margarita walking
> the alleys with yellow flowers in her arms.
>
> ("Day of the Border Guards")

This is Young's title poem. It begins with the lyric description of a spring day in Red Square, 1987. Then, from out of the blue, a teenaged German aviator buzzes Red Square and lands in it—Red Square, the symbol of Soviet Russia with its distinct politics, manners, and customs.

This startling event is erased in a flash as the young pilot climbs out of his plane and extends his hand. His act creates a human solidarity transcending national borders. A man thrusts a camera in Young's hand so that she can photograph him with the pilot. Soon Special Forces cops will

swarm the plane and cordon off Red Square, but now a drunken officer of the Border Guards "stretches out ten trembling / fingers to print the faintest stain of hope / on the airplane's shiny metal skin."

This is Russia, a land of hope and a land of despair. Katherine Young captures *both* in language vivid, precise, and surprising. As she writes in "Speaking Russian," "*The antechamber of learning is the knowledge of languages*."

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In Mary-Sherman Willis's *Graffiti Calculus*, both poet and reader learn new languages—of calculus, phenomenology, and graffiti, just for starters. The title alone—*Graffiti Calculus*—hints at a rough ride. Just say "calculus" and memories of high-school math strike fear in many a heart. Yes, a hard ride, but not impossible, and richly rewarding if you sit tall in the saddle and trust the poet with the reins. Willis, who teaches at George Washington University and received her MFA from Warren Wilson College, is at the peak of her craft. Hers is a big book, with big themes, resonating with allusions to the Bible and Greek tragedy.

"Calculus" (Latin for pebble), the mathematical study of change, is the basic metaphor for Willis's book. Historically a study of infinitesimals, it includes the notions of convergent and divergent sequences and of infinite series that grow smaller and smaller but never achieve zero. Many of us cannot even imagine the concept of infinity. Doesn't everything have a limit, a beginning and an end? How can there be convergence in real life (as opposed to abstract mathematics) if we are talking about *infinite* sequences?

The desire for convergence is at the heart of this book. Willis's mission is to track (and track down) her runaway son in hopes of convergence, a meeting of the minds, or at least an actual meeting. He has taken to prowling the streets at night, a graffiti artist. "I had to find you. You

had left your marks, first on my body, my heart, / and now on the city itself" ("3"). But though son and mother sometimes cross paths, there is no convergence.

The book begins with Creation and the first words of Genesis, "In the beginning…." This Old Testament reference foretells the labors of God and the pain of separation—the waters below from waters above, of earth from the seas, of day from night. This labor is akin to a mother's labor, the breaking of the waters, the bringing forth of a new being henceforth to be known by a name: "your name / which we gave you to make you / a part of us and apart from us." From these opening lines, we know we're entering a world of paradox: *part of*, but simultaneously *apart from*.

Despite his parents' fixing their own names in him, the son, now an adolescent, is bent on creating his own name or, in graffiti-speak, his own "tag": CONE. Willis, in puzzling over his choice, comes up with an explanation: it represents the first initial of her son's name, C, plus ONE. "Or rather…See One. See me. Or, don't see me" ("1"). This section of the book is titled "Phenomenology of the Name." "Phenomenology" is the study of how we structure and attach meaning to experience. Willis's son—her prodigal son—abandons home for a different world altogether, a radically different phenomenology, discarding his name for a tag.

When he does, Willis also enters a new world, one of terror: "*If you died, where would I begin to look for you?*" ("7"). Even the dog feels it. She calls her son incessantly on his cell phone; he finally answers but hangs up immediately, disconnecting her. "Terror leads to terror, now I know. But that…that was true vertigo / to feel in motion even when at rest" ("8").

To understand her son's world, the poet must learn the phenomenology of graffiti. "I follow you, pebble-dropper, to learn what *lasts* [italics mine] beyond the heart/ and body, to read the wall's stories. // You are the writer, I am the reader…" ("14").

What shall a mother make of her graffiti-artist son, who has no desire to create timeless works of art, no desire for fame—especially a mother whose art is manipulating words to create a unified whole and who would like nothing better than to have her poems remembered for all time? But then, according to her son's phenomenology, he *is* making a name for himself, in code, for the cognoscenti—fellow prodigal "squanderers //who roamed lamplit streets, listening to the city's stone walls call" ("9").

Willis then goes back in history to World War II and graffiti with which she's familiar: Kilroy, Kill Roy, kill the king. She remembers doodling images of Kilroy years earlier in calculus class. Kilroy is a tag, depicted worldwide and always anonymously, sometimes drawn by soldiers in times of war, or teenagers who want to deface every wall in sight: "Every underpass // and overpass, sidewalk, billboard, subway, train-yard, toilet booth, / garbage-stinking alleyway…" ("12").

From Kilroy, Willis makes a huge leap back in time—far back—to the Paleolithic era, the Ice Age, prehistory, some 40,000 years ago when to hunt and be hunted was the stuff of life. But even *then* there was art, the cave paintings that hold such fascination even today. She calls this section of her book "Paleoboy." Perhaps her Boy is driven by the same impulse as those first cave painters, making marks depicting daily experiences with no desire for authorship. Once again Willis opens with biblical language: "The wall is our shepherd. It brings us to green pastures and leads us / by still waters to the cave" ("19"). In this world, she can take pride in how fast her Boy learns to craft his tools and learns the skills of becoming an expert hunter.

But Willis cannot track him here. "She would not be // the first mother to lose her child to the underworld's song. She would / have to dream him back" ("21"). Convergence is only possible through imagination.

Willis imagines the Paleolithic beasts he would see—mammoth, yipping wolf, ibex, bison, the shaggy stiff-maned horse. She even imagines the Boy imagining his prey:

> …oh wide-set leaflike ears, oh oak-brown nose glossy as river-rock,
> oh sapling-thin legs,
>
> oh white tail—so that when the snuffling and coughing, when the clatter
> of dry leaves kicked,
>
> the head held low, pink foam at the mouth—when the Boy sees the
> animal at last it's familiar.
>
> ("24")

She imagines the kill: "the thrash of boys and beast // to hold her [the deer] down, to pierce, to slice her throat, a gargled cry, the tongue, / pools of warm blood. Her eyes" ("25"). The writing here is muscular, visceral, primeval, turning sensuous as she imagines him sharing meat with a girl: "she opening her mouth for him, red and glossy. He strokes her bare / shoulder gilded with fireglow" ("28").

The prowess of Willis's writing is apparent as she shifts back and forth in time and space, from speaker to speaker, tracking her son on the path of the Red Line, a route that is part of the DC Metro system. The stops named along the way could be from that other, prehistoric world—Brookland, Shady Grove—but the Line also runs straight to the urban: Friendship Heights and Dupont Circle, a blighted, strung-out world of broken glass, condoms, stained mattresses:

> Code Orange, baby!—snarling Granddad's sloshing bourbon….
>
> Uncle Brother's looking to score on M Street, babies on board….
>
> Auntie Sister's doing lines in the bathroom….
>
> …*all* appetites running amok!
>
> ("34")

And there is always Willis's son—running away, running towards, running. We are not traveling in a straight line, but rather snaking forward and backward, back to the cave and an artist's toolkit of charred sticks, clam-

shells, chipped burin—and to the Mother, "she who had shaped him inside / her and tore him free of herself." He is still her creature: "By making her Boy / from her life, she left her print in him" (both quotes from "47"). Note that she writes *in*, not *on* him. "In" is permanent and cannot be erased. Her boy is busy at his art, getting lost in the process. Why this effort? Willis gives voice to what must be the goal of all art: "He wants to preserve her—and himself—in a kind of permanent speech, / and for that he needs a line ("48").

As does Willis. She, too, wants to preserve—the intimacy that once existed between mother and child. In the beginning, she tried casting lines onto the page. But now she is resigned; she must let her son lead her "down into the spoked city's underworld" ("51"). She follows his tag, hoping to catch sight of him, but he is always a step ahead: "Was that really you, or some other woman's son? What part was me, / at the limit at which we converged?" ("32"). *Line, limit*, *converge*, terms that lead us back to the beginning, to calculus.

The end to this book comes swiftly. Following her son's mark has led her to the end of the line, the line unspooled to threads, threads that are only our beginnings. The end is loss, letting go and accepting her son's name, now *"Lord of yourself"* ("60").

This is a complex and ambitious book. Yet we willingly follow Willis's hunt, the pebbles she leaves to mark his trail—her fertile imagination, her striking language. We wish her well in her search for her beloved, maddening son as he descends into an Underworld with its own cartography, its own logic, where she will always hope for convergence but will always fail—an outsider and alone.