

Marie Calloway, *What Purpose Did I Serve in Your Life*. New York: Tyrant Books, 2013. 240pp. \$12.85

Sam Pink, *Rontel*. Portland, OR: Lazy Fascist Press, 2013. 96pp. \$7.95

The graphic sexual content of Marie Calloway's autobiographical stories instigated major controversy when they first appeared online at the journals *Vice* and *Muumuu House*. *What Purpose Did I Serve in Your Life* collects this work in print for the first time, and its printing continued this controversy: Tyrant Books reportedly had to find a second printer after the first refused the job on an obscenity objection. The fallout was perhaps predictable, given Calloway's use of nude photos (some depicting her bruised body), descriptions of sex work at a young age, and thinly allusive pseudonyms for her partners, well-known writers among them. These controversies over content, however, have overshadowed the work's literary achievements. Calloway describes a series of sexual encounters minute by minute, in an understated style of sequential transcription that is documentary rather than fictional. This mode slows the narrative ratio of character change over time to track the tiniest increments of development: it allows for boredom, for fluctuations in feeling, for arbitrarily strong reactions, for mistakes and curiosity. Calloway's stories are delicate, formally innovative meditations provoking reaction to the aesthetic qualities of damage and concern.

Writers of documentary fiction like Tao Lin and Megan Boyle are clearly among Calloway's influences, and there are strong similarities to Kathy Acker's transgressive material. But the lucidity in these scenes is entirely Calloway's own:

I told him I was interested in politics, and he asked me why, and I didn't know how to answer.

"Because it affects a lot of people maybe."

"I work for a company that makes cancer drugs, and that affects a lot of people."

"I really want to have sex with you, but I think it's going to be really bloody, and I don't care, but it's going to be really gross for you. I think if I take a shower first it'll be okay."

"I think we should have sex, and then we should take a shower, and then we should have more sex."

I stared at him.

"I used to work in a lab."

I took another drink. It was my third beer and I guess I was tipsy.

“Okay! We’re going to take pictures, but first we’re going to take these things off.”

He came toward me with a grin on his face.

I said, “I can do it.”

The gaps of logic here, and the steely, mocking effect, are key to the book’s sense of chronology, the everpresent “now” shadowing these reflections. Calloway captures the constant anxieties she feels about her own attractiveness through formal means:

I talked about how mean I felt I had been treated throughout my life for my looks. And how I felt like people judged me less now that I was attractive. How even though it’s not true, I can’t get the idea out of my head that I feel safer when I look pretty.

Here, temporal compression implies universal mistrust: just as the move from ugly youth to babyishly pretty young womanhood seems to be from old to young, with the doubly mortal threat of aging again soon, the “now” flattens this development into a single moment. She will not inhabit herself for very long; she doubts the very presentation that serves as her retreat. *What Purpose* grants access to zones of feminine object experience (and femme presentation more generally) that are not often so finely rendered.

The book is stocked with long-distance dependence, trains and lost debit cards and corporate helplessness, jobs in new media and banking, plotted reputations, London and New York, Skype sex, and casinos. These are token features of white-collar diaspora, of privileged estrangement and internationalism alongside the adaptive technologies and anxieties that serve these new careers. In many of the encounters described, the narrator connects more tenderly with objects in partners’ homes—furniture, cans of beer, bedroom decor—then with the partners themselves. There’s wry humor in the way Calloway looks past these men at how they live, how they calculate value, and in turn, how the material structures of their lives mandate affection in its abstract form. She has a laugh at her role in the abstraction. She tells her partners “I am sorry I made you talk so much,” or responds to dozens of messages in a row with only “k” or “mew” or mute visuals. Is this a kindness offered to someone legitimately sick of talking, or the narrator’s expectation of her role? *What Purpose* leaves open the possibility of both. By refusing to obscure instances of this character’s passivity with retrospective narrative intent, and by continually deploying the airy tone, resistant to moralizing,

Calloway preserves a sense of herself as a girl-object in a historical moment framed by service work and cultural exhaustion.

As *What Purpose* outlasts the instant controversies it generated, Calloway is likely to be remembered for the grace with which she has rendered a world that holds her so loosely. The answer to the question of the title—*what purpose did I serve in your life?*—is open-ended. An austere “life” is mutually constituted; shared conversation does not imply shared purpose. Nor should it, this book seems to say. Part of Calloway’s narrative project is the imagination of new kinds of mutual usefulness. Her precise depictions prove that a kind of serviceable passivity might be undertaken half-instinctively, even self-protectively, that it might function as goading and cruel (or caring), but that it oscillates continually and should never be mistaken as inert. She makes what appear to be bad decisions about lovers and sex work but she doesn’t actually appear to sustain much harm. Her harm is not the point.

Rontel, a new novel by Sam Pink, reads as spear-side to Calloway’s practical take on alienation. Pink writes from Chicago’s Uptown neighborhood, with a dukes-up stance recalling Nelson Algren’s never-total immersion in an urban underbelly he both records and resists joining. The Uptown neighborhood is known for SROs and a large population of mentally ill homeless, related back to the closure of public psychiatric hospitals in the 70s. However, *Rontel* is less focused on lost social services than on the absurdity and criminal wit that rise to fill this space. Its narrator is weird, broke, and lonely, filling his solitude with a thousand doubts about solitude itself:

What was the normal thing to be doing, as myself at that moment.

Given all the qualities I embodied and could use to interact with the world, what was the right series of actions to begin taking.

[...]

What if I didn’t even have the option for something great because I couldn’t even return to a situation that allowed it.

I heard a spaceship captain in my head, and he said, “Original route, impossible. We now enter: Total Isolation.”

The lines fold back infinitely, the narrator’s imagined outbursts canceled as quickly as he voices them. He works in a chain-store warehouse, employment that provides neither satisfaction nor a basic level of comfort and stability. The only way to survive such a limited life, his surreal narration suggests, is an echolocation that continually prods the texture of social boundaries.

Rontel follows a minimal story: the narrator works, quits his job, buys a burner phone, ventures to other neighborhoods looking for work, and has

alienating run-ins with his brother, girlfriend, and neighbors. These scenes depict the intensity of scrambling for interpersonal connection while approaching the realization, affirmed by the shaken quality of almost everyone he talks to, that this is now almost too much to ask, especially in relation to the overwhelming demands of life on the bottom rung. This is the surest (and most hilarious) depiction I have read of the recession and working-class poverty as isolating forces. Pink's prose is sticky and so aggressive that you start to feel the weight of the narrator's obsessive projections, as the novel establishes a recurring and recognizable scene of nonencounter that is equally proximal disinterest and projected affection:

I got a sandwich at this place near my apartment.
I didn't like the food there, but felt very hungry and dizzy.
I went in and ordered.
The man put together my sandwich as I directed.
I pointed at the things I wanted.
"That bread, please," I said, pointing towards some bread
behind a glass blocker.
It was very intimate.
An intimate process.
A mutual trust.
A marriage.
In which he agreed to gently make my sandwich as I directed.
No, commanded.

And:

Fuck Western Avenue and fuck Chicago.
Fuck the summer and fuck all these people
[...]
People walking dogs.
People talking to themselves.
People sleeping underneath doorframes.
People under the Western bridge, their mattresses between
concrete support beams, right next to the street.
People handing out fliers.
People refusing fliers.
People taking fliers then throwing them in the garbage five feet
later.
People on parole, cleaning streets and sidewalks.
People sitting on milk crates on the sidewalk, staring.

People with no idea how to spend the day.
People who wished the day was already over.
People whose day was already over.
People.
Hey people.
Suck my dick.
Thought about myself in front of everything.

In *Rontel*, the narrator imagines far more interactions than those that actually take place. Race and ethnicity are depicted to a degree of racist exaggeration, down to absurdly rendered vernacular, and this emphasized difference strikes me as a fair depiction of the uneasy racial undertones that permeate life in Chicago. Following a hostage situation on a train, Pink rides a sense of solidarity and a fantasy of engagement with his neighbors, although he shares only a snatch of small talk with one (schizophrenic) man on the street. In these scenes Pink dissembles the rote epiphany of empathy with others that is so common in contemporary fiction. It's a freeing thought, even if it is crudely executed: identification with the life of another is not itself revelatory or useful. Pink's character recognizes the bitter danger of an empathy realized only in moments of forced defensiveness.

Like Calloway, Pink offers a sparse gallows humor that skirts clear moral arcs or resolutions and depicts a set of comic tactics developed to defend against mobility, distance, and overwork. Both writers invoke solitary life in a city with dead-eye accuracy—this is their most exciting contribution. For the many Americans at a remove from regular conversations—migrants, regional ex-pats, families of prisoners, anyone who has chased work out of state, anyone whose work so shapes their life that they are at a loss when “free” time presents itself—these structures of stranger-danger affection, strained jokes, and self-regard are key supports from day to day. It feels like a loss to the reader at the end of *Rontel* to realize that the narrator, in his quest for connection, must lay off the acerbic digs; this loss only proves how dearly we hold our social defenses, and the basic usefulness of selfishness—or, in Pink's words, “[thinking] about myself in front of everything.”

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