Arts & Humanities

The Project of Making: Poet Jeanne Marie Beaumont

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Jeanne Marie Beaumont ’90SOA describes herself as a poet involved more with the project of making than with writing. In her first collection, *Placebo Effects* (W.W. Norton), chosen by the late William Matthews for the National Poetry Series in 1996, Beaumont illustrates the process of suggestibility that images and objects create when they are drawn together from disparate origins and allowed to “talk” to each other. Her poems are detailed assemblages of sounds, personas, and material relics, such as “a zoo of belongings” and “erstwhile dust.” In them, as she confesses in “Photographing the Dolls,” an unintentional Ars Poetica, she wants “to invent a record, / one worth filing in a historical museum / of the future age.” This is work, however, that does not tell or reveal in the way that a narrative lyric may recount a personal experience. Rather, Beaumont believes in a collaboration between the intelligence words possess through their history of usage and the measure of a poet’s attention to that record, hinting, suggesting, and directing, refusing to tell a secret outright, yet without dismissing the nuance of experience; it is like the placebo that affects the mind, which in turn affects the matter. “Look,” she writes in the final lines of that same poem, “I realize they might all seem the same to you, / but I was schooled in subtle- / ties, out of fashion at the time as Latin / or home ec, which I skipped.”

Beaumont grew up in suburban Philadelphia in the 1960s, a place and a time she admits she hated, feeling stifled and rebellious. Her father sold cars and her mother was a homemaker. She was neither encouraged to write nor discouraged from it, but her working-class background gave her, she says, at least a sense of discipline. She was always interested in arts and crafts (the source of her constant desire to collect and assemble), but in her teens she began reading seriously the poetry of Emily

Dickinson as well as the plays of Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, and other playwrights. Both of these genres created in her a single-minded desire to start writing.

During the summer between high school and college, Beaumont discovered the work of Sylvia Plath, a writer with whom she says she found an immediate affinity. Like Plath, Beaumont had struggled with depression as a young adult, and she found a resonance with the mental landscapes Plath evoked. Plath's work also led to a discovery of the poetry of Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell '69HON. But Beaumont resisted the obvious trap of "confessional" writing. Rather, she took from the work of these poets what she calls their "emotional extravagance, or stylized seeing with emotional charge," in order not to write about her latest heartbreak but to put that intense interiority to work for her back out in the world.

After receiving her undergraduate degree in English from Eastern College just outside of Philadelphia, Beaumont worked in publishing, editing, and eventually advertising, which brought her to New York in 1983. Those jobs, she admits, made her miserable. She wanted to turn her life in the direction of something creative, so she quit work and began an intense period of reading, writing, and, as she puts it, "re-claiming poetry." Living on freelance work and her dwindling savings, she applied to and was accepted into the Writing Division at Columbia's School of the Arts in 1988.

The MFA program at Columbia exposed her to the poets and writers who shape her work now. For the first time, she read Elizabeth Bishop, a poet whose sense of place became immensely important to her. Beaumont discovered Italo Calvino's work; his interest in folk tales and fairy tales influenced her aesthetic of quickness and play. Poets fascinated with the transformation of the ordinary, such as Wislawa Symborska and Francis Ponge, as well as Freud on the interpretation of dreams, all gave Beaumont what she calls "permission" to experiment in her poetry with material she might otherwise have left out.

In her recently completed collection of poems, *Curious Conduct*, Beaumont takes on the twentieth century and the poet's relationship to history and time, stopping along the way to incorporate key literary events, such as modernism, surrealism, and theater of the absurd, into the discrete, formal space of individual poems. These new poems, Beaumont says, are "bigger in that they're able to embrace more," yet without giving up her signature heightened attention to objects and personas.

It seems appropriate that in talking about poetry with Beaumont she would come back around to her insistence that poetry is always about making. Closing a black, tomelike sketchbook full of handwritten drafts of poems and found epigraphs, she adds to a question on the physical labor of writing: “Once, when I was watching the construction of a new building in my neighborhood in New York, I realized that the men up there bolting together all that iron were risking their lives making something. That’s where my poem ‘City’ came from. Poets are always being told to take risks, but so few can say they actually risk their lives each time they write.” Making poems has become, for Jeanne Marie Beaumont, part of that human need to make something in as well as of our lives, whether or not we risk them, from what we have at hand and what has been handed down, and always, as she writes in “City,” with “The courage to build slowly / in the determined Roman way– / to knock off at sundown, / return the next day and the next.”

—Andrew Krivak ’90SOA

The Project Thus Far

I made of it a rough ball of fur, spittle, hairspray and wax.
I made of it a sheet I kept tearing and mending, splitting and stitching
until it were a quilted thing, a map of the intention to keep.
I made of it cheese.
I made of it a weak tea with no legible future but strengthening warmth.
I made of it worn down, ie, I made of it a molehill.
I made of it a pyre, piling dried herbs, old hymns, curled shavings
from a wouldn’t heart.
I made of it a recipe for steadiness including the latest disruption, the wild
oat flour, a pinch of salt.
I made of it hazard though I meant it to be entertaining.
I made of it a scroll that entrapped a keen disappointment exactly.
I made of it tidy piles, hankering to be categories.
I made of it a belt of fear, tight-cinching, with a buckle that lit the path.
I made of it porous, impure, a poor tent for rehabilitation.
I made of it a zoo of belongings and tended the erstwhile dust.
I made of it a hundred-button coat and wore it to my lover’s who
wept that it was good.
I made of it a tardy hourglass.

—Jeanne Marie Beaumont

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