

Hannah, Sarah; *Longing Distance*
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REVIEW

Picasso said Goya once framed it this way: The best art defines a quest to "mediate the distance" between "this strange, hostile world and us" by "giving form to our terrors as well as our longings." The same claim could be made of the best poetry being made today. In *Longing Distance*, Sarah Hannah probes the possibilities of each "uncontested crevice," from a nanosecond of childhood glimpsed in an old snapshot ("The Disappointments of Photography") to a de-liberate "flaw" in a villanelle ("Self-Portrait in a Cocked Hat"). In "Quincy Quarries, Quincy Mass," notice how the speaker, who enters a perilous excavation site through a "secret fissure," proceeds to uncover everything from the ob-scuring scents of her lover's shirt to the remains of those "gone missing," including the ironies buried in this phrase. The poet thereby reveals how recovering entails re-covering, how holding on requires letting go. Absences are implied by everything including a "kitchen sink," literally.

Sarah Hannah's voice is protean: now recondite, now outrageous, circuitous, forthright, celebratory, and now deadly. Her idiom can shift from the high Anglo-Saxon strains of "forelock/ and throatlatch" ("Horeshead Nebula") to the campy snappiness of "I passed my late teens belted/ in snazzy Mazda." These multifold turns of phrase are all part of Hannah's distinctive music. The games this poet plays with words are just as unmistakably surprising. In this book, a "rock star" in "Marble Hill" becomes a geological phenomenon, and the "asters" in "Aster Hill" get re-rooted by their Latin roots to stars: "Lights from a source long expired." In "Apology for Sleeping Late," our guide pulls out all the stops, taking us by "Disorient Express" and "Frisco" streetcar through "Pleistocene" stanzaic formations of inlaid half-rhymes: "Past phalanx and loggia, paroxysm and/Quiescence" (all very "Delfty" by way of "Flanders," mind you) to "a life! Low Country." How's that for a trippy outtake on the netherworld?

Like her equally skillful work in syllabics, Sapphics, and the villanelle, Hannah's free-verse and sonnet compositions are various, and she plays on the influence of poets as diverse as Plath and Sydney. *Longing Distance* centers on a

sonnet sequence in which courtly Renaissance conventions are mated to killer modern conclusions. These couplets in turn take jabs at one another. At the end of one sonnet, the mock-courtly speaker rejects the role of Andromeda (the mythic damsel in distress), asserting, "I'm the jagged rock you cling to." As befits the metaphysical conceit in the next sonnet, a comet does some talking to the sun, retorting, "No sense clinging to it. The answer is annihilation. You first." In the following sonnet, Gorse addresses its Tennysonian synonym Furze, rhetorically proposing, "Which cuts worse?/The claws that grab and cling, purpling the skin./Or the sudden spike that stabs and runs?" As the title of a later sonnet affirms, "Run, Don't Walk." These poems have bite.

Whether they focus internally on local urban observations, colors, botany, mythology, meteorology or astronomy, these poems also blend such themes and fields, defining a greater cosmos of perceived interrelations. Indeed, Hannah makes meteorological observations upon observatories, exemplified by the "plumed horse head" of cloud that curls an ocean away from "my Greenwich Mean." This horse later reemerges as a cloud seen through clouds, a "Horse-head Nebula." Every shift in perspective defines one more way of seeing into "the backward space of things—the air behind the air." Any "Apology for Sleeping Late" is also, by this account, a defense of the practice of poetry. These poems outwit space-time, dissolving the frontiers between night and dawn, one year and the next, childhood and adulthood, Boston and New York, east and west, the personal and the universal.

Behind it all, the "unperceived" persists. What lurks in the "intestines" of the "mirror," or in the lost "Dark Bookcases," or "in the bowels" of the "Linen Closet"? What do we make of that "unflagging question (past cure)" that has already lead us, say, past "bevel,/Slat, and dowel" to "jars of unknown solutions" in father's old art studio? One answer emerges in the author's reflection on the words defining a *frame* in a museum as a work of art. In their craft and their vulnerability, their erudition and their edginess, these poems reveal the limits of perception and articulation as the only vital sites of being and meaning: "no life/But on the rim, no word but on the lips" ("Cassette Frame").

MEENA ALEXANDER's volumes of poetry include *Illiterate Heart* (winner of a 2001 PEN Open Book Award) and *Raw Silk* (2004), both published by TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press. Her memoir *Fault Lines* (Publisher's Weekly Choice, Best Books of 1993) was reissued in 2003 with a coda composed after 9/11. She is the editor of the anthology *Indian Love Poems* (Knopf/Everyman's Library, 2005). KIRSTEN ANDERSEN received her MFA from New York University. Recipient of a 2002 fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, she was also poet-in-residence at the Edward Albee Foundation in Montauk, New York. Her poetry appears in *Swink*, *Cider Press Review*, *Painter's Bride Quarterly*, and other journals. She lives in New York City. LINDA BALDANZI MA, MS, has studied poetry at the New School, and has participated in a Sharor Olds workshop. Her poem, "Nipples of Destiny," will be in the forthcoming issue of *Redivider*. She lives in New York City and is a psychotherapist. SALLY BALL is the author of *Annus Mirabilis*, which was selected for the 2004 Barrow Street Press Poetry Prize by Ellen Bryant Voigt. She lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, and teaches at Arizona State University. MICHAEL BASSETT earned an MFA in poetry from Vermont College. He is currently working on a PhD in poetry at the University of Southern Mississippi. He has won the Joan Johnson poetry award and the *Fugue* Fourth Annual Poetry Contest, judged by Tony Hoagland. Pudding House Press published his chapbook, *Karma Puppets*, in 2003. DAVID BLAIR's poems have appeared in *Fence*, *The Greensboro Review*, *The Harvard Review*, and *Ploughshares*. He's an associate professor at the New England Institute of Art in Brookline, Massachusetts. BEVERLY BURCH's recent work appears in *The Antioch Review*, *Nimrod*, *North American Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Poetry International*, and has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her book, *Sweet to Burn*, won the Gival Poetry Prize and is a finalist for a Lambda Literary Foundation prize. DAVID STANFORD BURR's work has appeared in *Poetry*, *Barrow Street*, and other journals. He is the series editor for the Barnes & Noble Poetry Library, editor of seven poetry anthologies, and author of *The Poet's Notebook: Inspiration, Techniques, and Advice on Craft* (Running Press, 2000). He is an associate managing editor at St. Martin's Press and an adjunct associate professor in publishing at New York University, where he also teaches a poetry workshop. ROSETTE CAPOTORTO poet and writer, teaches writing in NYC schools. Her work has appeared in *Long Shot*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, and in several Italian journals as well as the anthologies *Are Italians White?* and *The Milk of Almonds*. *Bronx Italian* is her chapbook of poems. She is a two-time recipient of the Edward F. Albee Fellowship. PAMELA HOBART CARTER started playing soccer in March 2004. She has found the back of the net twice. Her birthday is the third of May. JENNIFER CHANG is the 2005 Van Lier Fellow in Poetry at the Asian American Writers Workshop. Her poems have recently appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *New England Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Indiana Review*, and *Poetry Daily*, and are included in *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation* and *Best New Poets 2005*. She teaches creative writing at Rutgers University and is on the staff of Kundiman (kundiman.org).