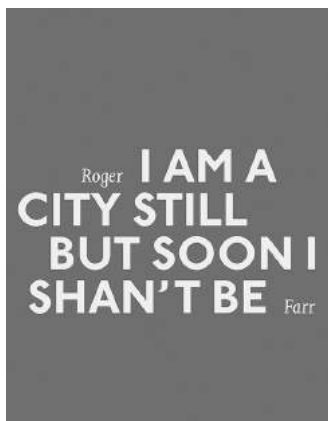


# see to see —

***I Am a City Still But Soon I Shan't Be***  
by Roger Farr

NEW STAR BOOKS, 2019

Stephen Collis



Shoshana Zuboff argues that under conditions of surveillance capitalism, “it is no longer enough to automate information flows about us; the goal now is to automate us.” It is at the confluence of flows of information, capital, state and corporate surveillance, and social control that Roger Farr launches his gorgeous stream of poetic

feedback, cutting into the surging current of urban infrastructure. The effect signals, in part, the way cities are designed to let (certain) things flow—to function as circuitry and facilitate (as the opening of the book’s nine “cantos” has it) “liquidity.” This is a book that attempts the integration of a certain form of lyricism with an unapologetic concern with political economy, the desiring body, and revolution.

The book’s lyricism in part relates to the chatty and poetically self-conscious nature of the “I” inhabiting this poetry and in part enabling its easy forward flow. The I-saying function still so common to poetry—the “supposed person,” as Emily Dickinson called this effect so long ago—has of course been much discussed, decried, disparaged, and re-inscribed over many generations of the “contemporary.” Farr’s I-speaker is of course no stand-in for Roger Farr the author or any other “actual” person and their “experience”; Farr’s “I” is a function of the city (*I Am a City*, the title tells us after all), which is not built for human

beings, but for the flow of materials and abstractions, in the circuits of which perceiving I-beings are simply utilitarian nodes, “like all other commodities circulating aimlessly.” Still, Farr’s “I” is aware they are being used in this way, is aware there is a history of resistance to such usage, and is on the lookout for possible opportunities for subterfuge.

Things are bleak in Farr’s “Dream Notes/on repressed collective desire,” and yet it is the way this poetry casts aside “[o]bsolete literary and political distractions” while continuing to hold out hope for “singular lives charting lines of flight from / all the checkpoints” that hooks and grips the reader, drawing us towards the poem’s conclusion. “Theory has failed you”—failed, at least, to do more than describe the Benjaminian wreckage heap of history—the revolution has failed us too—but in Farr’s dream notes, we keep its failure close (as one keeps one’s friends close and one’s enemies even closer).

Despite the near total pressure of surveillance capitalism, bodies go on desiring. How to shift *flânerie* “from window shopping” to “window smashing” is the question posed in “Dream Notes.” Near the end of the poem the speaker addresses one they “remember... from the riots”—a potential “paramour” with whom to “map” the city anew. And so we arrive at a conclusion which is necessarily a new beginning: “From here we began

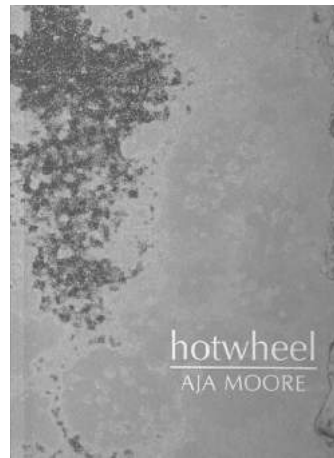
to course so here we will / return one crowded Monday morning in May.”

The modernist view of the city as necropolis (“Fear death by finance,” we hear a resurrected Eliot intone) is given its truly contemporary aspect. The wager—the excitement of this book—is how radically and openly we are thrown into the project of thinking and feeling our way through the contemporary—no assumed “truths,” no established “methods” or “theories” or “ideology”—just the ineradicable will to resist. Poetry has always been there when nothing else is left. This is poetry as the last stand—but the magic is that it reads as much like poetry as the first skirmish of what is to come.

### ***hotwheel* by Aja Moore**

METATRON, 2018

Jake Byrne



*hotwheel* by Aja Moore is a polished, muscular debut, a fine addition to Metatron's catalogue, and an emotionally cathartic work brimming with humour and wit. Lines from this book crackle.

The book opens with a soaring piece, "After I Definitely Can't Afford to Study w/ Sharon Olds," that swerves from a meandering trip to the library to a shattering recount of a medical emergency so quickly you can smell the rubber of the ambulance's tires. The speaker refuses to pin down an addressee, shifting between the speaker's stillborn sibling to Olds herself, and providing the second-person corollary to Ariana Reines's seminal line from *Coeur du Lion*: "[b]ut this I is the I of poetry / And it should be able to do more than I can do."

The poem's existence hinges on this unstable epistolary "you" as it performs an impressive balancing act: providing structure for the narrative to lean against, while at the same time exposing that narrative as potentially false. In the final lines—when the narrator writes, "In an effort to get close to u/it seems/There is nothing I won't/write about"—they expose their unspooling memory as performative, agenda-driven, a self-conscious piece of art(ifice), deflating the direct evocation of sincerity epistolary poetry relies on. With the structural conceit of a direct

address pulled out from under the poem, the weight of the previous eight pages collapses into itself, removing the reader's ability to discern between truth and artistic performance, and leaving something dense and unknowable as a neutron star.

Moore often employs humour, and sometimes as a defense mechanism, but never without winking to the reader a few lines later. Stylistic choices some might deride as millennial read as easy and familiar to any member of a digital-native generation: sloping, varied rhythms, contractions and internet-speak ("u," "w/"), references to memes, which, come to think of it, might be the closest thing we have to Yeats's images flowing out of spiritus mundi... "Technologies for Freedom" delivers an experience of contemporary alienation anyone with a smartphone knows all too intimately, where the device "deliver[s] / Right to yr door in 24 hrs or less / The device that reveals the atrocities / Causes them."

These choices and the wry, ironic humour throughout the collection place Moore's chapbook firmly within Metatron's established zeitgeisty aesthetic. But where *hotwheel* shines is in its beautifully expressed rage. Moore's is a rage directed inwards, perverting itself into body horror, health anxiety, or disassociation, as in "I Eat My Burger and The Man on the Radio

Lists Symptoms,” where “[m]ouths always taste worse than they look,” and a doctor’s callous bedside manner causes the speaker to mentally disassemble themselves into pieces “arranged by weight: lightest to heaviest. Then, by colour: darkest to lightest.”

When that rage is directed outward, toward the monied hypocrisy corrupting Vancouver, for example, as in the poem “Unemployable,” Moore balances class-conscious lines with self-directed irony. By the time Moore states, “I thought Adorno wrote: All / art is just properly sublimated rage,” these poems have already served as a testament to the power of that line, however misremembered.

### ***The Crying Book* by Heather Christle**

CATAPULT, 2019

Natalie Podaima



I am a sensitive person. I know this. I cry every three to five days, sometimes more often. I read Heather Christle’s *The Crying Book* over the span of a week, and as I read, I begin to track the number of times I cry, recording this total in my notebook on a page with the title “Tally of Tears” underlined. A strike for page 32, page 68, page 148. Sometimes I record the number of tears fallen (*four*), or a small caveat (*eyes merely welled*). At the start I cry infrequently, reading ten or twenty pages before adding to my tally. The number of pages diminishes over the course of the book and by the end, I am unable to endure more than a handful of passages at a time.

Christle positions herself as both “researcher” and “weeping subject,” stitching together history, language, science, and personal anecdote into a patchwork of prose poems. By contextualizing her own habits within her research, she makes her own life our case study: we follow the birth of her child, the death of a friend. Her references are countless and wide-sweeping, ranging from the seventy-two-year-old captive elephant who “died of grief” to a 1902 study of school children deliberating the moon’s materiality. These fragments elucidate the phenomenon of tears, creating reference points in Christle’s composite sketch of how and why we cry. We learn the difference between the three

types of tears our bodies produce: basal — the most ubiquitous, acting as lubricant; irritant — for flushing debris from the eye; and finally, psychogenic — those that express emotion. Though extensive, Christle’s study never diminishes the power of tears, never explains away their power.

I review my journal and recall my day-to-day events over the week spent reading the collection, attempting to draw a kind of emotional narrative that accounts for the various chronicles of my life in parallel to the book. I assess my agenda and period tracking app, compare these days to my tally, trace the arc of my cycle. I consult the dates and corresponding progress logged to my Goodreads account, check my iPhone photo library for the shaky images of my favourite passages while riding the metro. But the correlation is null: my findings conclude that there is little rhyme or reason, no clear map to my sentimental disposition. Christle’s ability to capture the seemingly arbitrary, non-linear nature of our sentimentality is precisely what makes this collection so necessary.

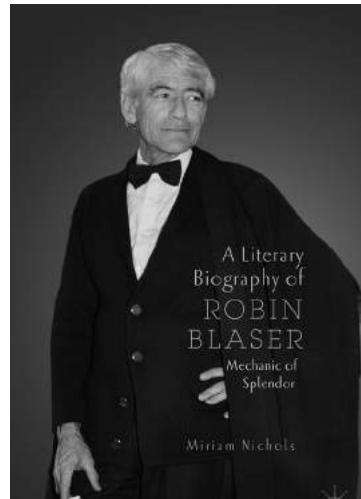
Christle writes: “Maybe we cannot know the real reason why we are crying. Maybe we do not cry *about*, but rather *near* or *around*.” *The Crying Book* is a collection in the truest sense; each fragment of prose chosen and placed with remarkable care, nestled

inextricably amidst the others. Christle’s exploration brings us nearer to tears, offering definition to our despair.

**A Record of Meeting —  
*A Literary Biography of Robin  
Blaser: Mechanic of Splendor*  
by Miriam Nichols**

PALGRAVE, 2019

Jami Macarty



Miriam Nichols’s *A Literary Biography of Robin Blaser* is an affecting examination of Blaser’s primary poetic themes and contributions to New American poetry: namely his “revisionary thinking of the sacred” and his perception-enacted,

outward-reaching meditations on the nature of language, sacredness, and the open space poem.

Nichols's biography vitalizes Blaser, the poet, and his poetry, while also offering particulars of his life in his words, such as the first time he opened "the door to a mysterious man with a mustache, dark glasses, a trench coat, sandals, his feet painted purple for some incredible reason." That "mysterious man": Jack Spicer. When Blaser and Stan Persky broke up, Blaser complained that Persky "took the curtains." Nichols also shares particulars from her personal history as Blaser's student, colleague, and friend, such as "Blaser's preferred white"—Chablis, and his penchant for shopping—"he found a pink jacket that became a favorite." All the while, Nichols stays wholly true to her intention to offer a literary biography, pairing Blaser's "distinctive discourse of poetry" with her distinctive discourse of biography.

The biographer's method speaks to what she learned from Blaser's "signature lecture style": to provide "context as explanation." Nichols weaves together the personal, social, and sacred in Blaser's life and poetry, mapping his early family and religious landscape in Idaho; his intellectual landscape in Berkeley; the landscape of his "great companions" in Berkeley,

Boston, San Francisco, Vancouver, and beyond—Dante, Duncan, Spicer, Olson, Creeley, et alia—to reveal how Blaser's work as a poet was "trying to be at home"—in perception and language—"to respond to the events of his times."

While I read the biography's fifth chapter, "San Francisco: The Artist of the Beautiful," I became aware of a background refrain playing in my mind: *All of these poets are gone. All of these poets are gone....* The poets of the Berkeley Renaissance, San Francisco Renaissance (Blaser was a member of both), the Beats, Black Mountain, and New York School—they are all gone. For me, their still-reverberating loss has as much to do with the lasting effect of their poetic works as it does the artistic community they formed and fostered. These poets took seriously and devoted themselves to poetry; they offered each other deep engagement via fine attention, rigorous reading, open conversation, and cross-media collaborations. To remember that they are all gone is to reckon not only with life's brevity, but with the fragile and contingent nature of artistic community. As life would have it, events arising in my own life while I read Nichols's biography brought the fragility of artistic community to bear. "Context as explanation": A dear member of

my writing community and I were reconciling after a slight, and another dear one was dying of a heart attack. Within the writing of this review, I endeavor, as Blaser did in his writing, to respond to their vacancy.

Blaser asserted that poetry retains a record of its “meeting with the world.” I too retain a record of my meetings with Robin Blaser on three

lucky occasions in Vancouver, where I witnessed how “in life he lived ... poetry,” and I met him in his poetry, where “he made a case for a mode of life.” A biography, according to Blaser’s terms, meant a poet had “done something”; that something is the *raison d’être* of Miriam Nichols’s devotional biography.

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Image: *The Capilano Review*  
Issue 2.17/18 (1996), “A festschrift  
for Robin,” celebrating the  
life and work of Robin Blaser.  
Featuring writing by Dodie  
Bellamy, Charles Bernstein,  
Rachel Blau DuPlessis, George  
Bowering, David Bromige, and  
others.

