

# FROM OUR OWN

## WE WERE WEREWOLVES

Doug Nufer  
(ABR Associate Editor)

Make Now Press  
http://www.makenow.org  
87 pages; paper, \$16.50

Reviewed by  
Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.



ABR is fortunate to have on its editorial staff many prominent writers and critics. *From Our Own* is a regular feature devoted to reviews and discussions of their books.

When reviewing a book like Doug Nufer's *We Were Werewolves*, one is tempted to employ a constraint a wee more exacting than that demanded by the typical review. One is tempted to write the review as a lipogram, or the more demanding prisoner's constraint, or maybe to limit one's vocabulary to the set afforded by the blurbs on the back of the book in question. But to do so in this case would be to diminish the achievement that is *We Were Werewolves*, to suggest that Nufer's constraint-based writing is some sort of parlor trick, a clever linguistic game designed to fill the time of dilettante writers who make their living selling spirits in Seattle.

### *Nufer's first book of poetry is as lovely as it is challenging.*

Doug Nufer is no dilettante. He is—if you will forgive the use of a perplexingly unpopular term—an experimentalist of uncommon success. Harry Mathews, to whom *We Were Werewolves* is dedicated, perhaps said it best: "A scientist whose experiments are consistently successful acquires the status of genius, and this is the proper status of experimental writer Doug Nufer." Nufer has previously limited his experiments to the world of prose narrative, so *We Were Werewolves* is a notable and crucial departure, as it is Nufer's first book of poetry. It is as lovely as it is challenging.

His previous work—excepting perhaps *Never Again* (2004)—suggests his love for pulp fiction and seedy noir, his opus *Negativeland* (2001) steeped in a dark, hard-boiled style that almost—almost—renders its constraint invisible. This love for noir is also apparent in *Werewolves*. The sequence "Poem Noir" interpolates and recombines noir commonplaces into a gripping tissue of language where phrase and idiom become characters in a linguistic drama: "I wasn't playing her, cutting my throat / To get some fresh air crawling with germs," opens "Like Cutting My Throat to Get Some Fresh Air." Similar phrases pop up again in "I'll Stake You" ("I was running rusty bobby pins / Cutting my throat to get left out all night") and again in "occasionally always" ("a part-time model cutting my throat and your mother dying there coarse muscled barbaric it's a word").

There's something of the fugue to Nufer's complex recontextualizing of these sentence particles, polyrhythmic and polyphonic, but also something painterly: the look of the language changes as semantic foreground and background shift in three

dimensions. As I'm no doubt demonstrating, it's an effect that can't adequately be described, only experienced.

Other poems are easier—if that's the right word. They foreground the kind of wit apparent in, say, Ron Padgett at his best, rooted in a simple idea expertly executed. "The First Star Spangled Noel" alternates lines from the popular Christmas carol and the lyrics to Francis Scott Key's famous poem:

The first Noel the angel did  
Say can you see  
Certain poor shepherds  
By the dawn's early light.

The poem ends, brilliantly, if necessarily,

Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel  
Born is the king of  
The land of the free  
And the home of the brave.

Another piece, "Super Patrol," uses a similar strategy, and in twenty-six short lines devastatingly critiques our obsession with law enforcement. Place this piece beside Hakim Bey's prose "Resolution for the 1990s: Boycott Cop Culture!" and you can see the benefits of using our own language against us, the benefits of theft, wit, and concision:

Look up in the sky  
Five-0 Racket Squad  
It's a  
Miami Vice CSI Special Victims  
Bird, it's a  
Unit, or  
It's a plane, it's  
The Highway  
Super Patrol  
Man.

"*Mort aux vaches*," indeed.

His drunken abecedarian "All Allow Allowances, Allowances Allow All" is a tour de force. Improbably, it is charged with an improvisational energy belied by its compositional rigor: "All allow allowances / but butt butterflies / Cup Cupid cupid-ity / Dip diploma diplomats / Eve ever everting / Fun fundament fundamentalism's," *et cetera*, *et cetera*. It is printed in two columns, recalling Paul Flieschman's award-winning *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* (1988), a children's sound poem which also features dual-columned text designed to be read simultaneously. "All Allow Allowances" similarly asks to be read aloud, "All allow allowances" read in time with "Zealotry zealot zeal"—"Pro prom promiscuous" read atop the appropriately kinky, "Kinkgous kink kin."

The more ambitious pieces in Nufer's excellent book insist on more time and space than this review allows. For instance, his inverse translation of *The Waste Land* (1922), "Land the Waste," will have you reaching for your collected T.S. Eliot with one hand and cutting up "Tradition and the Individual Talent" with the other.

Gertrude Stein once wrote, "No one is ahead of his time, it is only that the particular variety of creating his time is the one that his contemporaries who also are creating their own time refuse to accept." With this in mind, we can safely say that *We Were Werewolves* is not the future of poetry. It is its present. Let's hope more poets can catch up.

*A poet and scholar, Joseph T. Thomas, Jr. is a professor of contemporary poetry and children's literature at San Diego State University California. He is the author of two books, Poetry's Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children's Poetry (2007) and Strong Measures (2007).*

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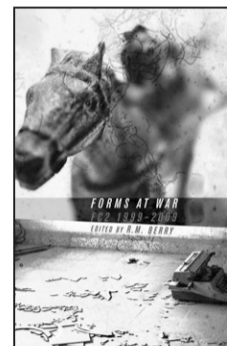
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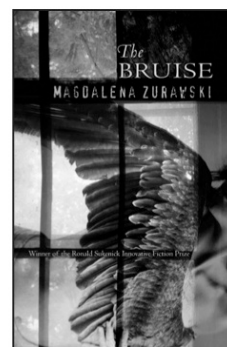
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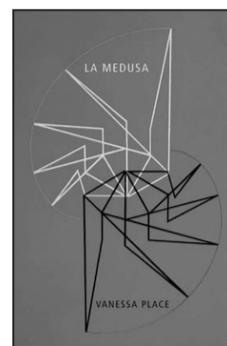
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