

Calligraphies

by Marilyn Hacker

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I once audited a course taught by John Hollander, Yale University's eminent poet, and an expert on Milton. I too casually remarked how Milton seemed to have counted syllables in his blank verse iambic pentameter lines. "He didn't count!" Hollander remonstrated, "Each line was like his breathing." (A detailed analysis of lines in *Paradise Lost* provides evidence of only rare deviations in the meter:

<https://poemshape.wordpress.com/2009/02/23/milton-blank-verse-iambic-pentameter/>)

In Marilyn Hacker's *Montpeyrux Sonnets*, each sonnet linked to its successor in a 'crown of sonnets', it's also exceedingly rare to find an exception to the pentameter and that on purpose: *My mind's sour as my stomach. There's something rotten...*, the alexandrine as soured as the sentiment.

Hacker and Milton both use Petrarchan rhyme schemes in their sonnets often direct and with enjambment. Milton's *voltas* come at the sestet (Milton's sonnet 19, *When I consider how my light is spent* is classic), where Hacker's turns are often delayed, relaxed, even coming within lines. The latter characteristic is what makes her sonnet sequences remarkable — their focus on the conversational: Her ills, laments for a dying friend, for food, her nostalgia for Beirut (where she studied Arabic), so much so that the 'breathing in/breathing out' of rhymes is scarcely noticed, an achievement hardly any other poet today can manage, making her work that much more pleasing.

Hacker's collection is not just comprised of sonnets. The dozen poems titled *Calligraphies* are perfect *rengas*, the Japanese linked form typically recited by a gathering of poets at night, perhaps fueled by saké. The first poet poses three lines in haiku form (5-7-5 syllables), the next poet follows with two lines (7 and 7 syllables each) — seventeen syllables in five lines, a unit known as a *tanka*. Hacker is her own company of poets, presenting two *tankas* (ten lines) with the last 7-7 couplet 'linked' in word or theme to the next pair of ten lines, each set separated by asterisks. Hacker uses the linked form to give accounts of her daily life — sorrows and pleasures — on and on through the Paris night.

Many of Hacker's poems relate to food: procured, made, eaten in pleasure with friends. A fine example recounts a time with her late friend, Marie Ponsot:

*Now, figs in salad,
cut up, or figs in labneh,
green Italian figs,*

*and blue-black Provençal figs
from the three brothers' fruit stand.*

*Remember figuiers'
branches overhanging stone
walls, or the time we*

*climbed a ladder to the roof
and picked the late figs of Vence.*

**

*Vence in September:
on the terrace with Marie,
we heard the ravine*

*murmur its prelude and fugue
to our reticent breakfasts —*

*coffee, bread and jam.
She was fifty-nine, and I
was thirty-seven,*

*that is, almost the same age
as we turned to our day's work.*

Altogether, Hacker's poetry is a master class in form. In addition to sonnets and *rengas*, she provides eleven perfect *ghazals* and, for good measure, Sapphic verses and a pantoum.

It's not just because of form that I so admire Hacker's poetry. She puts form to work to express feeling. Grief at loss of dear friends (Syrian political activist Fadia Suleiman an abiding spirit), insults to her aging body, loss of her spiritual home, Beirut (several poems have Arabic words, a language she studied there), and after Covid, increasing loneliness. The *cri de couer* in the first sonnet of the series, *Montpeyroux Sonnets 5*, distresses the reader as much as it had the writer. (One is reminded of Elizabeth Bishop's harrowing *One Art*.)

*Fug of the canicule. Fug of the aches
in neck, spine, abdomen, ankles and hips.
Fug of the words that don't come to my lips
or mind, to say, to write — to whom? Mind makes
mountains of anthills, lakes of drain pools, slakes
its thirst there, loses its balance, grips
a wobbly railing that's unsteady, slips
and falls this time, clutching the rail that breaks
the fall. But a bad sprain. Now it's truly lame.
The correspondent whom I hoped my read
my letter, poem, postcard, has forgotten
my phone number, address, if not my name.
My mind's sour as my stomach. There's something rotten
in all this undirected, flailing need.*

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