PRINTED MATTER

Composite Poetry

composite. diplomacy.
Padcha Tuntha-obas
Tinfish
By Craig Perez

Composite materials, from mud brick to concrete, rely on the principle that one material–the matrix–surrounds and binds a cluster of fragments of a stronger material, the reinforcement. In the chapbook *composite. diplomacy.*, Thai writer Padcha Tuntha-obas creates a composite poetry with the linguistic materials of Thai and English.

The Thai language contains 44 letters–nine middle-tone consonants, 11 high-tone consonants, and 24 low-tone consonants. In a short preface, Tuntha-obas highlights the language's tonal nature: "There are five levels of tonal pronunciation and four intonation marks; how they correspond depends on the tone of the consonant of the particular word."

In Thai poetry there are four main forms–Khloong, Chan, Kaap, and Klorn. Tuntha-obas writes *composite. diplomacy.* in the oldest form called Khloong Sii Suphaab, whose characteristics, she says, "lie in the compulsory uses of specific tonal words at particular syllables." Although the entire chapbook consists only of two stanzas (eight lines), the two stanzas undergo experimental transformations and translations.

The first section presents the eight lines in Thai, followed by a literal translation in parentheses. Here is the translation of the first line:

(hear)(completely)(voice)(chanting)
(interleafing)(hide)(language)

Throughout the chapbook, the "voice" interweaves its two languages, and locating this voice becomes an act of readerly translation. The next section phonetically translates the Thai into English, scores the syllables, and meditates on the poem in English:

sieng sar

laew rong

rum sack sonne

yin pa

in nine syllables, declarative is that one embraces what one hears. quiet lyric, itself refuses to speak, but insists that one hear completely that which sings. I say I have heard. continually. it has. there. has always been. song in chantry.

Sounding out the words and guessing at their tones places us within the textures of the poem's "quiet lyric." Tuntha-obas insists that we completely and continually hear what the poem sings in its composite chantry. In the last section of the chapbook, she accentuates the indeterminacy of translation by presenting a sentence diagram of each line, the line in Thai, and the line in grammatically correct English. Finally, the line is explicated syllable by syllable:

Line 1

syllable 1: /yin/. [tonal pronunciation] 1st level; [tonal mark]: none. Verb. To hear. syllable 2: /laew/. t.p. 4th level; t.m: 2nd level. Adverb. Completely, Already, Readily. syllable 3: /sieng/. t.p.: 5th level; t.m.: none. Noun. Voice. syllable 4: /rum/. t.p: 3rd level; t.m.: 1st level. Verb. To sing persistently [...]

Tuntha-obas brings into dialogue the disparate, linguistic materials of Thai and English; within this "diplomacy," neither language dominates. Instead, each language functions as matrix and reinforcement at variable moments, equally expressing their potential for song. In *composite. diplomacy.*, Tuntha-obas creates a composite poetry as elegant and complex as the natural composite materials of wood and bone.

A native of the Pacific island of Gua'han (Guam), Craig Perez immigrated to California in 1995. He recently completed his MFA at the University of San Francisco, where he worked with Aaron Shurin, Rusty Morrison, Rob Halpern, Susan Gevirtz, Doug Powell, Truong Tran, and Paul Hoover. He is an assistant fiction editor for Pleiades *literary journal and a poetry editor for the online journal* Switchback. *His work has appeared in* Watchword, The Redlands Review, Quercus, *and* Galatea Resurrects, *and is forthcoming in* The Outside Voices 2008 Anthology of Younger Poets *and* String of Small Machines. *Visit his blog at www.blindelephant.blogspot.com*

American Oracle

Carbon
Michael Ford
Ugly Duckling Presse
By Mark Lamoureux

I first became acquainted with Michael Ford's work in issue two of Ugly Duckling Presse's journal 6x6 around the beginning of this century. In December 2001 the poet Philip Nikolayev published a lyric poem in 6x6 entitled "Death of the Lyric," lampooning the notion that the elegiac lyric is now a literary dead end. Nikolayev's point is that the lyric is only as dead as the author, and Ford's recent book *Carbon*, featuring poems which appeared in the venerable 6x6, further illustrates that the elegiac lyric is alive and well, and even messianic, in the right hands.

Readers will not find much bombast in *Carbon*. Ford employs comfortable language and a comfortable diction, though they do not wear the mask of "accessibility." For all of their comfort, the poems in this book are often enigmatic, employing a kind of sublime social realism. (Ford even invokes Jack London in "Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco"–"The stone/ towers and statues bare, but where's Jack London?)

Carbon describes a kind of atemporal Middle America, a mythological country that may or may not have ever existed. Ford's landscape is populated by a menagerie of archetypes: "The Ghost of Ida Warren," Bonnie Parker (of Bonnie and Clyde fame), John Henry, "a man reading comics in a waiting room at Charity Hospital, New Orleans," and the hero of "Giantkiller," probably a metaphor for the author himself, who says "Tonight I'll take my razor and stones/ and go out after them." Ford takes his place amid his American mythology.

In the notes at the end of the text, Ford, a resident of New Orleans, addresses the ubiquity of water in the poems and points out that the majority of them were written before Hurricane Katrina. This statement is necessary and interesting, given the book's preoccupation with ruin and erasure, particularly in its first half. The landscape seems to be falling apart ("Table on top of the house, Chairs tossed/ out in the yard") or being torn down ("I built a dancehall in the cupboard/ and burned it to the ground.") around the narrator. Even writing itself seems in danger of collapse. In "London" (perhaps another allusion to Jack London) Ford describes "A page torn from the volume./ a line cut from the page." It is as if Ford is New Orleans' Pythian Oracle, predicting its crisis in verse years before the actual event. (See, for example, the eerily titled "Infrastructure.")

For all its realism, Carbon seems most interested in the point at which the real becomes surreal, the sublime absurdity of the plain face of things.

For all its realism, *Carbon* seems most interested in the point at which the real becomes surreal, the sublime absurdity of the plain face of things. ("On the wet lawn toadstools grow/ in an almost perfect circle.") In "Topiary" the narrator watches a house consumed by plants:

Vines multiply and thicken,
throwing leaves around the foundering
of structure, a frame, wood and nails and panes
of sleep and sand burned and poured and fixed
too long to hold.
The vines climb to the rooftop.

Till only the outline of a house remains,
draped in yellow flowers.

Carbon is a worthy read, at once familiar and alien, traditional and iconoclastic–a ride in a toy train across real rails. Ford shows us that there is still much to love even in a ruined city and that the American lyric has weathered both fire and flood and persists.

Mark Lamoureux is the printed matter editor for Boog City.

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