

Karl Elder. *Gilgamesh at the Bellagio*. The National Poetry Review Press. Post Office Box 2080, Aptos, CA 95001-2080.

Karl Elder's fascinating new collection, *Gilgamesh at the Bellagio*, is made up of two series of poems divided neatly in the middle by the title poem. The first series of 26 abecedariums, "Mead," was previously published by Marsh River Editions; the second, "Z Ain't Just for Zabecedarium," runs through the alphabet backward, 26 times. As if that weren't enough of a challenge, all of Elder's verse in this volume is written in 10-syllable lines, especially tricky when, in the case of the abecedarium, each line must begin with a letter A-Z or Z-A of the alphabet. Elder has won numerous accolades for these poems, including Beloit Poetry Journal's 2005 Chad Walsh Award, the Council of Wisconsin Writer's 2005 Lorine Niedecker Award, honorable mention for the CWW 2006 Posner Award, and appearances in *The Best American Poetry 2005*, *Poetry Daily*, and *Verse Daily*. Although there's formal sameness here, much as in a sonnet sequence, there's also variety—of voice, image, and subject—which does not disappoint. While Elder's poems challenge the reader intellectually and foreground philosophical problems, they are also playful, witty, and aware of popular culture in the best sense.

Favorite subjects throughout *Gilgamesh* include politics, childhood, games, luck and chance, jokes, riddles, and numbers. The differences between an abecedarium and a zabecedarium turn out to be surprisingly numerous, partly due to Elder's manipulation of the form, partly due to the requirements of the form itself—as in a Petrarchan sonnet, whose subject matter in the octet tends to be more constrained by the rhyme scheme's more exacting requirements than in the sestet. Whereas the abecedariums often require contortions and twisting turns of subject matter at the end, making them little puzzles in which you have to relate ends to beginnings, the zabecedarium gets the difficult part over right away, and Elder exploits that aspect of the form as deftly as he does the difficulty of ending the abecedarium, so that the poems become meditations on Z, on ends, on loss and death, and whereas there's a freshness to the poems of "Mead," which often deal with games, childhood, and beginnings as in "Original Sin," "Everything I Needed to Know," "Anna Banana," and "Five July," there's often an exhausted quality to "Z Ain't Just for Zabecedarium," suggesting resignation and rapprochement.

In both, however, Elder displays, besides his range of subject matter, a deft command of sound and rhetorical device of a kind that's often absent from contemporary poetry. Consider "The Haves and Have Nots," which maneuvers expertly between Shakespearean and Berrymanesque syntax in order to celebrate the present moment. Besides its effective use of alliteration and assonance, it's a marvelous compendium of figures of repetition, which themselves signal excess of language and of life—the *having* that the title points to. In this poem Elder punches the colloquial word "gots" eleven times, and simultaneously employs a plethora of classical rhetorical devices in a veritably Shakespearean way. Here's a passage that by my count contains *alliteration*, *ploce*, *anadiplosis*, *antanaclasis*, *anaphora*, and *polysyndeton*:

I

gots symmetry and I gots syllables.  
Healf? I gots healf in a handbasket 'cause  
I gots grandma's shawl 'cause I somehow gots

June pneumonia, gots antibiotics,  
killer medicines, pills white as the doc's  
light enough to spook hoarse out of horse barn.  
Mrs. I gots too—nurse as well as wife.  
Now tell me. Is I happy? Is I free?  
On count one I gots poetry. On two—  
poll the citizenry. Folks here'd sooner  
quarantine creator than creation.

I don't know that I'd call the zabecedariums the *have-nots* of this volume, but they definitely have a dramatically different character, as evidenced in their titles, e.g.: "The Unknown," "Eden Overgrown," "The Be and the End-All," "American Masque," "Acme Academy of the University of Megalomania at Melancholy," "Divine Comedies," "Less is More," "Loss," and "A Disappearing Act," the final poem. Many of these poems also focus on sound imagery, especially at their ends, that is itself often suggestive of ending—bugs zapped, hissing, deflating balls, bee's buzzing, flatulence, electric crackle, Darth Vader's heavy breath; as in "Mead," Elder plays with different voices, sometimes creating a character for the space of a line or two, including himself and objects/creatures from nature, sometimes writing a persona poem, sometimes incorporating naturalistic dialogue as in "A Routine Physical," sometimes staging a mini-drama as in "Tabloid Behemoth," in which Ham (short for Hamlet) speaks to Pol (short for Polonius but also *polis*).

Not all of these poems are about absence. "Shining" explores in a Platonic or Hopkinsque way the *ideas* of shininess and beauty, vis-à-vis a porcupine cub with a flashlight focused on its back:

a gorgeous hue of  
pewter so rare as to be the sheer form  
of itself that (in urgent fervor to  
name in order to more perfectly re-  
member) a Plato might call angelware—  
light the gown angels wear, their gossamer  
karma aura's alloy in the idea—  
jerry built, as is always the human  
idea of the beautiful,

The collection's final poem, "A Disappearing Act," displays Elder's playful range of voices, from the "words" a hummingbird's motions make, *zowie* and *yikes!*, to a Robin-to-Batman Boy Wonder persona, to a more world-weary narrator complete with a French *je ne sais pas*; despite one last reference to games and more puns, the ending has a serious point to make about life, death, and poetry:

For fortitude—out of fortune, fear or  
egress—is faint ally to existence,  
dawn the round nemesis of time's eclipse,  
cyclical as it is, as is the coy

buzz, the quick charge, the discrete retreat of  
all muse, that, game won, song sung, vanishes.

Although the abecedarium dominates *Gilgamesh at the Bellagio*, make sure and read the title poem carefully. Rather than a palate cleanser sandwiched between the alphabet read forward and backward, it's a densely packed mingling of ancient and contemporary imagery and myth. Although the title sounds like a piece of art at a museum (and perhaps it is), *Gilgamesh* is the part God, part human figure from the ancient Babylonian epic that bears his name, and *The Bellagio* is the name of a particularly opulent hotel in Las Vegas that is based on the "theme" of Bellagio, Italy, which, situated on Lake Como, was once itself a tourist center for the ancient Romans. The Bellagio's fountains, restaurants, and location across the street from the Paris Las Vegas with its "Eiffel Tower," as well as the general kitsch of Las Vegas, all figure in the poem, whose polyvocalism and tone is similar to that of Elder's abecedariums, as is its humor, allusiveness, invention, playfulness, imagery of gaming and luck, use of pop culture, serious treatment of philosophical questions and marvelous command of sound and rhetoric. Two characters converse through the poem: Gilgamesh and the poet/Enkidu, Gilgamesh's slave in the epic. Here are the poem's opening lines:

O, it turns out the sonofabitch and  
narcissist is immortal after all—  
epicure, of late, at faux Lake Como,

The Bellagio, where his spirit reigns,  
where fireworks in rain of fountains flower  
on the half hour to tunes feigned by the moon;

third he is if body and mind are thirds,  
his air of arrogance apparent as  
are we, his subjects here in a manner  
equal to *air*'s a phononym of *heir*,  
equivocal as the hole in our "O"

for what, opposite, looms tall, erect, lit  
over the shoulder—no evening, it, in  
Uruk or Paris—mock Eiffel Tower,  
ready, poised to prick its floating ovum.

Freudian perhaps? Hardly erotic.  
Indicative of an imperative  
vying for the right of reproduction,  
élan if élan's Elvis in the round.

Seen, read assbackwards, the scene is civil.

Note how the initial *O*, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the beginning of an epic echoes through the lines that follow in the words *Como, Bellagio, equivocal as the hole in our 'O,' opposite, over, shoulder, floating, ovum*, and is an excellent use of sound to suggest sense. Alliteration and assonance figure importantly in this passage and throughout the poem: *late/lake, fireworks/fountain/flower/feigned, poised/prick, right/reproduction, air/arrogance/apparent/airs/heir, indicative/imperative*. Homonyms multiply—*rain/reign, air/airs/heir, seen/scene*; figures of repetition repeatedly figure, as in the line *third he is if body and mind are thirds*, which also contains a joke about Gilgamesh being 2/3 human and 1/3 divine. And Elder likes his puns: *Elvis* read backwards really is *civil* (sivle).

It seems to me that “Gilgamesh at the Bellagio” and by extension *Gilgamesh at the Bellagio*, is all about balance, a controlling motif and metaphor at every level—either the resolution of opposites or the attempt to hold antithetical ideas at the same time without closing down either possibility—so Gilgamesh and Bellagio, ancient and contemporary, the Middle East and America/Europe, and so on. The image on the cover of the book is, in fact, a figure striking a balance pose. It’s this very balance—personal, national, poetic—that Elder advocates for in his poetry. Because you can’t go backwards, can’t “backfloat the flow” or

traipse counterclockwise

to time and space ante-Cirque du Soleil  
when/where Picasso meant energy—not  
entropy’s eatery, its menu chic,  
nauseating, bazaar of the bizarre,  
tripe like “Snake Xerophilous sans Cactus.”  
Yes, Gilgamesh, the serpent’s us, Narcis-  
sus under glass, coiled, gluttonous gut of  
incubus icon of decadence, the  
xenophile possessed by the zodiac.