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WORLD LITERATURE IN REVIEW

Fiction

Jean-Yves Cendrey. **Honecker 21**.
Paris. Actes Sud. 2009. 223 pages.
€18.50. ISBN 978-2-7427-8537-7

Honecker, a sales representative for a mobile phone company, has a low opinion of his own worth; he thinks he is "often broken down for someone who isn't even thirty." His wife married him in order to make him over into an intellectual who reads the classics of German literature, accompanies her to Italian classes, and goes to the gym to improve his physique (an activity he enjoys with "the enthusiasm of a galley slave").

Honecker's picaresque adventures are rather like those of Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus*, to whom he sometimes compares himself. He is often unsure how to act. He gets confused in the aisles of a "do-it-yourself" shop. Because of his "paranoiac instinct," he drives a car that was withdrawn by the manufacturer. He buys an apartment but can only arrange to move in on New Year's Day, after a snowstorm; then he finds that the former owners have left their tasteless furniture in his living room. He is subservient to a boss who makes outrageous demands, summoning all the staff to a meeting on New Year's night on the Polish border. He thinks halfheartedly of

suicide. Even his erotic fantasies lead nowhere.

He observes life around him in Berlin with irony. When he arranges a dinner in a restaurant-brothel for his boss, he hears about a claustrophobic stripper who refuses to be encased in a birthday cake. His incompetent dentist has a syringe

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"so large that simply seeing it would have made him admit to belonging to a terrorist network." He devises an advertisement for a mobile phone encased in a condom, for "privileged communications."

Why the title *Honecker 21*? There are in fact chapters numbered 1–21, but chapter 20 is missing. In chapter 19 Honecker picks up two

hitchhikers on the Polish border; they direct him to a deserted beach, where they leave him. Chapter 21 begins: "There is a hole in his life," a hole he fills in from memory as he lies on a hospital bed after three days in a coma. Perhaps the missing chapter 20 is what he remembers in chapter 21. Lost on the beach, he tried to read his copy of *Simplicissimus*, found what he mistakenly assumed to be a toy gun left by the hitchhikers, and shot it at himself. His last conscious vision was a woman's face—not that of his wife, or any of the women to whom he has been attracted, but rather that of a nasty saleswoman to whom he returned his espresso machine.

An amusing and perceptive portrait of a natural loser and of contemporary life in Berlin, *Honecker 21* differs from Jean-Yves Cendrey's earlier, more serious novels, set in France.

Adele King
Paris

Sampurna Chattarji. **Rupture**. New Delhi. HarperCollins / The India Today Group. 2009. 350 pages. Rs350. ISBN 978-81-7223-779-0

Nothing appears as it should / in a world where nothing is certain. / The only thing certain is the existence / of a secret violence that makes everything / uncertain. Sampurna Chattarji's use of this crucial opening quote by Lucretius (as well as T. S. Eliot's

lar. These stories powerfully evoke the kernel of a lingering emotional effect, as successful short stories do; a form of postmodern psychosocial malaise in the case of Holt's story, and the old-fashioned unrest and disquiet of a subtle ghost story in the case of Thorpe. But the same cannot be said for the majority of the stories.

All twenty-six stories, by writers as well known as Olive Senior and some being published for the first time, as in the case of Holt, deal with the volume's theme of the "global village," a phrase that evokes simultaneous visions of expansion and contraction. Most of these stories directly or indirectly address cultural migration and the experiences of contact zones between different cultures; almost all of them are stories of doom, with characters affecting what is not quite despair and yet is more than mere self-absorption. Sometimes the results are genuinely affecting and tragic, as in the case of Sara Hsai Tung, the Irish-Tibetan activist in "Pressed Flower" who is killed in Tibet, and sometimes they are banal, like the characters in Foluke Taylor's "Power Trip," in which a tourist ends up killing a native woman by accidentally pounding her head with the heavy pendant of his necklace while having sex with her. Are these the sort of warnings that are left out of the *Lonely Planet* guidebooks?

The gratuitous sex scenes in a few of these stories are troubling, not least because of a new old-fashioned objectification of women, but also because they seem to cast many of these women characters from Africa or the Caribbean as simply interested in vapid sex and money yet trying to appear serious while doing so. Yes, to be sure, as the edi-

tors emphasize in the introduction, such things happen all over the world—crude sex, violence, war, rampage—but there is no real substance hiding inside mere salacious details; there are no lower depths, nothing much to plumb, discover, or learn.

At least one story in the collection deliberately seems to be about the origins of the collection itself: Amran Gaye's "Estrangement," in which a struggling writer attempts to write a short story about the "global village" for a competition. Perhaps some of the dissatisfaction that one feels on reading this collection comes from the fact that some of these stories feel more contrived than spontaneously evolved. The best and the strongest stories still feature characters with depth; unfortunately, many of the stories in this collection sacrifice character depth and development to conceptual commentary about the global village, a definite drawback.

Gayatri Devi

Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania

Verse

Barbara Carle. **Tangible Remains / Toccare quello che resta.** The author & Antonella Anedda, tr. Formia, Italy. Ghenomena. 2009. 119 pages. €15. ISBN 978-88-95857-04-6

Barbara Carle's third book of poems, *Tangible Remains*, collects fifty untitled texts inspired by common objects, which are identified only on the contents page at the back. Carle's explicit goal is to make readers "avoid reducing the poem to its title," which works if we enter into her playful gambit. However, this speculative dimension would be a trivial gesture if

the poetry were not so evocative and imaginative.

The third poem, perhaps among those difficult to guess, is as lithe and deft as most of these remarkable texts: "Fitted hollow / accommodates / bodies for / intimate / epiphany. // Nests with / sheer curves. / Imperturbably / absorbs weight / creates lightness. / Frees dreams / with pleasure." The Italian translation is even more sensual in alluding to this *vasca de bagno* (bathtub).

Number 22 is easier to identify, but its insights are clarifying: "Holds water / without clouds. / Rolls sleekly / over the tongue. / Passes what it keeps / between lips / yet remains complete. / Inclines to be tipped. / Stands / without a hand." (Yes, a glass.)

In a few instances she tips her hand, but usually we must grapple with these charming mysteries of the everyday. Number 32 begins with: "Plane of expectancy. / Cleanly cut / clearly indispensable." This object "Rustles, tears, crumples, folds / but holds more than any window." Also it "Assumes all shapes / yet retains a blankness / that eclipses the limits / of possibility." Expectancy that eclipses our limits? What is it? Your eyes are looking upon it: a piece of paper.

The final poem, consisting of only fifteen words, reads: "Frames light. / Filters death. / Closes. / Slams. / Opens. / Damns. / Silences." Perhaps it suggests a door or a gate, until we read the simple and brilliant closure that "Draws you / out of your mind."

It turns out to be a window (*finestra*) through which these meditations draw us beyond conventional mindsets toward actually contemplating objects generally taken for granted. Throughout the collection,

highlighted by lucid observations and fresh perspectives rather than mere descriptions, Carle has created a poetic vision of the overlooked things of our world.

Robert Bonazzi
San Antonio, Texas

Mahmoud Darwish. **If I Were Another.** Fady Joudah, tr. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 2009. xxviii + 201 pages. \$28. ISBN 978-0-374-17429-3

If I Were Another is Fady Joudah's second book of translations from Mahmoud Darwish's poetry, the first being the award-winning *The Butterfly's Burden* (2007). Joudah, a Palestinian American physician and poet, offers selected translations in this collection from four of Darwish's recent volumes of longer poems: *Ara ma urid* (1990; I see what I want), *Ahada 'ashara kawkab* (1992; Eleven planets), *Jidariyya* (2000; *Mural*), and *Exile* (2005). Moreover, he introduces them in an excellent twenty-two-page literary study entitled "Mahmoud Darwish's Lyric Epic."

The translation is quite faithful to the original Arabic. It retains Darwish's different forms ranging from loose quatrains to free verse, with intervening prose paragraphs, and is conveyed in lines of varying lengths. Above all, it authentically renders Darwish's moods and feelings as well as his fantastic imagery of mental musings on life and death.

The former two books of Darwish belong to his "middle period," still struggling with the effects on his soul of the devastating historical and political events that made his Palestinian people homeless, but using allusive references and metaphors and eschewing the direct language of his "early period." The latter two books belong to his

"late style" period, suffused with Sufi inspiration and aesthetic, and replete with questionings of the self and the other, conjectures on presence and absence, memories of love and desire, and aspirations to fulfillment and perfection.

Mural, a book-length poem written by Darwish in 2000 after surviving cardiovascular death for the second time in 1999 (the first was in 1984), is a life-affirming poem that is as personal as it is universal in its vision of the poet's encounter with death—the human being in it is valued for

being human and able to accomplish immortal feats, especially in the arts. Addressing death, Darwish says: "Death, all the arts have defeated you, all of them." Darwish died upon his third encounter with death in Houston, Texas, on August 9, 2008, after complications from cardiovascular surgery.

One correction of a translation error in *Mural* is perhaps in order here. It is on page 136 where Dr. Joudah translates: "The Song of Songs / or the university's wisdom?" Dr. Joudah translates *al-jami'a* as "university," when the poet meant

