## AN ARMY OF LOVERS

Juliana Spahr and David Buuck

## AN ARMY OF LOVERS

Juliana Spahr and David Buuck



Copyright © 2013 by Juliana Spahr and David Buuck All Rights Reserved. Cover image by Mark Murrmann.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Spahr, Juliana.

An army of lovers / Juliana Spahr and David Buuck. pages cm

ISBN 978-0-87286-629-4 (pbk.)

1. Poets—Fiction. 2. Political fiction. 3. Experimental fiction. I. Buuck, David. II. Title.

PS3569.P3356 [A76 2013] 813'.54—dc23

2013020598



City Lights Books are published at the City Lights Bookstore, 261 Columbus Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94133. www.citylights.com

## CONTENTS

A PICTURESQUE STORY ABOUT

THE BORDER BETWEEN TWO CITIES 9

THE SIDE EFFECT 41

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT POETRY 69

THE SIDE EFFECT 91

AN ARMY OF LOVERS 123

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 145



## A PICTURESQUE STORY ABOUT THE BORDER BETWEEN TWO CITIES

THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA can boast of having both many great poets and many mediocre poets. Among the mediocre were two poets better known as Demented Panda and Koki. These two poets thought of themselves as living life in pursuit of both the intellectual and the social pleasures of poetry. In this they were like most people who considered themselves poets.

It is important to realize that in the time of Demented Panda and Koki poetry was an art form that had lost most, if not all, of its reasons for being. It was no longer considered, because of its ties to song, the superior way for a culture to remember something about itself. And at the same time, it was also no longer considered the superior way for a nation to inspire patriotism and proclaim, with elaborate rhyme and rhythm, that its values were great and universal values. This was especially true in

the nation that claimed Demented Panda and Koki among its citizens. This nation had long ago realized that the best way to inspire patriotism and convince other nations that its values were great and universal was to offer a series of tax breaks and incentives that encouraged the international distribution of colorful moving pictures and songs that celebrated soldiers, government agents, and upwardly mobile consumers as heroes.

It was in part precisely because poetry had lost its patriotic importance that Demented Panda and Koki were so devoted to it. But as poetry had lost its patriotic importance, it had also lost much, if not all, of its potential to be a meaningful part of any sort of resistance movement. It was not as if they had totally given up. They knew that poetry still had a role in various anti-colonial movements in cultures other than theirs. But they found it impossible to imagine any equivalent role in their own culture today. Despite this lack of faith in their ability to be meaningful poets, they remained devoted to poetry, full of hope about its possibilities, no matter how limited these seemed to be. As they remained devoted to poetry, they met frequently to take long walks together, and on these walks they talked about poetry and its particular lostness.

When they walked, they took up a lot of room

on the sidewalk. Demented Panda usually brought his two dogs, who tended to yip and yap at other dogs and at skateboarders, and Koki frequently pushed her baby in a stroller. Demented Panda and Koki thus walked down the street with three other sentient beings in tow, sometimes talking loudly like the baby, laughing and enjoying the sun, which was often accompanied by a cool breeze, and sometimes, like the dogs, getting in each other's way and then being annoyed and snippy with each other or with the world at large.

During these walks, what they would talk about could probably be best described as gossip, although it was also about poems and poetry. They didn't gossip about poets or poetry they didn't like. So they didn't talk much about poetry that tends to portray, in a quiet and overly serious tone, with a studied and crafted attention to line breaks for emphasis and a moving epiphany or denouement at the end, the deep thoughts held by individuals in a consumerist society. Instead, they talked about poetry that they liked, the sort that stretches language to reveal its potential for ambiguity, fragmentation, and self-assertion within chaos, the sort that uses open forms and crosscultural content, the sort that appropriates images from popular culture and the media and refashions

them, even if they often also talked about their frustrations with and the limitations of these kinds of poetries that they nonetheless liked.

During their walks they often played a sort of game where one of them would say something negative about some poem and then the other would say something positive and then one of them would say something negative and this would go on and on for some time. They were fairly ecumenical in their approach. They talked in negatives and positives about their own work and each other's work and the work of others. It was a sort of erotics to them, this moving of their brains between saying something negative and then something positive. It was like a game of one-upmanship that they played with each other and with the poems themselves. Some days Demented Panda was more negative and Koki more positive. But other days Koki was more negative and Demented Panda more positive. But when it came down to it, at the end of the flipping back and forth, the poems always won, and if they made a list of work that they liked, their lists would probably be remarkably similar and it would be that work that they talked about together, no matter how much they complained about the poems or gossiped about the poets while walking on any given afternoon.

One summer day, a particularly nice and mostly sunny day of 69 degrees, while on one of their many walks, Demented Panda and Koki decided to collaborate. They would, they said to themselves, write something that they would come to call A Picturesque Story About the Border Between Two Cities. Demented Panda and Koki lived only 1.4 miles from one another but they lived in different cities. They said to themselves that in A Picturesque Story About the Border Between Two Cities they would write something about what it meant to be poets in this time, this time of wars and economic inequality and environmental collapse, and in this particular urban space, a place that put up signs claiming to be a "Nuclear Free Zone" despite being the place that was largely responsible for the development of the nuclear bomb, a place that was now defined by the development of a technology industry that distributed colorful moving pictures and songs and social media through flatscreens of various sizes. They hoped that if they thought hard enough, they might be able to figure out some possible new configurations for political art and action. They wanted to think about the connections among place and time and writing as more than just an artistic problem, and also about how a site can be a complex cipher of the unstable relationships that define the present crises and their living within them.

But mainly they tended to say to themselves what they did not want to do. They did not want to write something that did what they already tended to do, something that was all clever about capitalism or all pious with long lists of endangered plants and animals and statistics that made you feel sad or all celebratory of poets and friendship or all self-lacerating or self-flagellating or self-cancelling or all about their edgy sexuality or all deep and serious with dramatic line breaks and well-crafted prosody or all jokey and deliberately bad and all about the genre or all full of found language edited to be either serious or funny. They did not, in other words, leave themselves a lot of possible things to do. As a result, their collaboration was more about what they did not want to do than what they wanted to do, even as their hope was that through the collaboration they might figure out what it meant to be a poet in a time and a culture where poetry had lost most if not all of its reasons for being, might by telling their picturesque story about a border between two cities find a new elsewhere, whether in poetry or as poets.

To begin this project, Demented Panda and Koki did not choose an obvious part of the border between the two cities, such as the intersection where people had once marched against the Vietnam war from Koki's city to Demented Panda's city and at the border had met the police and a motorcycle gang from Demented Panda's city and a brawl had ensued, even though this brawl more or less summed up the mythic histories that their two cities told about themselves, one claiming to be lefty and the other claiming to be bad-ass. Instead, after much wrangling and many misfires they decided to locate their picturesque story on a plot of land that was more or less equidistant from each of their houses and that included the border between their two cities. It was hard to say what exactly the plot of land was. It was small, about .27 miles around its perimeter. They could tell from looking at it that it was flat, somewhat rectangular in shape, with the distended sides of the rectangle going north-south. But the plot was not really a rectangle in any meaningful way as it had a hump on the northeast side and came to a point on the southernmost tip. A heavy-rail public rapid transit system emerged from an underground tunnel in the middle of the plot and traversed the north-south axis of the rectangle on an elevated platform. When the trains headed through Koki's city they travelled beneath it, entering and exiting through the plot of

land at the border between their cities. When the trains travelled through Demented Panda's city they travelled above it on raised rails and towering concrete hubs. On the southwestern corner of the plot, three streets and ten lanes of traffic met, regulated by three stoplights and numerous security cameras. A sidewalk was available for pedestrian access and there were benches every so often along the sidewalk. The rotting wood of the benches had been recently painted by children and featured self-improvement slogans such as "drink 8 glasses of water a day." There were also two metal sculptures facing each other across the border between the two cities that spelled out the words "HERE" and "THERE." "HERE" was north of "THERE" and read north to east, while "THERE" read south to east. The sculpture was a kind of joke for those who knew about poetry or who knew about the Bay Area, but it was not much of a joke and certainly didn't make the plot of land any more poetic to the two mediocre Bay Area poets.

In order to collaborate on the writing of *A Picturesque Story About the Border Between Two Cities,* Demented Panda and Koki met several times a week that summer on the small plot of land. There they sat and talked in the partly cloudy 78 degrees or in the sunny 77 degrees or in the sunny 76 degrees, the dogs

panting at their feet, the baby cooing with pleasure at each passing truck. Those passing by might have mistaken them for sunbathers or picnickers enjoying a summer's respite from the hard labor of toiling in the intellectual mines of the academy, but Demented Panda and Koki had only one thing on their mind and it was the small plot of land. It is true that their conversations frequently turned to urban theory, sitespecific performance, environmental art, and debates concerning gentrification and public space, but at the same time, they tried to focus all such wide-ranging conversations, with their detours into gossip and doubt, back onto the small plot of land, the plot for their picturesque story about the border between two cities. And as they did this, they talked frequently and repeatedly about how despite the amount of research they had done they were increasingly not that interested in the small plot of land. And then they would talk about how it made them feel uncomfortable to be there on the small plot of land attempting to write about it when they were not interested in it and how also they had no clear right to write about it because of who they were, although they always left who they were unspecified. And they talked about how they did not want to present the small plot of land as uninhabited because they imagined that certain people

lived and slept on the small plot of land. They talked a lot about how they didn't want to bother these people but they didn't want to ignore them either and about the ethical issues around this sort of neighbor-love and its representation in poetry. But as they spent more time on the small plot of land they began to realize that very few bothered to live or sleep on the small plot of land. The small plot of land was probably both too isolated and too exposed. Plus, beginning early each morning, it was regularly blasted with the vibrations and clamor of the heavy-rail public rapid transit system trains thrusting into or out of the ground as they moved people to and from either city. The people that they imagined lived and slept on the small plot of land and that they talked about not wanting to bother mostly only passed by the small plot of land, despite its many park benches, on their way to slightly more accommodating plots of land, like the street corner where Koki lived, which had hedges for privacy, or the abandoned lot with the burned-down house on the street where Demented Panda lived.

In setting their proposed picturesque story on the small plot of land, Demented Panda and Koki were somewhat right that nothing much dramatic had happened there. Even the story of the heavyrail public rapid transit system that passed through it, a story that in the city of Demented Panda was accompanied by the razing of vibrant, multiethnic working-class communities, had not been that dramatically controversial as it had merely replaced an already existing railroad line that had been in place since the turn of the century.

Yet looked at another way, the plot of land had all the histories of the surrounding areas, some of them sad, some of them triumphant. It had for many, many years been populated by various humans and animals, such as rabbits and other small rodents, large deer, elk, and antelope, and various birds, some migratory and some not. The humans hunted these animals and they burned the grasslands regularly and they harvested roots and tubers that they planted. They call themselves various names and spoke various languages. This history Demented Panda and Koki did not know all that well and was only vaguely told in their time. But the history that came after they knew fairly well. In the quick telling of this history, despite the humans who had for three thousand years been hunting the animals and burning the grasslands and planting and harvesting the roots and tubers, the land had been considered unclaimed and unpopulated by an expedition of people sent by that other nation far away who then claimed it for

another nation and then a representative of that nation gave the land that included the small plot of land to a member of one such expedition. From then on, different nations and many different people claimed the land. There were many lawsuits. A couple of armed skirmishes. And various deals were made and continued to be made. The land was now claimed by an entirely different nation from the one that sent the expedition and was owned by many different people, as long as they defined ownership in the same way the nation who now occupied the land did.

As they began their collaboration, they talked about the fickle nature of observation, about how they would walk to the small plot of land not really noticing anything but then once they got there they would perk up and begin to put on their "picturesque story" mindset and then look around for things to write about. They wondered if they should go through life using the "picturesque story" mindset all the time or if they should refuse the "picturesque story" mindset when they were at the small plot of land or if it was okay to use it some of the time and not other times. They did not even know what to call the small plot of land that they had settled on for their picturesque story. They agreed that it was not a park, despite the presence of park benches and

trees and grass. It was certainly never used as a park because it was surrounded by large amounts of traffic and every few minutes the heavy-rail public rapid transit trains careened through. But they were also hesitant to call it a median strip because it was a bit wider than most median strips and had the kind of public art one wouldn't see on a median strip. And so they kept on referring to it as the small plot of land.

When it came to the writing of poetry, Demented Panda and Koki were badly matched. Their mismatchedness could be seen in the accourrements that they used in their writing lives. Demented Panda always carried a notebook, but a notebook that might be called the littlest of notebooks. He kept this notebook in the front pocket of whatever jacket he was wearing on any given afternoon and it was so small that there was never an unsightly bulge. He carried a notebook at all times because he was a poet but he carried a littlest notebook because he didn't want to have to commit to writing anything really and the littleness of the notebook made it difficult to really write anything even if he had wanted to. Koki, on the other hand, carried with her at all times a backpack. In this backpack, she kept no fewer than five identical pens lined up for easy access in the pen holder section.

And in the backpack itself she always kept at least one large and thick notebook and a book for reading in case she was stuck for some reason somewhere for a long period of time with nothing much to do, along with the usual detritus of modern female life, like lip balms and tampons and small tins of painkillers.

As they talked about the small plot of land they also, of course, talked about themselves. They talked about how their writing might sometimes do a kind of political work but still leave them dissatisfied. And they talked about their own tendency to write things so as to show themselves and others that they had the right attitudes about various things. They talked about failure and shame and about maybe making failure and shame the work, how maybe this talking of theirs was a kind of doing even if it was mostly doing nothing and, like poetry, seemed to make nothing happen. They talked about collaborating and how the personal and the political and bodies and sex and work and wanting and writing and writhing can get all fucked up, can get in the way, even if they could not exactly say what it was in the way of. They talked a lot about their bodies, their bodily aches and pains, their signs of infection, their nipple discharge and breast swelling, their bizarre behavior, agitations, hallucinations, and depersonalizations, their severe dizziness and drowsiness and confusion, how all these might be part of their collaboration as well, part of the picturesque story they might tell about living as a poet today, a story about that complex cipher of unstable relationships that define life under capitalism.

When they talked, Demented Panda usually said things in the negative and Koki usually took notes. After all this talking, Koki would then make the face, the not-quite-exasperated-yet-thinking-hard-aboutit-but-also-frustrated face. And when Koki made the face Demented Panda usually made a joke or he would propose that the way beyond their impasses and their symptoms and side effects would be to create a giant mess. Demented Panda liked to talk about what he called the dialectics of mess, how he would hold his messes back or would hold his messes in his back where they could make pain instead of progress. He would talk about the messes he was maybe going to make, or talk about the messes he had already made but weren't quite done somehow, or about how his back hurt from holding all his messiness there, or about his never-finished messertation, which he thought maybe was no longer a good or a relevant mess, or about his messuscripts that he also thought were no longer good or relevant messes. And then