

or,

All of that, and much much more
The Louise we knew, will never return”

(from “Complicity of the Spiders”)

Oisteanu’s collages, often narrative, appear to be greatly influenced by street anthropology. The poet’s passions are immediately apparent; Pop culture, Dada icons, eroticism, evocative words. My favorite works, however, contain no writing at all. In one, “Suicide Balcony,” illustrating a poem dedicated to Tzara on the fiftieth anniversary of his

death, “Global Psy-Dada” masked figures cascade from a terrace, a bare dangling foot meeting a graceful upturned arm, with an Odalisque at the bottom anchoring the opulent imagery.
Valery Oisteanu embodies a contemporary wave of Surrealism, inviting the reader into a kaleidoscopic universe of self-proclaimed “jazzoetry.” His recent presentations at the Global Surrealism Symposium in Bucharest helped reintroduce poet Gellu Naum, the last surviving surrealist poet in Romania. Oisteanu is both a keeper of the Dada flame and a new romantic steeped in underground New York culture.
A freewheeling poetic diary drawn from

dreams and desires, “Anarchy for a Rainy Day” seductively introduces Surrealism as a way of life.

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MUSE OF EXIT RAMPS

Laura C. Stevenson

VERMONT EXIT RAMPS II
Neil Shepard and Anthony Reczek
Green Writers Press/Sundog Poetry Center
www.greenwriterspress.com
124 Pages; Print, \$24.95

One May morning some years ago, the Vermont poet Neil Shepard started at I-89’s Stowe/Waterbury interchange and headed south, turning off the superhighway at every subsequent exit to observe its cloverleaves, bridges, and underpasses; his project was to “crystallize” his impressions of these “ramplands” into a few poems. The journey, which continued south to the Massachusetts border on I-91 after its intersection with I-89, took three days. The crystallizations took longer—perhaps becoming poetic rest areas as Shepard concentrated on the more extensive journeys of *T(ravel)/Unt(ravel)* (2011)—but they eventually appeared in the chapbook *Vermont Exit Ramps* (2012).

Vermont Exit Ramps II is a continuation of the project, which grew from a three-day lark to a five-year series of reflective trips along 381 Interstate miles. The new collection reprints thirteen of the original twenty-five poems and adds twenty-seven more; it covers all but the Burlington city exits north of Stowe (I-89) and White River Junction (I-

Both poet and photographer have used their technical mastery to make their viewers see anew.

91). The poems are enhanced by Anthony Reczek’s photographs of the ramplands’s fragile spring loveliness, and the collaboration, handsomely published by Brattleboro’s Green Writers Press, is a beautiful book.

Readers familiar with Reczek’s style from his unobtrusively spectacular pictures in *Vermont Life* might expect *Vermont Exit Ramps II* to extend the image of an “unspoiled Vermont” that the magazine has promoted for seventy years. Be not deceived. The collection is, in Shepard’s words, “a book of post-pastoral poems,” and the couplets of its invocation, “Vermont Exits,” introduce a compromised Arcadia:

Who will claim the kingdom of exit ramps
and cloverleaves
on the hillsides of I-89, these realms of birch
and pine

Rippling in mountain wind on a spring day,
domains of quiet
forgetfulness, places ravaged and recovered—
Shepard and Reczek’s ramplands are

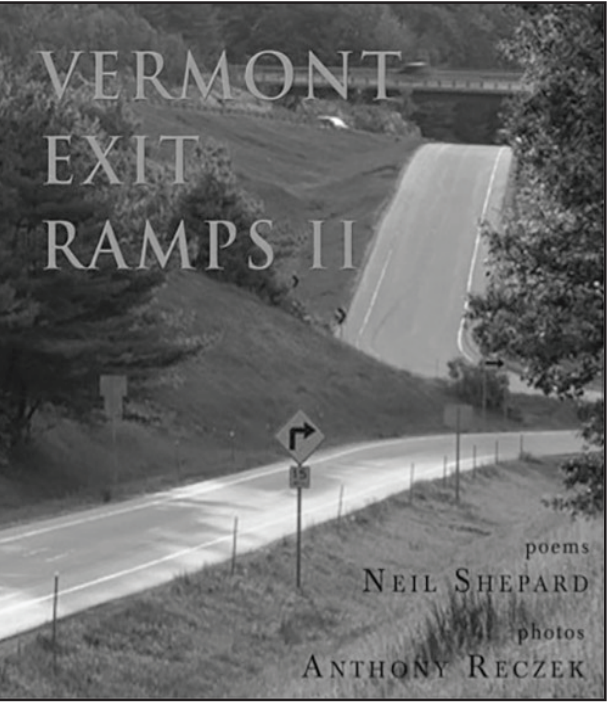
beautiful precisely because they are un-cherished. No longer of interest to the ravaging forces of progress, have become demesnes “no one claims, the heavy machinery / having rattled past and gouged a pasture elsewhere.”
Ostensibly, “I-89, Exit 10: Stowe/Waterbury” begins the sequence of exit poems because it’s the interchange closest to Shepard’s home in Johnson. Thematically, however, it portrays the face of post-pastoral Vermont by describing the geological and cultural metamorphosis brought about by the Interstates’ accommodation of Vermont’s ski industry. Exit 10’s rampland is “Blasted through fifty feet of granite / to make this exit ‘Vermont’/ for tourists.” Tourism, of course, preceded the Interstate; nineteenth-century visitors could see “the Summit / House built as the Civil War broke out,” or take “the Toll Road to the top of Mansfield / finished in 1870.” But “*this* history” began when Stowe’s residents innocently discovered skiing, thus opening the way to the literal and figurative Iron Age destruction of Vermont’s Arcadian foundations:

This history has a moneyed glide,
a schuss through powder, a hot-
tub view and a gold club perched high on a
hillside.
Beneath it, loggers felling trees on a ski slope,
road crews with sledgehammer, pickaxe,
demolition dynamite.
That dynamite exposed a prehistoric past,
Granite before you thought
of granite. Granite before the dynamite
blast, before the tourist-idea: *Best
Western Café Grill, Blush
Hill Country Club, Stowe
Street Emporium. ATM.*

This is ravage and commercial “renewal” brought about by the worship of progress “that bedevils us in this late-capitalist culture.”
The collection as a whole, however, is no diatribe; for the most part, it juxtaposes despoliation and beauty in the way earlier pastorals juxtaposed Court and Country. The “post-” in its pastoral lies in the witty irony with which the poems portray a “renewed” twenty-first century Vermont in which the Golden Age and the Iron Age share the same landscape. Sometimes the old and new parallel each other: at the end of the Middlesex exit (I-89 #9), for example, “turn right” and you’re headed to ski towns, but

Turn left and meet *Through Way Ends Here*,
A few cars, a few bicyclists pushing uphill
Into trees and breeze and birdsong,

and road names reflect colonial tall tales:
“Bear Swamp where a sheep farmer / shot five
bears a day to preserve his flock,” and Tangletown,



the woods that engulfed settlers. In the Northeast Kingdom’s Lyndonville (I-91, #23), on the other hand, beauty and tackiness have converged, thus changing the implications of Yankee independence:

Decline along a triangle of land; the engine
Backfires, belches, stalls. The pines
are pretty, smell pitchy. Route 5’s alive

with chains: Dunkin Ds, McDs, Domino’s.
And one unchained: Pizza Man!

For Shepard, the hybrid landscape is filled with memories. In the midst of “cheap real estate, a few shiny franchises” by I-89 #20 in St. Albans, nostalgia suddenly looms:

St. Albans Drive-In, last outdoor theatre
in Vermont. Ah, the open-air make-out scene
of days past, squawk-box speaker hooked to
the door,
convertible top fanned down, bugs biting
whatever wasn’t already covered
by groping hands.

Shades of past friends and lovers haunt descriptions of exits at I-91 #14 at Thetford and the I-89 exits at Randolph (#4) and St. Albans (#19); in Richmond (#11), the history of The Kitchen Table, once the house of Vermont’s first governor, now converted to a restaurant, is overshadowed by the memory of another conversion: divorce. These poems give us ironic glimpses of Shepard’s generation: the weed-smoking, free-loving pastoralists who came to Vermont in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s...and found the Interstates already there.
The relationship of Reczek’s photographs and Shepard’s poems is as complex as it is

—Stevenson continued on next page

beautiful. In some places, the photographs serve as illustrations: most notably on the front cover and in the pictures paired with the invocation and collection’s concluding poem, which focus on the rampland and reduce passing traffic to an inconsequential blur. But while the poems’s titles and content are so firmly attached to specific exits that readers following their progress long for a map (which the book unfortunately does not supply), the photographs are unlabeled and free-floating, sometimes even confusing. As a case in point, the photograph accompanying the poem on I-89 #19 at St. Albans portrays a vista just off I-91 #3, 130 miles south in Brattleboro. At times, poem and photograph present a dialogue; Shepard’s portrait of Sharon (I-89 #2) as a “land of exhaustion and surrender” is paired with Reczek’s photograph of the memorial to “The Boys of Sharon” who served in the country’s wars. In general, however, it is best to “read” the photographs not as illustrations or commentaries but as augmentations of a text to which they’re linked thematically but independent artistically.

One of the most effective combinations of the two arts appears in the collection’s exact center,

introduced by one of Reczek’s deceptively simple roadscapes. In the foreground, a street sign, “Tenney Hill Rd.,” marks an unpaved turnoff just past I-91 #8 to Windsor and Ascutney. In the background, the Interstate overpass crosses Rt. 113 so unobtrusively that the post-pastoral eye hardly notices it. The unprepossessing spot marks what used to be the farm of Romaine Tenney, who became a tragic victim of “progress and plain misfortune” in 1964:

Yes, this must have been a sweet piece of land back then. Now it’s a four-lane with a median: cars going south would have driven straight through his cow-barn. North-bound traffic would have run him over in his iron bed. Now the place is nothing...or the saddest spot in Vermont, where a man lived sixty years before he burned it up, burned it down.

The act was horrifying, spectacular (“The hillside burned for a night and a day”), but Tenney was a quiet, gentle man with no political motivation: “Self-immolation was his only protest.” He simply refused to live without the land he loved. Shepard’s elegy joins Reczek’s photograph in the collection’s

most powerful portrayal of a lost pastoral mentality. *Vermont Exit Ramps II* is a work of artistic collaboration at its best, for both poet and photographer have used their technical mastery to make their viewers see anew. Shepard’s poems weave anagrams, slices of guidebooks, quips from road signs, and Chinese fortune cookies into a tapestry of the “ordinary” that makes it impossible to ignore exit ramps in the future; but in so doing, they also offer an extended meditation on twenty-first-century Vermont. Reczek’s photographs portray a landscape renewed in the sixty years since the greatest geological upheaval since the Ice Age— but as it has become, not as it was sixty years ago. The book is a wonderful achievement, one that will long linger in readers’ minds as they speed along Interstates in Vermont and elsewhere to unknown destinations.

Laura C. Stevenson is Professor emeritus of Writing and Humanities at Marlboro College. Her most recent novels, *Return in Kind* (2010) and *Liar From Vermont* (2015), both reviewed in ABR, are set in post-pastoral Vermont.

SURVIVAL OF THE STRONGEST

Judith Podell

BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE

Jane Mendelsohn

Knopf

www.knopfdoubleday.com/book/

250775/burning-down-the-house

288 Pages; Print, \$18.00

Occupy Wall Street sympathies make it hard for me to romanticize the insanely rich these days, but I’m still willing to be seduced. Thus I approached *Burning Down the House*, Jane Mendelsohn’s novel about the fall of a New York real estate baron and his unhappy family, with the ambivalence I reserve for guilty pleasures (*Vogue*, *schadenfreude*). Are the rich different from you and me? Certainly each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. That I find myself thinking of Donald Trump rather than Anna Karenina or Gatsby these days is pre-existing bias, one that could be set aside by good writing, memorable characters, and the evocation of a fully realized world. After all, money, family, and the interplay of personal world with public are the traditional stuff of which novels are made. The book flap invites the reader to “enter the lavish universe of the Zane family from a wedding in an English manor house to the trans-global world of luxury hotels, while promising the contemporary equivalent of Greek tragedy against a back drop of financial crisis, human trafficking, and financial crisis.” Taken together, the hyped-up jacket copy and the title, with its allusions to Agamemnon and Talking Heads, suggest an unstable mix of glitz and gravitas, but it is unfair to hold a writer responsible for marketing decisions, and Mendelsohn, who wrote *I was Amelia Earhart* (1996) (widely acclaimed, thoroughly engaging), is a lyrical stylist, so I anticipated hours of reading pleasure and a novel I would not be able to put aside until I finished.

Burning Down the House gets off to a promising start. In a remote Russian village, a ten-year-old girl is sold into sexual slavery by her unwitting parents, dazzled by the recruiter who speaks their language and holds out the promise of a better life for their daughter, perhaps a job in a restaurant. Within weeks, the girl is living in the back of a spa in a New Jersey strip mall.

She is used by men from all walks of life and given drugs by the woman with black hair. A customer who says he loves her gives her extra cash each week.

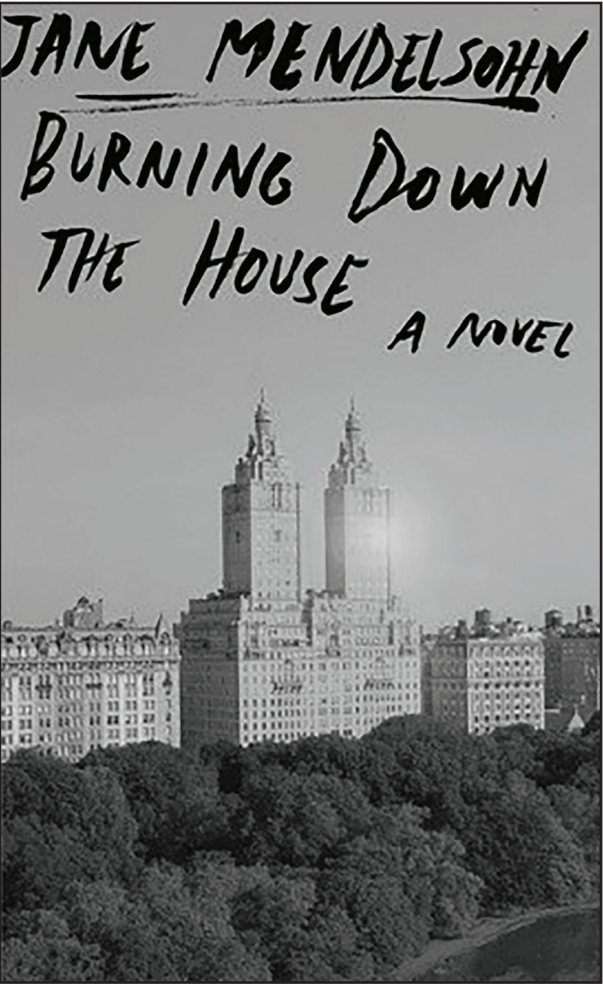
With a few deft sentences, Mendelsohn compresses years of hell and the girl’s eventual escape to New York, where she will reinvent herself and become Neva. “She is stoic like a river. She is sensuous like a river. She does not need people like a river.”

Next we are transported via speeding black limousine with tinted windows to an English manor house for Jonathan Zane’s wedding. We’re in the company of his perennially unhappy sister Alex, who for reasons never explained, thinks that it is too late for her to have a life of her own outside the hermetically sealed Zane Zone. Meanwhile, feckless Jonathan, heir apparent and weakest link, has been caught in bed with the nanny of his two young half brothers. This is no excuse to call off a lavish

I anticipated hours of reading pleasure and a novel I would not be able to put aside until I finished.

destination wedding, it turns out, but the occasion for hiring a new nanny. A Slavic girl this time. Will Jonathan make a play for Neva, the new nanny, who is “beautiful but not pretty”? No, Jonathan will find other ways to bring disgrace his family. Neva herself is drawn to Steve, the Zane family’s patriarch, but who can blame her? Mendelsohn endows him with the manufactured charisma of an Ayn Rand ubermensch at twilight. “I may be a crony capitalist but that is only because there is nothing left to be,” he tells his adopted daughter, 17-year-old Poppy, who is “brave but not strong.” How arch of Steve. Surely there are other choices (ski bum? philanthropist?). It was at this point that my faith in Mendelsohn started to wobble. I was entering the Valley of the Unreliable Omniscient Narrator, where I could no longer tell the difference between author’s intent and effect. Pathos or bathos? Such a thin line between self-aware irony and parody, but of what?

As an omniscient narrator, Mendelsohn stands between characters and readers in a pre-emptive way, more helicopter parent than Henry James. She



would rather explain than reveal. Sometimes she forsakes lyricism for hype. Steve’s a “ferociously intelligent self-made mogul who scaled the sheer glass mountainside of the international real estate community to become a member of the planetary elite.” Hints are broader than they need to be. The waif-like Poppy “always tells people that her family is like the House of Agamemnon or something out of Faulkner because everyone in it can be so mean. She has no idea how appropriate the references are.”

The pivotal love affair, the one that threatens to bring down the House of Zane, is between Poppy and unhappy Alex’s best friend, Ian, a successful Broadway director. Ian is old enough to be Poppy’s father. Ian is mounting a new show: *Jane Eyre* (1847) as a musical, only set in the 1980s with music by the Talking Heads. Dire consequences ensue.

In the scope of its ambitions, *Burning Down the House* belongs with those novels that purport to tell us something about the post-9/11 world.

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