

PILGRIM'S
PAUSES | ANIS SHIVANI

Siste Viator, by Sarah Manguso. Four Way Books. 63 pages; paper, \$14.95. <http://www.fourwaybooks.com>

Sarah Manguso is the anti-Louise Glück. She is one of our most exciting young poets. There is a promise here of breakthrough work to come, if she can dig even deeper into the classical Western heritage, and stand aside from the prevailing fashions of lyric poetry. In her new collection, one sees the emergence of a pleasing sensibility—the new new woman, fully of the twenty-first century, impossible to please, yet desirable precisely for this quality. What strikes the reader upon confronting *Siste Viator* is the immense energy of the poetry, which bypasses the morose helplessness of the grieving confessional poet we became so used to reading in the final decades of the dead last century. Energy plus verbal skill do not necessarily make a good poet, but Manguso also shows a certain humility, which can only be the result of sustained encounter with the masters of the past—at least, one hopes.

What you won't find in this collection: throwaway pop culture allusions, detritus of dead politics, hospital and illness news, pseudo-science updates, Whitman without his wooziness, Dickinson without her dampening, the lyric "I" postulated as the universal "we," suspicion of reality (à la the *Matrix* movies), the desire to appear hip, up-to-date, and cool, television dialogue, and the kind of cagey self-referentiality that only decades of teaching in creative writing programs seems to be able to impart (all language, and no fantasy). What you will find: Heidegger as a hands-on man, Cambridge steeples caught sleeping mid-summer (I see them, even if they're not there explicitly in the poetry), Continental places unvisitable, feminism fifth-wave or later, and the apprentice poet's burning desire to somehow assimilate both Pope's distance and Blake's vision. Note that this is still mostly on the edge of promise, as sometimes late twentieth-century cheap irony threatens to enter through the

back door. But the entry points, at least for now, seem firmly locked, no warrantless spying allowed. This is rare intellectual poetry, in a country that increasingly defies intellect at every turn.

A new kind of sadness (each literary age has its grip on a particular phase of it) seems to be required for this blooming century of dashed hopes. We are being made to feel small again, and the ego must rise; if the ego deflates further, we're buying into a pessimistic conservatism that above all should not be the playfield of the young and energetic. Manguso is having no part of it. Sadness is defined more than anything by its relationship with the fact of death. Some aging novelists have recently talked of the slow inevitability of senescence and death with all the perspicacity of earthworms. Manguso speaks of it in metaphors that draw into their loop vast areas of the Western philosophical and literary heritage, without appearing to show off.

"Address on the Tenth Day" is a sprawling sample of Manguso's virtuosity:

This morning all non-coffee energy comes having slept in
your blue shirt.

Soon we will fly north and see a glacier: proof that poignancy
can be planned.

Before the needle (*poignard*) goes in, we must ride in an air plane,
but airplanes also are poignant. Liftoff: the moment that flying
stops being a metaphor.

Quiet, with you. Said Flaubert: *Live your life quietly so you can be
savage in your work.*

Flaubert called his study, where he wrote, his shouting room
(*gneuloir*). While he wrote, it is said, he made a lot of noise.

I trust you to watch over me in my study, and I will watch over you.

In the eleventh century, a French priest met the devil, disguised
as a seal, who offered to carry him to Iceland. When they
were within sight of land, the priest brained the devil with a

psalter and swam safely to shore.

In Iceland we will eat seal meat as if to save the family of man.
We will pick up from the street the hands of the tower clocks
that blow down in the wind. . . .

At this particular moment in the historical cycle, it's hard to find
despair that contributes in a valuable way to a genre that's
seen a lot of derivative despair.

And yours is mysterious even to you. It's a discovery I may never
make.

Yet when it's all over with no artifact save a hunk of reindeer
cheese in the bottom of the suitcase,

the thermal pool will hide a mystery that will draw people to it
and fill them with a horror they will find beautiful, even if
the word does not occur to them.

The irony never severs contact with moral seriousness. There isn't the promiscuous mixing of dictions that has turned many a promising recent poet into a Bakhtinian parody of his own grotesque self. The associative leaps are ferocious but never far-fetched. There is historical awareness, but not historical overdetermination. The artist in this poem desperately desires the conditions necessary to produce immortal art: distraction, by definition, is impossible in such a matrix. The end of the world is foreseen, yet it is something that remains sublime (as do its many immediate gleanings), it is not something that can be reduced to documentaries or political manifestos. We will end in both fire and ice, and not even the poet's soul will be there to save us. Note that this poem is stretched to the finest edge of self-parody: a slight veer to the left or right of the poet's own artistic confidence (steeped in what appears genuinely to be humility before her predecessors) and it would have become either jokey or morbid. There is a female sensibility behind the lines that accepts her historical role and inheritance, without any expectation that she can deliver. "Invocation to the Muse," later in the collection, is a close counterpart, stylistically and thematically, to

“Address on the Tenth Day,” this time with a deeper skepticism about the artist’s self-sufficiency, yet never despairing, never anything but demanding intense burning immortality from difficult materials.

A shorter poem, “Will We?” this time:

My favorite euphemism for death is *the future*.

Vermeer’s kitchen maid is not the most famous painting in the Rijksmuseum though she pours her milk perfectly and milk poured no more slowly then than it does now.

In Cleveland, Aunt Jean offers me a Vantage and teaches me a game of solitaire called *The Queen Goes into the Woods*.

The older I get, the more I can discard.

Will we never live together in the round house?

The weaknesses are more evident here. More pathos, the quality that most severely undercuts the persona this poet has worked hard to establish. This is a brief meditation on time that comes across as such, without the added freight of the preciousness of much empirical knowledge. The poet’s self is smaller here than seems appropriate for her style of poetry. Brevity is not at fault, since elsewhere in this collection, such as in “The Dictionary” and “An Idea with No Bodily Counterpart,” Manguso packs a powerful philosophical punch in very brief poems; she does this best when she hones in on the part of her poetic knowledge that is most intimately connected with existence emptied of dread. The least bit of slackness—“The older I get, the more I can discard”—interferes with the necessary tension of knowledge having reached its final possessive ends.

A pervasive “I” dominates these poems, but upon reflection it is not the lyric “I” of recent poetry at all. It seems more a stand-in for certain of our egoistic delusions than renewed manifestations of the ego. It would be interesting to find out what Manguso might do in the future without the sustaining scaffold of this necessary “I,” especially in longer poems. Desire has reached impossible finitude in contemporary America, drowning in social engineering abstractions that have given

new meaning to man as statistic, the individual as number, the ego as unit. Manguso, unlike a previous generation of feminist poets, knows it, and has circled in on the problem of our time with immense verbal and imaginative skill. *Siste Viator* gives the appearance of enacting the many varieties of surrealist hallucination common to the last four decades of American poetry, without participating in their informing metaphysics.