

## John Mulrooney, *Spooky Action*, Dos Madres Press (2003), 107 pages

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In terms of using language to build relationship between the known and unknown, Aristotle championed the ability to make metaphors above all else. Keats, in his concept of Negative Capability, perhaps influenced by studies in electrical science at the time, valorized the capacity to be a receptor, to operate “in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” With the term Objective Correlative, T.S. Eliot proposed the clustering of objects or external events as transmitters of otherwise inchoate emotion. Actually, Aristotle, Keats, and Eliot surfaced rather than expounded on the terms of metaphor, Negative Capability, and Objective Correlative. But the terms, and the values of the concepts they represented, were taken up by poets and scholars.

Einstein’s “*spukhafte Fernwirkung*” or “spooky action at a distance” also surfaced somewhat casually, in a letter to Max Born in 1947. Unlike the positive exemplarity of metaphor, Negative Capability and Objective Correlative, “spooky action at a distance” was a repudiation. Author, teacher, steel guitarist, and film producer John Mulrooney doesn’t explain his choice of title for his first full-length book of poetry. Patrick Pritchett, in his blurb on the back cover of the book, provides that service: “Einstein spoke dismissively of ‘spooky action at [a] distance,’ the idea that separate objects could somehow share a simultaneous condition across space and time, or what is sometimes referred to as quantum entanglement.”

Einstein’s repudiation of entanglement implied a repudiation of quantum mechanics at the time, entanglement being a defining feature. Since Einstein, however, quantum entanglement has been detected in ever larger objects, nearly or barely visible to the naked eye; and the 2022 Nobel Prize in Physics was awarded to Alain Aspect, John Clauser, and Anton Zeilinger for their work on quantum entanglement. John Mulrooney’s *Spooky Action* has the feel of a poetry developed over a long time. His adoption of the example of entanglement, and conversion of Einstein’s term to a positive, signals his poetics of connectedness, systematicity, influence, and relationship. Now that we have the term, we can see that we need it, for this book and for contemporary poetry and experience.



like the faces in the hedgerows  
you can no longer discern  
a blank like any other  
like the day  
we went to that store  
in the thawing snow  
but that store was closed  
the shafts of sunlight  
finding their way beneath  
the bridge the highway  
that spanned the river  
astonished the roofs and gutters  
the whole day was  
revealed as the day that  
other days had only  
been the placeholder for  
so that even when we  
went back out into the light  
and the familiar territory  
it was new—a familiarity  
that had not happened  
before.

("Cantata of Pareidolia")

In this poetry, similes are more dynamic than commonly allowed. For a start, the simile is unexpected, even unlikely, e.g., "a sound like lost luggage" on the very first page of the book ("New Year's Eve, Gloucester Harbor"). Without simile, i.e., relationship/connection, no matter how elusive, the poem can't move forward. For example, "Apparent Wind" opens with a statement, "I am in a boat and the boat / I am in—," but there the poem halts until propelled forward by simile: "the boat is headed / up a wave like someone or / something going up a hill—Sisyphus or Jack and Jill, / penitents on the Camino / de Santiago." The poem stalls again. Another simile is drafted in: "The boat I am in / climbs a clean sheet of water / like a salamander scurrying up / a clean sheet on a clothesline / in a backyard a long time ago." And then there is a woman, "despondent about / some trouble the salamander / knows nothing of," and the poem is underway for almost five pages, spooling out of itself.

Similes are used like roundabouts to wheel the poem off in possible directions, sometimes returning it to base (which is never a base). In

“Meditation on the Real,” dreams offer a brief shore leave or reprieve from the real while other thoughts vanish

like a child pickpocket  
in a crowd on the Staten  
Island Ferry who ran off  
with your wallet—  
your money, your credit  
and identity and  
your picture of  
you in front of  
the pictures of  
the yellow harbor  
and the temple garden—  
the gentle constructions  
the mind makes and  
offices eventually accept.

The child pickpocket runs off with the poem too, its short lines offering no resistance, the very weak first words facilitating invasion. The line starts in the middle in a sense, and sometimes ends there too, cushioned on both sides by vulnerable articles, prepositions and conjunctions in a rejection of the conventional bulwarks of strong first and last word. The poem becomes Borgesian, charging itself with each image and each image within each image.

The terrific poem “Wallahi le Zein,” dedicated to Filip Marinovich, points in its title to Mississippi Record’s release of Matthew Lavoie’s collection and compilation of Wezin, Jakwar, and Guitar Boogie from the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, *Wallahi le Zein* (2010/2021): “an immersive entry into this music: gnarled and virtuosic electric guitars weave hypnotically throughout melismatic sung poetry and exclamations, pulsing hand drums, party chatter, buzzing rigged desert sound systems, and all manner of the ambient sounds of Nouakchott wedded to oversaturated cassette in all its swirling, breathing, psychedelic glory” (<https://www.mississippirecords.net/>). This shorter poem, written in lower-case tercets, with long lines (mostly sparked on the most peripheral of words, e.g., “and,” “but,” “how,” “of,” “that,” “at,” “the”), has intense visual as well as sonic energy. Lines such as “at the edge of Boston wailing for our demon lovers / or waiting for Corita’s tank to screech across the sky / or sorrowful fumbling with our trembling actor hands” remind me of Hart Crane, both *White Buildings*

("Legend") and The Bridge, "Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks, / A rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene; / All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn ..." ("Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge"). Whatever about Coleridge.

One of the takeaways for me from this book is that it's still possible to live a rich life and to leave a rich legacy of influence. A rich life is not to say an easy life, "when you build a road you know / there will be fighting—when you build a wall you had best / already made your wreathes—the republic of thought knows // the face of children crack and leak the refugees / of the next war" ("Wallahi le Zein"). Many rich lives are invoked and the book, of 34 poems, has 12 poems with dedications to poets and musicians, including two to John Wieners and one, "Cantata for Mitrovica Stars," to international peacemaker Pádraig O'Malley, the subject of the documentary film John Mulrooney co-produced, *The Peacemaker* (2016). The book as a whole is dedicated to the poet's wife, Rachel.

This is poetry for an age of desolation. You know there is a love song underneath. That is the landscape but not the argument. There is no thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Only one poem, "Entanglement at Solstice," connects directly to the book's title. I'd like to quote from it but the shortest quotation I can manage is 61 lines. In any case, even when it is spelled out, to say that the poetry in this book demonstrates entanglement or spooky action at a distance is a step too far. John Mulrooney doesn't demonstrate; he places where it is possible to find. You have to look. Even the cover of the book is self-effacing. At first, second, or third glance you might see an unremarkable blue/indigo cover with some patterns. But it's a celestial map. It's great to see this book on SPD's Bestsellers list. I hope there will be a second printing soon.