

# In Conversation With Our Contemporaries

AMY BUTCHER

Patricia Vigderman, *Possibility: Essays Against Despair*

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In her recent collection *Possibility: Essays Against Despair*, released earlier this year from Sarabande Books, Patricia Vigderman pairs the unlikely with the unlikelier. Conversations and meditations on Marcel Proust, W. G. Sebald, George Eliot, and David Foster Wallace work simultaneously—and often seamlessly—with the abstract and deeply personal: a consideration of Japanese art, a town in southwestern Texas, the hit film *Vertigo*, photography, and even depression. The collection is “like attending an ideal dinner party,” Mona Simpson writes astutely, “where everyone has read your favorite books,” but perhaps even more than that, one where the guests are the authors themselves, and they’ve very happy to oblige.

An experienced and talented writer in her own right—Vigderman’s earlier work includes *The Memory Palace of Isabella Stewart Gardner* (2007), and she is a recent recipient of a Literature Fellowship from the Liguria Center for the Arts and Humanities—Vigderman’s collection remains startlingly green, as yet untainted by cynicism or recent lofty conversations on navel-gazing. Instead, Vigderman’s prose insists upon art as she prefers it, indeed, as many of us often employ it: as a mechanism for understanding the self or the reality we find ourselves in. Beautiful things, Vigderman seems to argue, are made more beautiful upon application.

As a whole, the collection brings to mind a discussion on New York photographer Richard Renaldi, whose latest work—“Touching Strangers”—pairs unlikely residents of New York City in roles that bespeak familiarity: siblings, lovers, neighbors, an elderly woman and her only grandson. Renaldi began the project six years ago and to date has collected hundreds of unlikely and intimate portraits whose sentiments—for both the viewer and the subject—strike a remarkably authentic tone. What proves most interesting about Renaldi’s work is his capacity to forge an authentic sentiment from absolute inauthenticity, for while Renaldi is responsible for posing his subjects, he is in no way imparting any interior feeling. The subjects bring that themselves. Reports one subject, “I felt like I cared for her, like it broke down a lot of barriers.”

Said another, “It was nice to feel that comfort.”

But perhaps the most thought-provoking comment of all came from a middle-age woman, whom Renaldi paired with two young, blond teens, both of them in short-shorts and cowboy boots, leaning idyllically into her frame. “We’re probably missing so much,” she said, “about the people all around us.”

Most photographers are known for capturing existence as it is, yet Renaldi has tapped into something more elusory, more enigmatic: he is capturing humanity for what it might be, indeed, what many of us wish it would be. And isn’t it curious how seemingly easily?

My reason for mentioning Renaldi is two-fold: beyond feeling allowed—indeed, invited—to use another artist’s work to further inform and explore my own, Renaldi’s work seems founded upon the same main principle I perceive in Vigdeman’s collection. For while on the surface, *Possibility: Essays Against Despair* may seem a myriad of conversations about art and life, the collection appears instead to be a meta-observation on human thought: repeated moments of inspiration she finds as a conscious observer, listener, and reader, and she translates that energy into her prose.

On more than one occasion, Vigdeman cites a trait she loves most about an artist, then attempts to master it on the page. In describing her experience reading Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, for example, she writes, “I find I am reading it very slowly, almost word by word, following its winding sentences and paragraphs, and looking at its strange photographs . . . and sometimes going back and rereading pages or looking at how many pages are necessary for one paragraph (twenty-five is not unusual). I would say the effect is dream-

like, entrancing, except that the associativeness, the quiet shifts and turnings, are also keeping me alert.”

So, too, are Vigderman’s, for this is precisely my reading experience. Like so many great writers whose voices are shaped by their contemporaries, Vigderman seems to try on styles as if shoes, allowing each one to ease effortlessly into her prose throughout the duration of her collection. At times calling to mind the prose stylings of David Foster Wallace, Proust himself, and occasionally Lydia Davis—whose “The End Of The Story” has long served as my own foundation in complicated simplicity—Vigderman’s voice adapts to her material, and she moves as fluidly through language as she does through different kinds of subject matter. How else to describe “Eye Shadows,” a three-page essay in which Vigderman moves first from Japanese art to architecture to used eye shadow sold on eBay? Like Sebald, Vigderman’s essays explore the “possible co-existence of all moments of time in the space.”

But this coexistence, of course, can prove problematic. In discussing writers whose work moves in narrative asides rather than arcs—Proust and James Joyce chief among them—Vigderman confesses that digression can often “lead both off the track and somewhere very interesting, depending upon your tolerance for lyric and syntactical uncertainty.” Tolerance for the lyric: this seems exactly what Vigderman’s collection aims to establish. How, then, can a reader remain engaged if the form itself mimics digression, a deviation, a departure?

Through the personal, it seems. Like the majority of writers and readers who’ve already reviewed Vigderman’s collection, despite its relatively recent release, I found myself most sustained and indeed engaged with “My Depressed Person (A Monologue),” which appears at the very center of the collection. In it, Vigderman considers the near-crippling effects of depression, the complex nature of the “mind-body problem,” and her own friendship with a person afflicted by this problem via David Foster Wallace’s “The Depressed Person,” whose own struggles—and ultimate submission—often assume the forefront of his work. “The terrible gift of David Foster Wallace’s story,” she writes, is “his knowledge of what it is to be lost of the grace of compassion.”

“My Depressed Person” is engaging precisely for this reason: it is uncomplicated, straightforward prose on the profound subtleties of one’s discontent. The depressed person, she writes, “is at the bottom of a well and all she

can see hear touch feel taste smell is herself.” What’s more, depression is an enactment of “intense mercilessness . . . shame, the sense of being demeaned, the conviction that no one else has ever suffered comparably, the inability to describe the actual pain, and the isolation.”

In short, I find the essay brilliant, not only for its argument, but because the prose itself functions so efficiently. The essay’s close—with Vigderman and her depressed friend walking through a meadow—suggests *possibility*, which is essentially unavailable to the depressed and therefore informs the collection’s title: to save oneself from despair, of course, one *must* believe in future prospects.

It’s evident Vigderman has crafted art from an assortment of literary musings. Hers is a collection that is both thematically and formalistically interesting, and for me, it calls to mind the very beautiful articulation of Vigderman’s own experience reading Sebald, which she describes in her essay, “Sebald in Starbucks”:

Loss of family, of country, or mind share in his sentences an unsensational space with sunlight coming through the feathers of a bird’s wing, or a perfectly appointed billiards room left shuttered and untouched for a hundred and fifty years.

*An unsensational space with sunlight coming through the feathers of a bird’s wings—how unfamiliar, yes, but true.*

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