

*Book Review*

## Nonfiction for the Common Good

BARRIE JEAN BORICH

*A Twenty Minute Silence Followed by Applause*

by Shawn Wen

Sarabande Books, 2017

136 pp., \$15.95, paper

*In the Dream House*

by Carmen Maria Machado

Graywolf Press, 2019

264 pp., \$26.00, cloth

*The Yellow House*

by Sarah M. Broom

Grove Press, 2019

400 pp., \$26.00, cloth

For a while the city was so frighteningly quiet. I want to say it's as if someone held a hand over the city's mouth, but with all the masked faces passing by on Chicago sidewalks that image is a bit too literal to be a metaphor. Our indoors contained us in ways we couldn't imagine. One month. Two months. Three. Was this rest or was it chaos? When the quarantine began, I wrote on the chalkboard in my foyer: *WELCOME the considered life*, but that was just wishful thinking. After a while I became used to the sounds of empty streets, but absence is not the same as peace and quiet.

Then George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis, reminding us all that silence in America has never been the same thing as peace.

The part of Chicago where I live was still deep in stasis when I chose my nonfiction reading for these pandemic times. Our mayor shut down the lakefront walking paths, for the public good. I had yet to figure out how to keep my face mask from fogging up my glasses when I left the apartment to walk my dogs. The trains and buses I used to ride daily were running, but without most of their usual constituents. I only saw my students and colleagues on a laptop screen. Looking out my window, at the usually busy street between the elevated trains and the lakefront highway, I saw only a fraction of the usual people, the ballet of the street turned solo showcase, just one or two people on the sidewalk at a time. The empty spaces were distracting.

As a professor teaching a full quarter from my computer, I can't say the pandemic spring was a retreat from responsibility and activity. If anything, I have been busier with classroom business than in usual terms, and my students have not found shelter-in-place particularly sheltering. Their bodies have been quarantined but their emotions are raging. Still, for me pandemic time, particularly the stay-at-home order in Chicago, has differed from regular time in that I have felt released from the need to outwardly present beyond my computer screen.

Early in the shutdown, all the days felt like one long day. With no outer world to contain me, I began to lose interest in my own body. My undergraduates told me they worked all night, slept all day, waking up just in time to log in to a Zoom classroom, and I tsk-tsked them, warning against getting lost in a too-personal bubble, all the while knowing I was doing much of the same. The only way back was to break from the singular. Less me. More we. Alone-togetherness requires such a bridge.

Shawn Wen's book-length essay *A Twenty Minute Silence Followed by Applause* was the first book to hold my pandemic attention. The performance of this book is the author's deep observation of a body very much not her own. It sounds like I am talking about fiction writing here, but this book is researched-based nonfiction, an impressionistic biography of the famous mime Marcel Marceau. From the very first line the book breaks the public-private barrier. "Why this black box? The bare stage? Why perform in a darkened, scraped-out spot?" (7).

In short, lyric chapters Wen tells the story of a performing artist famous for his body language, for being seen but not heard. Marcel Marceau may no longer

be the household name he was, a mainstay of the TV network variety show when I was a girl, but his career spanned the late 1950s into the early 2000s. He inspired generations of street festival mimes, and later a new genre of TV sitcom mime-hating jokes. *A Twenty Minute Silence* neither critiques nor lionizes mime as an art form but rather dwells with curiosity, rendering the strangeness of both form and fame. The book succeeds because the language bears intense witness. It's almost as if we are viewing a silent film. "He pushes against the floor to make it look as if he is pushing against a heaviness in the air. The fabric stretches over his torso, clinging to juts of bone, so that a hollow reveals itself" (67).

I describe this book as a biography, but it's less the history of one artist and his particular and finely tuned skills than it is the story of why we watch him. What attracts us to any performance? What directs and inspires our gaze? I can't say that I am a fan of mime, but reading this book nudged me back to its sources.

The first video I find when I google Marcel Marceau is a clip from a 1966 TV variety show hosted by Hollywood dancer Fred Astaire. In his introduction, Astaire describes pantomime as "the most difficult of the performing arts" as he welcomes "the magnificent Marcel Marceau." Marceau was then still more Parisian artiste than clown. His character Bip attempts to coax an imaginary lion through a hoop, and then eloquently chases butterflies with an imaginary net. His performance is deft and charming, but more interesting is his popularity amidst those mid-twentieth-century trappings of show business glitter. How does performance create pleasure? Wen describes it this way: "As we watch the mime's expressive form we lose awareness of our own. We forget to breathe. Thank God our lungs inflate and deflate on their own. This is why—at performance end—we scream, stomp our feet, and throw our hands together. And we violently reawaken to our bodies" (89).

Wen's book observes not only these peaks of the artist's fame but also its inevitable wane. By the 1980s the critics are no longer amazed. By the 1990s they tire of the overplayed expressions and body stories that have become cliché, even while the artist himself insists on his own timelessness. Wen tracks this biographical arc with another—a lyric catalog of all the objects "blue and green iridescent goblets / bottle that flares out white and pink / paunchy green jar"(124), markers of wealth and success the great artist has collected, only to be sold at a court-ordered auction to pay off debt after his death.

Every beloved performance has its iridescent moment, followed by applause. I read this impression of one artist's life and death through the early pandemic silence, while on the news the hospitals are filling and the death toll is rising. I think about all the ways that we perform our lives until "the stage light drops" (131). The detritus is auctioned off and we are returned to our shaven-away selves.

Who are we without what we do when others are watching? Perhaps this will finally be the difference between the old century and this new one. The performance may still be beautiful but we've tired of the same old show.

~

Of course, sooner or later the silent body needs to speak. There is no such thing as true silence. The unspoken is always smoldering underneath, and we won't ever get over our need to speak to one another. The great irony of this time is that the pandemic hours isolate but the virus is entirely social. Together-apart is a peculiar kind of friction. What we need we can't have. What we don't want we get from each other.

What I keep coming back to in these pandemic-to-protest months is the social role of nonfiction. The virus is a we situation, but then what isn't? My spouse, Linnea, and I don't always love the constant presence of each other in our shelter-in-place work lives, and we never imagined this workaday constancy would be our Lesbian Never-Never Land, but after three months of working at home we've both amended our habits for the common good. The virus has remade our sense of *we*. This commitment is the same reason we city dwellers wear masks, whether at protest marches or the grocery store. We mean to protect one another—and that's the main reason I wear mine whenever I leave the house. How, then, might we also essay for the good of one another?

The image of a magical house of love that sits at the center of Carmen Maria Machado's memoir, *In the Dream House*, is a beckoning trope, as seductive as it is dangerous—a cabin of desire and a dungeon of control rubbing up against each other. With friction comes fire. Machado's dream house is a fallacy that needs to be burned down.

*In the Dream House* is both intimate and communal. The story begins with the weight of taboo, not because it includes explicit lesbian sexuality but because

it steps into the realms of what some don't want to believe exists. Machado tells us from the start that she means to create an archive in the gaps of what has not been well-enough recorded. Her memoir is a story of intimate domestic abuse. The lover who psychologically abuses her is also a woman. "I enter into the archive that domestic abuse between partners who share a gender identity is both possible and not uncommon. ... I speak into the silence. I toss the stone of my story into a vast crevice; measure the emptiness by its small sound" (5).

The memoir's structure is a series of vignettes—small moments of intimate stories spun within the frame of public stories, stories about the stories, so even the most intimate of her recountings reverberate through fairy tale, horror, and the myth of a house of dreams. The dream house is many houses—a haunted house, a longing for sanctuary, a romance novel setting, a belief in utopian lesbian love, a suspense device, a moniker of a relationship gone wrong, a choose-your-own adventure that never ends well, a house at the end of the world, a tragedy escaped, a cliché, and an actual lovely house in Iowa "as real as the book you are holding in your hand, though significantly less terrifying. If I cared to, I could give you its address, and you could drive there in your own car and sit in front of that Dream House and try to imagine the things that have happened inside" (9).

*In the Dream House* works as captivity narrative, bad romance chronicle, and lyric horror story, but it also shatters the façade of a too-easy politics of identity. Machado's narrative structure is a fractured mirror, exposing the messy underside of the ways abusers of any gender terrorize by manipulation and gaslighting, taking advantage of vulnerability, internalized homophobia, body shame, and any of our desires to be desired. Machado not only tells the tale of saving her own life but also reaches back for archival evidence of stories that have come before. She wants to find herself in queer history and also to invite others to find their way back to her. "The literature of queer domestic abuse is lousy with references to this punctured dream. ... Acknowledging the insufficiency of this idealism is nearly as painful as acknowledging that we're the same as straight folks in this regard: we're in the muck like everyone else" (109).

Machado regrets the loss of the fantasy of a perfect queer love, free from the everyday misogyny of a heteronormative marriage—the dream house that never was—but has learned to desire life lived in a less glamorous neighborhood. What if we dismantled all the dream houses, and all the plans for dream houses

to come, and just lived and loved imperfectly, deserving of dignity not because we are magic but simply because we are human?

~

When the pandemic time broke, or seemed to break, it was because the greater good burst out of its long confinement. Suddenly the image of fire was no longer metaphorical. While COVID-19 is by no means over, and while I am myself still conducting most of my universe out of a back room of my apartment, all the rooms feel different than they did a few months ago. The world turned over after we all saw that video of George Floyd's murder. Linnea and I watched the video on repeat, grieved him and also the urban policing history that put him under that cop's knee, followed our friends' protests reports from Minneapolis, woke up to social media posts about buildings on fire in the Minneapolis neighborhood where we used to live, then watched the rest of the street burn down. By the weekend, uprisings and riots surged here in Chicago and all around the country too. No more resting. No more waiting for that silent considered life. The time to reenter our bodies, and our cities, had begun.

I read other books during the pandemic hours—beautiful and sensitively considered books built from deep research and stirring queer sensibilities. I will go back to those books again as I consider what else is possible in the not-me realms of new nonfiction. But right now, as the cities rage, the one book that's turned my head is a memoir about a city that has long known the price of a too beautiful projection.

Sarah M. Broom's *The Yellow House* is more *we* than *me* by design, in part because the central protagonist is not a person but a house, and in part because the narrator, Sarah/Monique, does not even show up as a character until 100 pages in. The book is the saga of a family, a house, and a city, meticulously researched with extensive family interviews, city archive research, and multiple returns to walk and watch the space of family and city history. The yellow house was Sarah Broom's mother's place of being on Wilson and Chef Menteur Road, on the far east side of New Orleans, home to twelve children, one of the many sites of Hurricane Katrina wreckage. The history of the building mirrors the story of a family who grew up on the city's far edges, the New Orleans the tourists rarely see. "There are no guided tours to this part of the city, except for

the disaster bus tours that became an industry after Hurricane Katrina, carting visitors around, pointing out the great destruction of neighborhoods that were never known or set foot in before the Water, except by their residents” (4).

*The Yellow House* is an epic symphony of four sections, or four Movements, as Broom calls them. The first Movement tells the story of the family who lived there before Sarah, the youngest of the twelve children, was born. The second Movement brings us Sarah’s childhood through adolescence, in a house redefined by the sudden death of her father six months after her birth. The third Movement is the family’s story of living through Katrina and the long journey back to New Orleans, via Africa, to work for Mayor Ray Nagin’s misbegotten campaign to rebuild the post-Katrina city. The final Movement chronicles another of Sarah’s returns, for a year this time, to investigate the messy infrastructural history of New Orleans East, the outlier region where some of her family still lived, even more neglected since Katrina destroyed her mother’s yellow house.

The Katrina diaspora scatters Broom’s family to California, Arizona, and Texas, and most don’t intend to come back, but one brother is still there, keeping watch over the land where the yellow house used to stand. Another keeps trying to return, while the author’s mother lives on in her own mother’s house, waiting years for the state of Louisiana to settle her recovery claim. The deeply flawed Road Home program was supposed to bring the owners of storm-devastated homes back to New Orleans but prevented much of the city’s Black population to rebuild. The payouts were keyed to depressed pre-storm property values rather than to the cost of rebuilding, and many Black New Orleanians owned property in historically undervalued neighborhoods, one of the ways anti-Blackness is written into the foundation of most American cities. “The mythology of New Orleans—that it is always the place for a good time: that its citizens are the happiest people alive . . . can sometimes suffocate the people who live and suffer under the place’s burdens, burying them within layers and layers of signifiers.” (328).

Chef Menteur Highway is the essential artery and dangerous boundary of Broom’s memory map. She spent her childhood perilously crossing and recrossing Chef Menteur, the same road where one of her sisters was lucky to survive being run over and dragged from the back of a speeding car. Chef Menteur runs from the city proper eastward, over the water into the Mississippi,

intersecting in the Broom family center with the dead-ended Wilson Avenue. This is the address of the yellow house that keeps pulling her back but won't fully yield to her questions. "How will the children living here now describe the street on which they grew up? What will they have to say, these children growing up on a block with two houses left, in an abandoned, disparaged section of New Orleans where a city councilman claims coyotes reign after dark?" (358)

When Sarah returns again, in the book's final Movement, to write and research the yellow house and the politics of city location, she lives for a time in a French Quarter apartment, on the city's most photographed corner, a location so contrary to her family identity that one of her New Orleans East brothers won't even visit her there. She spends her time in city archives, finding traces of the family story and untangling zoning distinctions that have doomed her former neighborhood to more junkyards and industrial development than people. She keeps going back to New Orleans East, to see her brother Carl, to examine how her family's geographical fulcrum was unmade. "If the French Quarter is mythologized as new-world sophistication, New Orleans East is the encroaching wilderness. The East is less dressed up; it's where the city's dysfunctions are laid bare" (313).

~

One month. Two months. Three. Four. How long will the pandemic last and what will we use this time to reconsider? Sarah Broom's memoir examines far more than the damaged edge of her own bifurcated city, asking us to consider how our fantasy landscapes conspire with history to obscure too many Americans from full view. All of these books consider the difference between artifice and actuality. Performances end. The Dream House never was. Cities are human made, but never for the benefit of the many. What, and who, props up our projections?

Nonfiction's job, or one of them, at least, is to keep us looking for the machine behind the image. Nonfiction for the common good asks us to consider what has kept our deadly and magnificent dreams alight for so long. What will we do, now that we've been so violently reawakened to our bodies by the thrum of this half-static, half blazing spring?

