*Broken Glossa*, Stephen Bett (Chax)

I've taken some time to get a handle on this new 'alphabet book of post-avant glosa' from Canadian poet Stephen Bett. Is the title a pun on 'broken glass' or is 'broken' to do with postmodern poetics and Betts' deconstruction or re-invention of the glosa, which the blurb glosses [sic] as 'a Renaissance Spanish Court form'? Both, and much else I suspect.

Bett's version of the glosa is a kind of summary, critical reading of, biographical note and dialogue with, indeed a gloss on, the poets he has chosen to engage with. Each poem has a poet's name followed by a colon and a phrase as a title, each includes quotations or adapted quotations from the poem, a response, and sections picking up on details (friends, attitudes, actions, diction, etc.) from the poets' own work, as well as Betts' own writing. They are at times funny, disrespectful, worshipful, undermining, critical or a kind of pastiche; sometimes all of these at once. Footnotes help explain or locate some of the references, and in one poem – about John Wieners – allegedly contains the poem (it doesn't).

The book is a bit like being taken by Betts to a party. It's good to see some mutual friends and acquaintances but difficult to get to know the strangers there, despite the introductions. On one level these poems seem insular, a kind of in-joke for those in the know. So, I mostly enjoyed the poems about, from or referencing Rae Armantrout, Charles Bernstein, Ted Berrigan, Paul Blackburn, Clark Coolidge, Robert Creeley, William Everson, Jackson Mac Low, Frank O'Hara, Charles Olson, Tom Pickard, Jeremy Prynne, Tom Raworth, Gary Snyder, Jonathan Williams, Derek Beaulieu and Guy Birchard, whose work I am familiar with; and had enough to get by on with Tom Clark, Ed Dorn, Hank Lazer, Ron Padgett, Peter Schjeldahl (who I mostly know as an art critic), Jack Spicer, Lewis Walsh, Paul Violi, Philip Whalen and Jennifer Bartlett.

Why am I writing a list? Well, in a way this is a book that places Bett within a list or network of reading, fellow poets, influences and friends, and I want to do the same. It's also to point out (although I am not going to list them) how many other poets here I know absolutely nothing about, and how few women there are here. I don't want to get PC or self-righteous, but this is a book dominated by males: out of 67 poets here only six are women, which isn't really on in 2023. At least make an effort Mr. Betts!

The poems themselves are convoluted, associative and tangential, often jocular, sometimes knowing and familiar. What, for instance should a reader make of 'incidentally Pip, you never unzipped my appendicized letter' in the Philip Lamantia poem which is mostly an exercise in surrealist and alchemical references. I'm assuming there is a sexual pun here, because elsewhere in the poem we are told that 'psychic automatism lifts up its skirt' and about 'randy laddies' with 'cum stains on teeth'. However, I'm unsure is Betts is flirting, feeling rejected or just teasing?

To return to my party metaphor, I don't mind being a wallflower and drinking quietly by myself, or hiding in the kitchen for a deep conversation with someone else who doesn't know many others, but when everyone seems to be speaking a different language and playing non-party music, it's weird. My ultimate take, however, is that it's Betts talking strangely, not the poets who are his subjects; I don't recognise his version of Tom Raworth, Robert Creeley, Tom Pickard et al, or their writing. The numerous footnotes suggest that the author knows he needs to explain what he has written, although sometimes they do the opposite and present yet another layer of elliptical allusion, whilst others seem like a namedrop or chance to include himself in the text.

I so wanted to like this book, because there are so many important poets (canonically and personally) included, and also because I have enjoyed Bett's other books, but I confess I don't. Michael Rothenberg, on the back cover, mentions 'lament, exultation, beat improvisation, pop incantation, mantric visitation', and Orchid Tierney claims the work is not 'just poems but dialogues, chants, and jokes with the poets on whom they riff.' This may be true, or may be Betts' intention, but ultimately Jeffrey Cyphers Wright is closer to summarising when he points out that Betts 'riffs from an insider's perspective'. Since I am not a member of the Beats or New York School, let alone a 'Zen Cowboy', I am somewhat lost in what Rothenberg calls' the continuous song of the cosmic and eternal muse, reborn in *Broken Glosa*.'

Rupert Loydell

(722 words)