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Review: Suzanne Stein's *Passenger Ship*

Suzanne Stein

Passenger Ship

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The first appropriate departure in Suzanne Stein's chapbook *Passenger Ship* is a replacement.

Thanked-party [Louisa May Alcott](#) (photo above), from her book *Little Women*:

"The girls never forgot that night ..."

In her version, Stein hides the "girls" in a pronoun: "They never forgot that night..."

The very first words in the book, then, are a reframing, however minor, by disappearance. The disappearance of gender, to be specific. After this initial drifting, the book then "starts" on a stage, Alcott's/Stein's: "The Bird Room was the theatre." Note how quickly the content is "placed" on "stage." This is not by any accident. Immediately we are in a play within a play. At the story level, which is a repurposing, a collage, and within the meta-argument of the entire book. These various frames widen out, like multiple mirrors, but with tricks in them. I am reminded of the famous [mirror scene](#) in Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai*.

Passenger Ship repurposes text from Alcott's novels *Little Women*, *Little Men*, *Jo's Boys*, and *Jack and Jill: A Village Story*. There are also lines retrieved from Herman Melville's novel *Typee* and lines from a poem written by Governor Howell of New Jersey upon George Washington's inauguration journey from Mt. Vernon to New York [See Exhibit A], which was famously attended and made memorable by many "little women."

Though, through repurposing, everything within this Ship's a fiction, or at least a creation. A double fiction. A doubling of creation. But the creations change incrementally, like the "girls" and "they." Likewise, in her post-script poem, "Cotton Ship," she breaks a line and adds a comma and the word "mate" not seen in *Typee*.

Melville: "square in the yards and keep the vessel before the breeze"

Stein: "square in the yards, mate

and keep the vessel before the breeze"

Or there are other inversions of text in:

Or, there are other inversions about, as in:

From Alcott:

“We must have cold tongue and chicken, French chocolate and ice cream”

Stein reworks this to:

“eat cold tongue and chocolate.

French ice cream. Chicken.”

I am reminded of the 1994 film *Before the Rain*, whose motto was “The Circle is not Round.” That is, change is constant. The same is never the same. *Passenger Ship* floats on a Hericlitean river.

Stein, who happens to work at a museum (SFMOMA), where framing is an omnipresent fact, activity, is inclined in her written work to these matters as well.

She has, for some time, been interested in how spaces and speeches and poetries are framed, in what manner they are, before what gets said gets said. Her focus is there. I had previously [written](#) about another of her chapbooks *Hole in Space*, where I addressed this tendency. Her work is highly structural, highly organized, a kind of collage conceptualism.

However, this is not the sole achievement. To focus there only does the reader a disservice, because Stein is laden with lyric gifts, mostly displayed by intuitive assonance, a keen sense of assembly, or with deft line breaks. Even while using text from Alcott, she hears the singing in the lines, which are from different areas of Alcott’s works. For example, her poem “Learning to Forget,” which is also a chapter title in *Little Women*, delivers its sensitivity austerely yet poignantly:

how well we pull together, don’t we? said Nora

who objected to silence just then

you may take an oar if you like

nothing seemed impossible in the beginning

black shadow of the tower falling far across the sunny water

rest a little, and let me row

the wound insists on healing

letters such a comfort

if not an opera then a requiem

*

A natural side-effect of collage texts is the simultaneity of the whole and the parts. It is made of parts and yet it has a whole to it. It is neither one nor the other but both. There is an unstuckness, too, a drifting by, in collage. It’s a method of interruption, to create the feel of interruption, the points of which are various, certainly, but one effect is that there is a quicker breaking of individual narrativity, into multiple narratives. It highlights the dead spaces, the fractures.

There are four illustrations in the chapbook, as well, presumably all by Ruth Ives, another thanked party, and also the illustrator of some of Alcott’s books. These include:

Girl on lap of bearded man on chair (front cover)

Rowboat with boater hat, on water, attached to near pier (inside)

Girl on porch chair admiring fireworks (seemingly) and boats at night in the water (inside)

Anchor (back cover). But specifically an anchor whose rope line is broken. An anchor with no anchoring ability. [See Exhibit B].

*

Beyond the writerly methods of collage, parataxis, replacement, and inversion, what else is being done here, being said? It is not always clear. Why specifically Alcott? Because she was an abolitionist and feminist? A personal interest? What is Stein saying about children? About children's stories? It, too, is not exactly clear. But it is not an essay, *Passenger Ship*. It is poetic fiction, or a fictional poetry. Like the anchorless anchor, we are set adrift in the seemingly mirroring collages.

Stein always balances her texts while slightly shifting them, working at various levels of textual and illustrative organization. I appreciate the focus and thoroughness. Her book *Tout va bien* had a similar organizing plan. That text is bookended with two talks, and ends with a post-script, with the middle of the book occupied by a bordered screenplay of Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus*. In *Passenger Ship*, a work of fifteen pages containing actual text and/or illustration, there is no screenplay, instead there is the image of the boat in the water, and the assumed nearby presence of a person (the hat in the boat). There is additionally a short, untitled text, the only untitled piece. When one sees this as the middle, we can look at what is before and what is after, and it is interesting.

For instance, as previously mentioned, the chapbook begins with the "night," but it is framed at the end in "sunshine." In the first "half" of the chapbook, the first piece is called "Chapter 12—The Twenty Second of February." In the second "half" of the book, we also get a Chapter 12, but this time it is below the illustration of the girl on the porch. As well, in the first "half" of the book, we have a piece called "Two Girls," and in the second "half" we have one called "Merry and Molly," which is also a chapter title in Alcott's *Jack and Jill: A Village Story*.

Passenger Ship is meta-structurally about mirroring and framing and yet in the narratives themselves—at the level of the content within the pieces—there is movement, change, disappearance, irruption, mystery, and even ease. John Cage believed in indeterminacy, but there was still the form of indeterminacy in which the elements of indeterminacy were housed. Stein understands that. The "little women" and "little men" wander about with heartache and hurt feet, falling asleep, brushing their hair, and there is sweetness there, innocent humor, and while the structures present and represent certain approaches, while removing others, this artful and entertaining text is no less affecting or affectionate. It's really a dream, in this way, and a dream to read.

[EXHIBIT A]

"The readers of Marshall's Life of Washington will remember the peculiar and cordial welcome of the Father of his country at Trenton, 12 years after his memorable achievements there, while on his way from Mt. Vernon to the inauguration in New York. In addition to the usual martial display, the ladies of the place erected a rich rural arch over the Assunpink, with appropriate devices, and bearing this inscription :

**THE DEFENDER OF THE MOTHERS
WILL BE THE
PROTECTOR OF THE DAUGHTERS.**

"The General was met here by a company of matrons leading their daughters dressed in white, with baskets of flowers, and singing these lines, written for the occasion by Gov. Howell :

Welcome, mighty Chief, once more,
Welcome to this grateful shore ;
Now no mercenary foe
Aims again the fatal blow,
Aims at **THEE** the fatal blow.

**Virgins fair and matrons grave,
Those thy conquering arms did save,
Build for *thee* triumphal bowers :
Strew, ye fair, his way with flowers,
Strew your Hero's way with flowers ;**

[EXHIBIT B]

'You do me proud, Captain. But, dear, I want to say one thing and then I'm done; for you don't need much advice of mine after my good man has spoken. I read somewhere that every inch of rope used in the British Navy has a **strand of red in it**, so that wherever a bit of it is found it is known. That is the text of my little sermon to you. Virtue, which means honour, honesty, courage, and all that makes character, is the red thread that marks a good man wherever he is. Keep that always and everywhere, so that even if wrecked by misfortune, that sign shall still be found and recognized. Yours is a rough life, and your mates not all we could wish, but you can be a gentleman in the true sense of the word; and no matter what happens to your body, keep your soul clean, your heart true to those who love you, and do your duty to the end.'


Suzanne Stein is a poet. Poems, talk performances, and prose have appeared in WAR AND PEACE, ON: CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE, *Counterpath Online*; and at New Langton Arts, the San Francisco Exploratorium, Artists Television Access, and elsewhere. Her chapbooks are *HOLE IN SPACE* (OMG!), *Passenger Ship* (Ypolita), and *Tout va bien*.

She is editor and publisher of the small, Oakland-based poetry press TAXT and was co-director and film curator at { f o u r w a l l s } gallery in San Francisco 1994-1998. She works currently as community producer at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, organizing a variety of talk- and conversation-based programs, and is editor-in-chief of the museum's blog, *Open Space*.

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