

**Todd Colby's review of *The Origin of THE Species***

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Semiotext(e) Native Agents series has done it again. After a slew of great uniformly sized books (great for reading on the subway from the likes of Eileen Myles, Kathy Acker and David Rattray, comes a wonderful book by Barbara Barg.

If you've ever heard Barbara Barg's voice with her band Homer Erotic or seen her alone, you know that her voice is beautiful one moment and a snap crackle flask of acid pop across the face the next. I was happy that her new book *The Origin of the Species* delivered just the punch she packs live. This book is full of dreamy ditties on the breakdown of the world from Memphis to the Lower East Side. It's about succumbing to the horror and ecstasy that inhabits those exquisite blocks of ENERGY. Barbara has her finger on the pulse and she's relating the beat. And as Captain Beefheart said, "If you've got ears, you gotta listen."

While I was reading her book I got scared a few times, thinking she was going to come into my apartment and knock me upside the head for not paying close enough attention – her voice is that real on the page, which is no small feat. Her writing is sharp because like the best of writers, she stays "close to the nose" when she describes her personal vision of staying alive in this wicked age we live in. That's right, staying alive, surviving.; And when you are a survivor, you come out on the other side a lot stronger, wiser and more vulnerable. As she writes in "Fresh Out of Nodland": *I'm bored with wearing black all the goddam time. I'm now naïve enough to want to shine a little light. A little corona on my persona. I had forgotten what it is to be gentle with myself.* It's these moments that separate Barbara's wringing of other ex-junkies. She's not romanticizing a damn thing about that hell: "I've been down low / I've been traveling blue / I've been cool too long / Life / is the hot / concept." Whew! When is the last time you heard something that honest without smirking? She doesn't just hit the nerve, she stomps on it, which is what makes this book so exhausting and rewarding. You can't read Barg's work passively, you gotta roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty.

There are songs, poems, short stories and automatic writing in this collection, as well as an element of mysticism (à la *A Vision* by William Butler Yeats), which leads me to my favorite poem, "Guide for the Perplexed", a piece of writing that was apparently channeled through her as she sat down at her computer to write a letter to a friend. It's not something that's easy to quote from, or to summarize, but I will recommend that you read it before going to sleep (when your defenses are down). It messed with my dreams after I finished the piece. I was under the firm belief that she had mastered some alchemical language matrix that was capable of changing the chemistry of my brain so that it only picked up the frequencies of her voice.

Another great piece is "Pop Quiz" with a preface explaining that this is only a "review", not the "real thing". What follows is a questionnaire of sorts that asks almost every question we were born to ask. Answers that will never be found in the latest addition of *How Things Work*. No, these are questions best answered by a poet (to list a few:): "What is the difference between a flower and the rent?: "Who among us is waiting until tomorrow to begin their real life?" "What do we take to be the point of a cock?" "What is shampoo?" "Would you rather open your heart or open your veins?" "Do you hug people you don't want to fuck?" "Do you fuck people you don't want to hug?" With every question comes an amused silence followed by an insatiable need to read the next unrelated question. But hey, there's nothing to worry about, it's only a pop quiz!

I'll wind up with the funniest line in the book from the poem titled "Good Morning Princess": "Your family wanted a doglike robot. / They got you instead." Tell it like it is, Barbara.