



Mean Free Path

Ben Lerner

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“Lerner [is] among the most promising young poets now writing.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Sharp, ambitious, and impressive.” —*Boston Review*

National Book Award finalist Ben Lerner turns to science once again for his guiding metaphor. “Mean free path” is the average distance a particle travels before colliding with another particle. The poems in Lerner’s third collection are full of layered collisions—repetitions, fragmentations, stutters, re-combinations—that track how language threatens to break up or change course under the emotional pressures of the utterance. And then there’s the larger collision of love, and while Lerner questions whether love poems are even possible, he composes a gorgeous, symphonic, and complicated one.

*You startled me. I thought you were sleeping
In the traditional sense. I like looking
At anything under glass, especially
Glass. You called me. Like overheard
Dreams. I’m writing this one as a woman
Comfortable with failure. I promise I will never
But the predicate withered. If you are
Uncomfortable seeing this as portraiture
Close your eyes. No, you startled*

Ben Lerner is the author of three books of poetry and was named a finalist for the National Book Award for his second book, *Angle of Yaw*. He holds degrees from Brown University, co-founded *No: a journal of the arts*, and teaches at the University of Pittsburgh.

Mean Free Path Details

Date : Published March 1st 2010 by Copper Canyon Press (first published 2010)

ISBN : 9781556593147

Author : Ben Lerner

Format : Paperback 96 pages

Genre : Poetry

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From Reader Review Mean Free Path for online ebook

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I really enjoyed Lerner's earlier works, but I don't like poems that I need guidance to read. Chopped up sentences with no clear direction as to where the different parts go, interrupted sentences... this would have been okay in one poem, to communicate a feeling, but he definitely lost me. And I'm hard to lose!

Natalie says

if "mean free path" is defined as "the average distance a particle can travel before impact with another object", the space in which a person's thoughts can travel alone feels like the space these poems were developed in, that is in isolation. and this book was ben lerner's attempt to develop & communicate as coherent & complete an expression of love in a vacuum before impact with another object, whether internal, external or even the return of time. i think he achieved this. five stars

abcdefg says

This book of poems is divided into 4 parts: "Mean Free Path", "Doppler Elegies" and then "Mean Free Path" and "Doppler Elegies" following once more. In physics, the "mean free path" of a particle is the average distance it travels before colliding with another particle.

In some ways, I noticed the poetry in this book alludes to this measure in physics with lines like:

"At a canted angle of enabling failures
The little collisions, the path of decay"

But the thing about what Lerner does with his poetry is that he experiments with it in such a way so that you get lines of unfinished phrases grouped into stanzas. It almost appears as if Lerner wrote this work initially as a coherent piece, and then decided to be adventurous by reordering the entire thing so that it makes no sense whatsoever.

But I won't shoot it down because the lines were actually somewhat graceful and pleasant. He combines phrases that are entirely unique and unheard of with the utterly everyday and most cliché expressions. There are even places where you can combine some lines and make sense of what is said in your own way. In this way, the work is interactive. It's not one to read passively.

There are hints and glints of a suicide, a plane ride, and his beloved Ari which recur throughout the work. In a way, it's like he's trying to say something very personal, but it never really comes together because the lines are so mixed up that you can never really get at what exactly is being said.

In some ways, it's almost like when people say "There just aren't any words to express how it feels." Lerner

uses language so that it never meets up in a way so that you can grasp it. It's elusive and tantalizing, like trying to take hold of reflections in water. You're just never going to be able to.

Jack Haringa says

I much preferred the first half of this collection to the second. In the later poems, Lerner seems to have discovered a style of intercutting thoughts that really felt like a kind of deliberate formalist obscurantism, which I'm generally not a fan of. I do like his habit of blending the personal, elevated, and scientific into his poetry, though.

Taylor Napolsky says

It can be a dense read if you take it that way; but you just have to relax and let it wash over you. The images and terms reflect and ripple throughout.... I read it twice for good measure.

Liz Howard says

I'm writing this one as a woman
Comfortable with failure. I promise I will never
But the predicate withered. If you are
Uncomfortable seeing this as portraiture
Close your eyes. (9)

Mcatania21 says

Mean Free Path is quite experimental, in the way it uses language to reconstruct and destruct ideas. The recombination of text is playful and opens up the poem for reinterpretations. The fragmentation is quite jarring. Lerner invites his readers to rearrange his own poems like building blocks. His lines are out of order and can be rebuilt to whatever dimensions we want them to be. His stanzas may look tidy at first glance, but once you dig into them, they are disorderly, with no clear beginnings or ends.

The passage I chose to analyze in Mean Free Path for lines and line breaks is as follows:

The good news is light is scattered such

Toxicity means the paint must be applied

The apparent brightness of the surface

By robots one atom at a time, bad news

Is the same regardless of the angle of view

I thought I should be the one to tell you

Simultaneously, how monks sing chords

A kind of silence, what we might call

The military application of Cezanne

(Lerner, 51)

It's easier to look at a particular passage rather than analyze the entire poem because his lines become more digestible that way. Note the way Lerner starts with "good news" as "light" and ends with bad news as the "same regardless of the angle of view." He equates "a kind of silence" and "military application" as negative news.

Many of Lerner's end lines serve as cliff hangers (e.g.: "The military application of Cezanne"). They leave us frustrated and wanting to know more about a briefly mentioned subject. And how do we make sense of invalid arguments like "Toxicity means the paint must be applied." Does he want us to rearrange the text to read how we want it to: "toxicity means a kind of silence"? His poetry is filled with false starts and no clear finish (e.g. "thought I should be the one to tell you") Tell me what?!

While reading fragmented sentences slammed together with no punctuation can be tiring and frustrating, in a way, Lerner's poetry mimics the way we speak out loud (e.g. "Simultaneously, how monks sing chords"). We are not tidy in real speech, with proper noun-verb agreements and often end in mid-thought. Normally, we are engaged in conversation and answering someone, so our sentence replies are often fragmented when we talk. Lerner's odd line breaks are examples of how language can break up when we become emotional and how language can also hinder communication. Lerner also writes how we dream, disjointed and incongruent.

Lerner's poetry is unruly with its lack of punctuation (notice there are only two commas in the above passage) and violent switch in subject matter (one moment we are talking about toxic paint, and the next line moves onto robots).

Furthermore, his line endings don't always feel meaningful (e.g.: "The good news is light is scattered such") Why is he ending on "such" a weak word? He is breaking all the traditional rules of poetry. The line breaks are not audible. I cannot hear the music. I cannot hear the pause. I feel disengaged from the subject matter as it jumps frantically from "Toxicity" to "robots." If line breaks "allow us to dwell in the image or idea of

individual lines” as Instructor Maxwell points out, then Lerner’s does quite the opposite.

Jeff T. says

I reviewed it here:

<http://thefanzine.com/articles/poetry...>

Chris Schaeffer says

Probably my least favorite of Lerner's books, but still one of 2010's strongest releases in poetry.

Danielle Doerr says

I've read this 3 or 4 times now. I feel surprised by the breadth of topics covered in such a short work. And I always feel like I learn something about the possible structure poetry and about how I, personally, parse sentences.

This is easily one of my favorite works.

Ellen says

Amazing. Beautiful. A must-read.

Sarah says

Poems that seem like cryptic messages emerging from a war bunker, from a reluctant and somewhat crazed secret agent, that become more and more unhinged as they progress.

*It's more of a vitamin than an antipsychotic
Collective despair expressed in I-statements
The dream in which the skin is stonewashed
Denim, running your hand through the hair
Of an imaginary friend, rising from bed
Dressing, returning calls, all without
Waking, the sudden suspicion the teeth
In your mouth are not your own, let
Alone the words.*

Tiffany says

Nothing for you here but repetition

Matt says

Another from the "small press list," this book by Ben Lerner is pretty well in my wheelhouse, since it seems to be assembled from cut-ups of other poems, worked together and repeated into two long poems, each split into two sections so that they alternate-- so many pages of "Mean Free Path" followed by so many pages of "Doppler Elegies," and then repeat.

They are both really satisfying on a line-by-line level-- "DE" is, obviously, an elegy, and Lerner's technique allows the mourned-for object to be present and absent at the same time. In "MFP" the idea I gather is more of a periplum, a crow's nest view of contemporary culture as it whirls by, with the still point of the beloved, Ari. It's also strong, moving stuff, though the last section, where Guantanamo Bay enters as a recurring figure, felt a little too on the nose, making the dislocation too fixable and less a product of the way we live-- like saying, if we close Guantanamo, everything will be better and we won't need this poem anymore, which, and I hate Gitmo too, is overstating the case and devaluing the experience of lots of folks.

What I did find sort of weird is the way this book and another on the list, Nate's Wonderfull Yeare, both use this similar cut-up formal device. Nate's, though, stretches his to the frame of a shepherd's calendar. I wasn't always a fan of that conceit, but seeing Lerner's poem without such a support, I think I understand better what Nate's gets from it, a productive tension against a more rigid form-- a sense of connection, to form and history, that Lerner's book forgoes, and which I think it is weaker for lacking.

Jim says

It's like a mashup of The Talking Heads' "Life During Wartime" and "The Wasteland".

It's 2 poems each in 2 parts: 2 titled Mean Free Path, and two titled Doppler Elegies, interspersed. Mean Free Path is in a narrative stythic verse (or close to it), and Doppler Elegies is in a free verse. Both though employ a cut up of sentences to the syntactic: prepositional phrases and verb phrases that seem lost from their immediate peers. This gives the poems an abrupt, almost meaning, almost understandable. But it left me with a dream like effect: like I'm pretty sure I know what this is about, but if asked to explain it would be like trying to interpret a Rothko painting: There's a few colors here that I totally get but then in whole? Just look at it yourself if you want to understand.

I think Lerner's The Hatred of Poetry is the essay version of these poems - and is likely "what this poem is about". No matter what the narration is describing (struggling to fall in love? coping with loneliness? stressed out life? A friend's suicide?) there's the theme of struggling to keep this a poem. Keep it from being narration, and there's a frustration that Lerner can't express what he feels or wants to say. These are the themes of his essay - finding the frustrating limits of poetry. Seeking the ideal, the devine, but knowing the form (the written language) will fall short. The 2cd Mean Free Path has this theme of the struggle with the word and the poetic form sprinkled throughout:

There must be an easier way to do this
I mean without writing

...

Put the book away, Look out the window

And here, as explored in The Hatred of Poetry Lerner struggles with keeping his expression a poem

Wait, I don't want this to turn / Turn into a major novel

And more examples:

I did not walk here all the way from prose

The best section of the poems happens in the 2cd Mean Free Path where a friend's suicide (it seems) and (maybe) a breakup is cut-up with his own frustration of not being able to express what he wants to say, and with the notion of "virga" (rain that never reaches the ground) as a metaphor for poetry's frustration - it just can't reach its destination - and the hanging friend who never reaches the ground. Here's my own cut-up of quotes from part 2:

Like rain that never reaches the ground

...

Virga, or the failure of the gaze to reach

...

Before I reached the ground like virga ... To find Ari gone.

...

The pitch drops suddenly because the source

Passed away last night in Brooklyn

...

Hanged himself from the apex in the hope ... Of never reaching the ground

...

This is the lethal suspension of a friend ...

From a low beam by ligature

In summary here's my take on what Lerner's poems are about: A frustrating way-of-being where expressing your emotions clearly seems either embarrassing at best, or just plain unattainable at worst. And that frustration can feel like despair at times.
