

SARAH HANNAH (1967-2007) – A LONGING DISTANCE

by Lo Galluccio



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Yes, right now there is a longing distance between myself and this brilliant dead poet – Sarah Hannah -- for whom I will read and honor at the upcoming Writer's Festival in Somerville this November 11th. That is her book, her first published poetry book – *Longing Distance* -- which Doug Holder sent me to review months ago. It is a beautifully cosmically colored lush pink book, a semi-finalist for the Yale Younger Poet's Prize and one which I was, frankly, afraid to review. How strange looking back on it now. Why was I afraid to review this particular book after reviewing so many other works of PhDs and accomplished academic poets for Ibbetson St. Press?

What a mistake I made not to review her work then. How much I might have learned and gained in inspiration. On the subject of pink, that girl color, that deep vortex of cosmos color with stars embedded on the cover, she writes in the poem:

“The Colors are Off This Season”

I don't want any more of this mumble—
Orange fireside hues,
Fading sun, autumnal tumble,
Stricken, inimitable – Rose.

I want Pink, unthinking, true.
Foam pink, cream and coddle,
Miniskirt, Lolita, pompom, tutu,
Milkshake.”

Yes, there I see my namesake, Lolita, and there I see that wonderful cascading Hopkinsque and Plath-like brocade of images, the colors come alive with emotion, motion and vibrant association. That's a poet. She wants something that's not there, something of her own invention. She's a girl imposing her vision on the landscape. It's her whim and this rather painful, playful division between what's there and what she wants to be there. Funny, because that's why I'm Lo. I'm Lo because I took the name when my first solo CD, *Being Visited*, came out on the Knitting Factory label in New York. I had secretly wanted to be a sexy tough singer maybe with heart-shaped sunglasses through which to view the world. I had been called that by first boyfriend at Harvard College. I wanted to be something other than my former self. I wanted that after my father died and when I became a poet and singer in New York. Different from Sarah, who was systematically called and systematically brilliant in her studies. Sarah, I think, always had her head on straight, more or less. Wesleyan College, A student, Columbia University PhD in Poetry and then Emerson College Professor of Literature and Writing. According to the Boston Globe story, she also wrote on 'sheaves of pink paper.' So I start to play with our differences and our similarities --how we might have touched each other, not just through language but as contemporary female artists.

I met and read alongside her at a reading at McIntyre and

Moore bookstore reading later that year – what season now I can't remember-- and I was struck by how fine-boned and how forthright she was. Again, we did not have much contact but I was very impressed by her. I failed to comprehend again that though this brilliant blonde from Newton, MA was more of an academic poet than myself, we had both traversed similar orbits and held similar passions: New York City, rock music/music in general, and strangely some carry-over NYC hip ness and scars. Here was actually someone who, like me, had been favored with intelligence and creativity and drive, but who had also seen it all fall apart. And then, from there, I have to get to the fact that I'm here, after three suicide attempts and brave Sarah, in one swift stroke, is gone. In May of 2007, after moving to Brookline, following a recent divorce from her husband, she committed suicide at 40.

In the SCAT TV interview, she says that *Longing Distance* was named after watching her husband scale some rocks and that it came from the idea of messed up love affairs and "absence making the heart grow fonder." So there is the idea of the unreachable or unattainable love in the very title of the book. Despite her upbeat and nourishing and sometimes humorous aura, Sarah, like Plath, knew that loss was shadowing life all the time.

This first full-length book is a masterpiece of word play and an amazing amalgam from a kind of urban princess, albeit from a hardscrabble and strained suburb, who could also peer into the high-blown intricacies of nature.

In "Greenwich Mean Time" she writes:

"A storm swathes the Atlantic coast:
Heavey Snow, Blowing Snow; Ceiling Low; Dewpoint
Twenty.
The Capes, those lonely outposts,
Are summoned like deities: May, Cod, Hatteras,
Waters green and roiling...."

This was as woman who strove to see it big — invoking the gods --and could also command detail like a weather girl.

Colette Inez, one of several rave reviewers, commented: "Astronomy, Renaissance literature, mythology, music, a love of wit and verbal play combined with a passion for form and scholarship resonate in this lively collection of poems that marks Sarah Hannah's exciting debut..."

Sarah had a full-blooded teaching career at Emerson College, where she was adored by her writing students and played guitar in a rock bands, an avocation and passion she'd begun in New York City where she'd spent 17 years paying dues to develop an original poetic voice. She returned to Boston, which was her home, because she wanted to be in the "underdog" City as she put it.

Her second work is forthcoming on Tupelo Press and it deals with her mother's mental illness. She finished it before she died, "Inflorescence," and this work shows that Sarah had a passion for people as well as for metaphysical language; that she was also wrestling with a depression in the family, maybe in her mother only or also in herself. The cover features a gorgeous gold burst of flower enveloping both of them. Readings from it by poets and friends take place at the Poet's House at 72 Spring St. I go there on a mission to learn more about Sarah, to hear more of her work and to revisit the City which made me an artist, the City I still like to think of as the badlands, as Oz, as home.

Oh, that Sarah and I had had a chance to talk over a green tea latte at 1369 Coffee Shop in our Central Square hood in late April. Oh that I might have told her that my break up with a world-famous guitarist nearly killed me, and so did the psych ward aftermath of my own suicide attempt. Maybe she would have realized something still very good about her own situation and she might have lived on. Because the problem with poets is that they get very dark and have a tendency to think they can figure it all out themselves, or

have to. That death is the only resolve. Without someone shining a fine light or turning the right key in their minds they can miss the fact that against all that agony, they still have important cards to play. That's the real tragedy of the suicide of any artist. However, Sarah's work lives on and so does her memory. May she spin on in another dimension....for she had a spectacular talent for fathoming many.

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For more information on **Sarah Hannah** Google her or visit Tupelo Press's website.