

Summer 2008

## ***Starred Wire* by Ange Mlinko**

Edward McFadden

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

**Let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

### **Recommended Citation**

McFadden, Edward (2008) "*Starred Wire* by Ange Mlinko," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 69 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss69/29>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

ANGE MLINKO

*Starred Wire* (Coffee House Press, 2005)

In his poem “Peter and Mother,” David Schubert—the neglected depression-era poet who John Ashbery has called “a painter of heaven- or hell-inflected urban landscapes”—writes: “A hand is writing these lines / On your eyes for journeys / You’ll never start for.”

The allure of the journey never started for—how many *Lonely Planets* line my bookshelf? I’ve always meant to get to Salzburg, to view from the surrounding hills its symphony of architectural styles, its Mozart festival, its fountains, dwarf gardens, and *Eduscho Kaffee*. I must have seriously considered at one time or another Montenegro, for the book is there, must have considered whitewater rafting down its Tara Canyon or watching a *kolo* wheel dance from the balcony of an Adriatic hotel. And literary Savannah? When will I bathe in Aiken’s strange moonlight or walk among O’Connor’s lovely peacocks? When will I ever use that Hebrew phrasebook with its *madbukhas*, *ami khereshes*, and *dvash*? Oh, when will I find time to motor up Jamaica’s Blue Mountains with a Norwegian-Thai girl, or listen to the roots of Flabba and Bingy Bunny or the hard-edged ragga of Red Rat?

In Ange Mlinko’s *Starred Wire* we are plunged into the cold pool of potentiality, “adrenaline surging through the veins,” to find out the place we thought we were—Lisbon, or was it Fès? no Venice, it was certainly Venice—was mere imagining. That being in or traveling to those places closer to home—Philadelphia, or Boston, or falling in love and ruining our lives—is the “true illusion,” the “casserole . . . put out on the porch to freeze.”

Here pushing against there, interior bulging into exterior, dreamscapes exploding hard facts—“everything’s carousing” in Mlinko’s poetry, “the certain ratty violets,” the “What, ho!” of our leniency,” the “schoolkids jumping jellyfish fences,” enchanting us, making us ask *What does it mean?*, giving us at times an erethism, an abnormal irritability to her stimulation. She is the ticker screaming across the screen to give us the epilogue, to dredge up those curious days, to tell us to come to bed.

And good bedside reading it is: “I must wait for her to speak / The meanings I must negate before / I am admitted to the gayest person.” That’s David Schubert again, who Mlinko’s enlisted to introduce her. Indeed, Mlinko shares with Schubert a kind of forced manic gaiety, sprinkling her poems, as he did his, with exclamation points—a dastardly feat to be able to pull off with such regularity. “What hairstyles! What restoration comedy! Excuse me, is that a pigeon or a dove?” And here’s Schubert: “Break the pot! and let carnations — / Smell them! they’re the very first. / Break the sky and let come magic / Rain!” Poetry at its best, for Schubert, arrives to the party “innocent and gay: the music of vowel and consonant is the happy-go-lucky echo of time itself.”

And that is a trademark of Mlinko’s style. In “Contretemps” she is “lipreading through the moving leaves.” In “The Intrigues” we get the “vernacular lavender softening the rocks,” as “the ghost devolves to dew blobs.” And in “Femme Fatale Geography” the vowels and consonants play with each other in sometimes surprising combinations: “Man-made Monet Lake’s shaped like an eye,” or “from the top he can savor milkshake stucco terraces.”

Indeed, this pollination of categories, this constant mixing of the senses—sight and sound, smell and touch—gives to Mlinko’s poetry a freshness and well-roundedness that we expect from life but is often missing. Coming to her poetry is like arriving at the farmer’s market early, when it’s still cool and the Hmong and Russians are laying out their still-cold berries and radishes, long before the crush of people picking over the produce, combined with the heat of the sun, have left only a wilted agglomeration, an irritation at the day and people.

In an interview several years ago in Morocco, Mlinko was asked if living there had changed the way she thought about aesthetics. She answered that yes, the surfaces traced with koranic inscriptions and hypnotic designs were very amenable to her; that she preferred poetry to be like that: “semantically & rhythmically brimming over.”

But Mlinko doesn’t want poetry to be merely “language-bending;” she wants it to be imaginative in the sense that it becomes “reality-bending.” She wants, as Alice Notley’s argues in her lecture “Disembodied Poetics,” to “re-imagine reality.” So we get the “Girl with the Black Square Hair” who calls to invisible birds, leaves her solar eclipse sunglasses in the long grasses of the park, but is reassured of being able to return at night—for once she saw the gas-lamps on past noon.

Occasionally, though, Mlinko gets carried away, becoming perhaps a bit too forced in her insistence on the primacy of sounds. “Opus Opal Opulence” is perhaps the clearest example I can find with its “buffalo of philosophy,” and its “exciting to be involved in a schism.” Or the childishly forced squisito mosquito in “Three Old New Games.” But then, just when I’m worn out with the music, just when I feel I can’t listen to one more Sibelius recording, the poet too begins to question herself: “I am no longer certain what music I want to hear.”

Mlinko does know what she is about. In the Moroccan interview she said: “I can’t write a poem without justifying it from the point of view of ‘interesting design.’” She’s not a formalist; rather the design is in the shape of the poems with their studied balance; the design is in the shape of the lines, their internal rhymes, their keen awareness of letter combinations creating surprising alliterations of phonemes: “engrossed they were, groomed by a finger.” The poet, too, insists on wrapping and unwrapping carefully, like the Japanese. But just as “the secret art of wrapping a canvas can’t be repeated,” the secret art of wrapping words into a poem for Mlinko very nearly seems like a sacred, one-time event.

In a Poetry Foundation online journal entry, Mlinko says this about the philosophical underpinnings of her poetry: “[T]he Russian Formalists . . . theorized that poetry must have *strangeness* in it. Studying Russian as a little girl, I would read aloud from children’s books, usually fairy tales, like Goldilocks. Maybe I’ll always associate those illustrations of a kerchiefed *devochka* wandering in the wood with the slow decipherment of the Cyrillic alphabet. Maybe language was always the primal dream: getting lost in it, and finding my way out of it: cutting an elegant path through it.”

*Reviewed by Edward McFadden*