HYPERALLERGIC

The Tender Proceduralism of Solmaz Sharif's 'Look'

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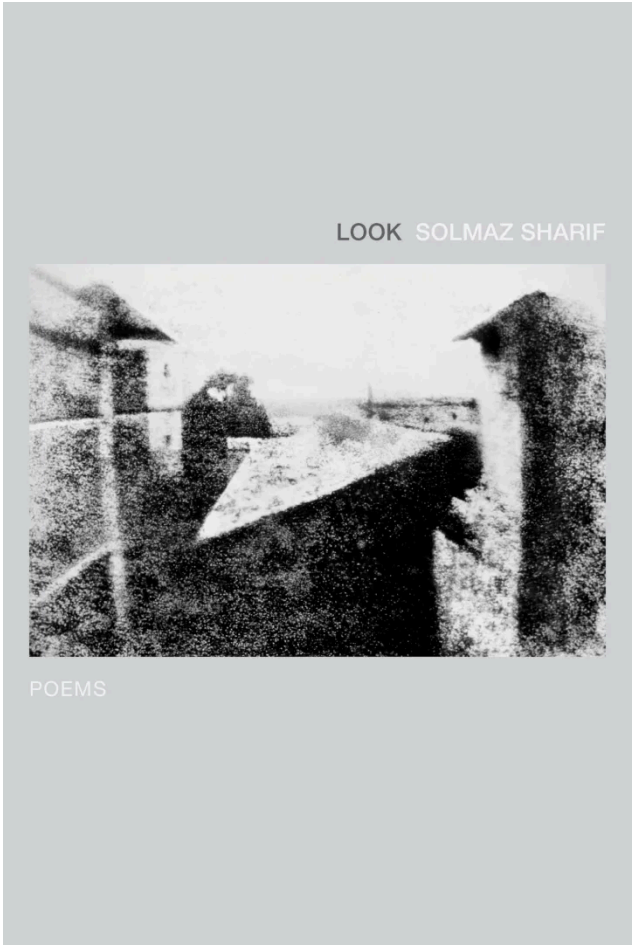
Louis Bury October 23, 2016



Solmaz Sharif's heralded debut poetry collection, ***Look*** — out this summer from the discerning Graywolf Press — has been described in interviews by Sharif as a project that began as a rewriting of the U.S. Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms. In its use of repurposed military terms, the book borrows from the well-worn playbook of procedural poetry, using a set of self-imposed rules, strict or loose, to point the way forward for composition.

Literary proceduralism resembles artistic conceptualism in that both operate through an underlying conceit or schema to realize, or gesture toward the realization of, the work.

Poets have long worked within self-imposed, arbitrary forms, from Dante's terza rima to Petrarch's sonnets, but in the mid to late twentieth century, roughly coeval with the advent of artistic conceptualism, procedural methods in literature became more common and aggressively experimental. The quite large aesthetic tent of literary proceduralism includes practices as diverse as Jackson Mac Low's aleatory compositions, OuLiPo's mathematical hijinx, Bernadette Mayer's infamous list of writing experiments, and, more recently, the calculated appropriations of Conceptual Poetry. Different as these writers may be, what unites their disparate practices, in the common view, is the assumption that their reliance on procedure results in works of arid formalism. As with artistic conceptualism, literary proceduralism gets stereotyped as intellectually provocative but emotionally distant, all head and no heart.

Solmaz Sharif (courtesy Greywolf Press)

Containing both hints as to its compositional methods *and* an exposed emotional core, *Look* represents the latest in a strain of accomplished procedural writing that ought to put the lie to this stereotype. These two poles — the intellect and the emotions; the political and the personal — braid together so tightly throughout Sharif's book you wonder how they could ever be meaningfully disentangled from one another. This complicated knot of head and heart appears from the outset, in the two halves of the collection's opening line: "It matters what you call a

thing," Sharif avers, on the heels of an epigraph that cites the military dictionary, "*Exquisite* a lover called me. *Exquisite*."

In her influential Modernist *ars poetica*, "Poetry and Grammar," Gertrude Stein defined poetry as an art form whose fundamental concern is with naming things, vocabulary: "And so that is poetry really loving the name of anything." For Stein, naming — "caress[ing] and address[ing] a noun" — represents a way to express love through language. Sharif's lexical bent manifests a somewhat similar sensibility, but she remains less sanguine, more suspicious, about naming due to its more insidious uses in unpoetic contexts. The italicized "exquisite" that a lover calls her matters, in part, because the apparent complement nonetheless renders Sharif, Iranian-American, exotic, overly precious.

Look's most prominent acts of naming occur with the numerous terms repurposed from the Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms and sprinkled throughout the poems, in small caps, like seasoning. Only, unlike actual seasoning, the terms are not there to help the main dish go down easier; rather, we are meant to choke on them. Set off in distinct typeface, dozens of technical military terms such as "CIVIL CENSORSHIP," "CLOSED AREA," and "STOP-LOSS" stud Sharif's poetic lines. Without this visual differentiation, many of the terms would be able to pass as ordinary civilian terms, ordinary poetry. With it, we can better see the often euphemistic and inuring specialized vocabulary we have developed to talk about war's atrocities.

The military definition for the book's title term, "LOOK," stands as the collection's aforementioned epigraph: "In mine warfare, a period during which a mine circuit is receptive of an influence." This curious military definition of the word, with its emphasis on receptivity, resonates with Sharif's mindset in undertaking the book: "Until now," she explains, "All my Muse's poetry has been harmless:/ American and diplomatic: a learned helplessness." The implication seems to be that, through her procedural use of a military dictionary, her poetry, at once personal and political, has unlearned these docile habits, become more dangerous, explosive. The naming — *re*-naming, really — that she performs throughout the collection is thus more biting than caressing in nature.

Conspicuous as the repurposed military terms may be, it's never made explicit what principle or procedure, if any, Sharif used to thread them throughout the poems. The book's end note describes the nature of the dictionary used, and also contains a brief list of military terms Sharif wishes she could have worked into the poems, but it doesn't reveal her actual compositional process. This omission isn't a shortcoming but it has the effect of making the collection's varied poetic forms — lists; erasure poems; historical overviews; personal letters — hint at an undisclosed method. In this respect, *Look* sides with those members of the French OuLiPo group, such as novelist Harry Mathews, who argue that an author shouldn't reveal the procedures used in composition, on the grounds that the finished work ought to stand on its own.

More than merely taking a side in a long-running coterie debate, *Look*'s selective disclosures of its method stand out because they represent a way of pointing to artistic process without fetishizing it. In proceduralist literary circles, the strong emphasis on process can sometimes eclipse considerations of the end product. The mantra of Conceptual Poetry's much-embattled figurehead, Kenneth Goldsmith, is representative in this regard: "You really don't need to read my books to get the idea of what they're like," he deadpans, "you just need to know the general concept." As a rule, the writers who develop public identities as some stripe of proceduralist do so in part because their artistic self-pronouncements foreground quirky method.

But countless poets (and non-poets) compose using methods found under the big tent of proceduralism without becoming primarily known as procedural writers. What's more — and here is where *Look*'s relationship to method is particularly instructive — these quiet proceduralists are often the writers whose work puts the lie to the stereotype that proceduralism must be cerebral and impersonal. In works such as CAConrad's (soma)tic poetry exercises, Bhanu Kapil's assemblage of performative notes *Ban en Banlieue*, Mark Nowak's documentary poem *Coal Mountain Elementary*, Jenny Boully's ghostly footnotes in *The Body*, and Cathy Park Hong's language games in *Engine Empire*, procedure is not an end in itself but a way to create an aesthetic space wherein head and heart, literary form and politics, might collide.

In *Look*, these personal and political concerns converge in a haunting longer poem called "PERSONAL EFFECTS." The poem elegizes Sharif's uncle Amoo, a soldier killed in the Iran-Iraq War, through a series of formally varied meditations on a photo album of him. "Each photo," she writes, "is an absence,/ a thing gone, namely/ a moment." This idea of the photograph as an absence, which adds yet another layer of meaning to the term "LOOK," is literalized in a passage that contains a photograph caption — "*A young soldier (pictured above)*" — in the middle of an otherwise blank page. The analytic philosopher Kendall Walton has argued that photographs provide a way to "see into the past," a way to access the kind of disappeared moments that the poem lingers on, but Sharif complicates any such photographic transparency by drawing attention to the medium's more ghostly elements and then imaginatively filling in the blanks with "guess[es]" as to her uncle's thoughts, feelings, tastes, and words.

This inclusion of a caption without a photograph also illustrates the way in which Sharif softens the severity of hard-edged formalist techniques. Rob Fitterman's 2013 *Holocaust Museum*, a book-length poetry collection that consists of photograph-less captions from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., stands as the obvious recent precedent for Sharif's use of the same technique. But Fitterman's catalogue of captions, while haunting in their own way, maintain an abstract, impersonal distance, an effect intensified by his inclusion of a cold and clinical index number at the end of each caption. Situated as part of a poem about her uncle, Sharif's caption, in contrast, emphasizes personal connectivity: "*A young soldier (pictured*

above) the son of an imam, brother to six, is among the latest casualties in the military campaign of Susangerd."

The point here is not that one or the other approach represents a superior brand of proceduralism. Each book's approach — one highly personal, the other highly depersonal — makes for compelling poetry in its own way. But whereas we intuitively grasp that, like a camera, procedure allows the artist to remain detached, at arm's length, we need reminders that, also like a camera, procedure can allow the artist to draw closer to difficult material through the security blanket of mechanical method. As the military-termed title of *Look*'s perhaps most raw poem suggests, proceduralism can constitute a kind of "VULNERABILITY STUDY"; it's just that we're habituated to thinking about procedural methods as ways of remaining distant and invulnerable.

One of the reasons Harry Mathews prefers not to reveal the procedures he uses in his novels is because he doesn't want to be pigeonholed as a procedural novelist. This concern makes sense coming from a member of the OuLiPo: because the group is renowned for, among other things, creating the kinds of writing exercises that would be right at home as warm-ups in an MFA workshop, Mathews doesn't want to be perceived as a mere parlor game scribbler. But in the case of many other writers, the distinctions in public identity between proceduralist and non-proceduralist camps can feel arbitrary, if not misleading. In conversations about this capacious literary mode, proceduralism that doesn't conform to expectations — proceduralism that cares about expressing personal identity; proceduralism that doesn't wave its own aesthetic flag — tends to get occluded or, if considered, distorted. Perhaps, like Mathews, many such writers prefer it that way; they don't want their work confined to an aesthetic ghetto. Still, *Look*'s tender proceduralism suggests we ought to look harder at how and why we name our aesthetic categories. It matters what you call a thing, and it matters what you don't call a thing, too.

Solmaz Sharif's **Look** *(2016) is published by Greywolf Press and is available from* ***Amazon*** *and other online booksellers.*
