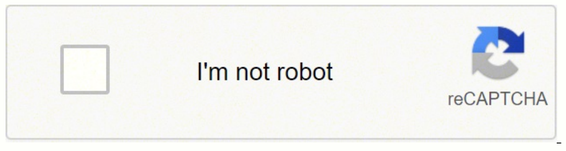
Renee gladman calamities pdf



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From Renee Gladman’s Prose Architectures After we acknowledge it is writing that cannot be read, how is it that we then go about reading it? I wrote this question down in my notebook after first seeing Renee Gladman’s volume of collected drawings, Prose Architectures, in a bookshop. I found myself wondering often over this second mode of working—drawing—that seemed to have emerged from Gladman’s long-established writing practice. The marked precision of thought that characterizes her prose, in both her series of speculative novels set in the fictional country Ravicka and in her most recent essays in Calamities, seems initially counter to the form of her drawings. Except for a few identifiable syllables and words, and occasionally the beginning of a sentence or phrase, the drawings take the form of stylized but illegible writing in lines that often cluster to suggest architectural silhouettes or urban skylines. What would cause a writer to turn to a mode of drawing that looks like writing? I intuited that this second practice made sense in ways I hadn’t worked out yet. The drawings share many of the same concerns and preoccupations found in her prose but are addressed through line, gesture, and space, rather than language. I’ve thought about Gladman’s turn to drawing over several months with an oscillating sense of urgency. This is what I wanted to know: What are we reading or seeing when moving through books of writing containing only gesture and abstraction? What does it mean to write free from language? * Consider the Argentinean artist Mirtha Dermisache’s Selected Writings. The book contains the expected front matter, and then a brief, single-page table of distinctly vague contents: “Textos,” “Libro No. 1,” “Sin titulo (Libro),” and so on. Moving through this book, I felt as if I were suddenly afflicted with a form of readerly aphasia. Here was writing, which I could immediately recognize as such in the form of reproduced handwriting, but it was indecipherable: absent punctuation or discrete words or even anything recognizable as letterforms. In my initial attempt to characterize Dermisache’s works, I noted that some more closely resemble waveforms, always advancing. They reminded me of the graphic representation of sound in audio editing software, and I imagined that her waveforms could be rendered as sound via a sort of nonlinguistic digital translation or as performed by a musician as a visual score. Others more closely resemble Gladman’s drawings in what I began to describe as a knotty mode of writing. In these works, the line progresses only by repeatedly doubling back on itself. I saw this as writing with a different timbre that conveys intensity by the density of these knots. I couldn’t track a single advancing line, rising and falling, curling back and then forward as it proceeds; I couldn’t untangle with my eye the continuous strokes of the forms as possible sonorous units or phonemes, even if they graphically resemble, in length and distribution, written words or sentences. I wondered if I was seeing in this mode of illegible writing a performance of doubt, an author’s hand hovering over and exploring the contours of an idea or feeling, unsure of how to proceed, and when continuing onward, doing so only haltingly. From Mirtha Dermisache’s Selected Writings Dermisache’s writings and Gladman’s drawings remind me of quipu, the Incan proto-writing system, dating from the fifteenth century and comprised of gatherings of various strands of sometimes colored knots. Quipu are generally thought to encode information or language (census data, inventories, and possibly fables, myths, and genealogies), but how they do this remains mostly a mystery, despite numerous code-breaking efforts. Quipu fascinate me as a mode of writing that is tactile, read as much by the hand as by the eye moving across the strands of knots—a more complex version perhaps of how a rosary encodes a cycle of prayers for a devout Catholic. Perhaps Gladman’s and Dermisache’s works can be read as visualizations of the process of writing, and if not constituting linguistic writing itself, then rendering graphically an aspect of writing that dwells somehow underneath the surface of written language: a mode of writing joining bodily expression with a particular technique for recording feeling or thought. It is a type of writing or drawing in which “the body says what words cannot,” as Martha Graham mused about dance. * In 2013, the scientific journal PLOS ONE published a neuroscience paper that defines asemic writing as “the static consequences of hand gestures devoid of any meaning.” The authors of the paper sought to test the “involvement of sensorimotor cortical circuits during the beholding of” gestures that are either writing or drawing or both. The odd phrasing of this definition distilled what I’ve been attempting to behold on and off for several months now. But I’m also interested in the study’s findings, which relate to the presence of mirror neurons in the brain. These mirror neurons activate both when a motor function is performed and when a motor function is observed. In other words, the same mirror neurons activate when you watch someone writing as when you yourself are writing. Mirror neurons are thought to play an important role in learning basic manual skills as well as more complex activities, such as experiencing empathy. In the case study, a selection of black and white Franz Kline abstractions—the ones that look like blown-up details of freeform Japanese kanji—were used as test images alongside a control group of digitally translated Kline “knock-offs” that removed traces of the artist’s dynamic gestures and replaced them with a similar but simplified graphic pattern. The results of the study suggest that when viewers were presented with both the gestural works and the digitally produced knock-offs, their brains attempted to reverse engineer the bodily acts and gestures (and even the thoughts or feelings) that could have created the marks—a process the neuroscientists call “embodied simulation.” By removing the detailed traces of the gestures (the drips and smudges of ink) in the knock-offs, viewers were less able to reverse engineer how the image was produced. And yet, as viewers look at the work, their brains attempt a sort of imagined reenactment. In this way, to read a work of asemic writing is to feel it, at least neurologically. To read it is to decode it with our eyes, our brain, and our body and maybe even to attempt, however imperfectly, to inhabit in an empathetic act the body of its creator in the unfolding moment of the work’s creation. * A virtuosic aspect of Gladman’s writing is her ability to use simple diction and syntax to represent complexity. In her introduction to Prose Architectures, Gladman describes an entanglement between drawing and writing. “I began to understand the lines I made as a means of pulling the act of writing away from the act of making sense,” she writes, “so that I could look almost mechanically at what writing was.” Gladman’s prose gives the effect of overlaying the expression of a thought to the thinking of it, as if to bring the writing as close as possible to the process of thought itself. In Calamities, she creates a series of first-person portraits of a writer thinking—balancing always the false starts, wanderings, doubts, and distillings-of-thought alongside the material reality of a body in a room. All of the essays in the collection start with the phrase “I began the day by…” but this constraint falls away when Gladman turns her final essay into a subseries of numbered essays (only the first in the series maintains this prior constraint at the start). As she moves through these numbered essays, her thoughts increasingly turn to the subject of drawing. This shift in attention is preceded by an increasingly troubled relationship to writing, which she addresses in the earlier essays in sentences such as “I was writing down the idea ‘I no longer wish to write’ by writing down that I was writing it down.” I read this as a sort of glitch in the text, a snag in her writing, as her thinking about writing becomes entangled in the process of her giving form to these thoughts in writing. By the end of Calamities, the essay form has broken down, as though a rift has opened up and she has fallen into drawing, no longer willing or able, at least for the moment, to represent the dailiness, the presentness of a writer writing: It seemed one needed to write in order to see; one had to move out across the page and then through—but maybe not through the page. It would be movement nonetheless and would require the body to transform the physical body becoming astral or like a line itself, moving further in. Something. But how did you get out of language from language? … There was an elsewhere bearing down on me, in the whiteness of this space. We were staring at its blankness, and this was when I lifted my arm and brought my hand close to the surface. I made a mark … The eruption into first-person plural here— “We were staring at its blankness”—is unsettling. Who is this “we”? The reader is implicated and brought somehow closer to the surface of her thought. With this “we” she breaks through the page in yet another way, acknowledging the union of writer and reader, and also acknowledging and troubling a border or limit (of language, of the essay), perhaps also suggesting a cleaving of the self. In Gladman’s work, especially in the Ravickian novels, when language fails to be comprehensible (the language spoken in Ravicka is an invented one), the movements of bodies become a means for maintaining communication or some approximation of understanding. In Event Factory, the first in the series, the narrator meets a mysterious salsa dancer near the start of the novel and later recalls the dancer’s enigmatic words, “You can’t do this without movement.” The narrator then wonders “if she was referring to life in this city.” In her drawings, Gladman has found a way to keep her body engaged and her pen moving even when, alone in a room, her relationship with language breaks down. This may explain the non-asemic elements of her work, such as the legible fragments that appear at the beginnings of some of her drawings. In one of these, she begins a drawing with the phrase, written in cursive, “I went away but something drew me back…” which soon tangles into abstracted (and illegible) gestures. We see this particular drawing—with its legible start—almost exactly in the middle of Prose Architectures, a rupture of readable language, with a play on the meaning of the verb form drew: drawn back into language only to recede back again into illegibility and drawing. * In the preface to Prose Architectures, Gladman writes of the author-narrator of her Ravickian novel Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge, “She thinks about architecture, about lines in her books and the lines on the street. She tries to switch one for the other. She turns to architecture to describe the configuration of her friends meeting over coffee, her friends writing and surviving a national crisis together. She writes things like …” And then Gladman includes a paragraph from the novel itself. What I find remarkable here is that Gladman cites these as Ana Patova’s words, not her own as the author of Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge. This made me wonder if she considers the drawings to be fiction or nonfiction. Are they composed in an invented language, as Ravickian is an invented language? The spaces we inhabit are largely human made, which is to say we exist mostly in a built environment rather than in nature: we dwell in architecture. Similarly, our thinking is shaped, housed, and limited by the bounds of our language(s), which we inhabit rather than invent. Or at least it seems exceedingly rare that someone would attempt to invent a language for her thoughts to more fittingly inhabit. When I first attempted to describe Gladman’s drawings, I thought of the paleographic terms for describing ancient and medieval writing: letterform, overline, cross-stroke, descender, curl, et cetera. I thought of the names of the Western letterforms no longer in use: ash, eth, thorn, yogh. But this seemed futilely retrospective. A dead end. I thought of a line from Event Factory: “There were no residents here. Old Ravicka, the ancient city, was a museum.” * From Renee Gladman’s Prose Architectures. In Gladman’s drawings, her lines gather into tangled structures that resemble cityscapes, individual buildings, skylines, structures covered in scaffolding; they are architectural plans composed of written lines. In the introduction to Prose Architectures she asks, “How could I inhabit thought as architecture, as a space that could be seen or experienced bodily?” These drawings create structures that are at once schematic, like maps and diagrams, and yet they are lived through, brought into being by tracing Gladman’s thoughts and feeling in real time, tracking the gestures of a body, her body, making marks across the blank expanse of the page. Both her writing and drawing practices share a concern with the limits of language, an emphasis on documenting presentness (in thought and the body), and a preoccupation with architecture. In Prose Architectures, Gladman creates more than just writing or drawings—she creates dwelling places. John Vincler is at work on a series of essays exploring the intersection of writing and drawing, as well as a book-length project on the poetics of cloth as subject and medium in art. He is the visual-culture editor at Music & Literature and worked for the last decade as a rare-book librarian.

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