

The Body is No Machine

Jennifer Perrine. New Issues: Kalamazoo, Michigan. 2007.

The poems in Jennifer Perrine's first book, *The Body is No Machine*, are muscular, hard working poems, and they require heavy lifting from the reader, as well. While some of the poems offer themselves up on the first read, many require intense and sustained engagement over several readings before they yield much more than the shimmering surface of Perrine's beautifully precise language. As in this musical description of DNA:

& its self-love letting loose in operatic
concerts of codons that call out: their song
a metronomic tick run rampant: the thinnest
gnomon under the sun&

Perrine's diction is elevated and dense, scientific, Latinate, archaic, lush and seductive by turns. The second time through, I read this collection with a dictionary in hand.

The poems are structurally formal, and the form provides an interesting contrast for the full range of Perrine's contemporary and often edgy subject matter: the exploration of gender, family, culture, genetics, and the razor edges of their intersections. The section that most overtly explores gender bending draws its title, "Time and Song Enough," from

Brood X, a meditation on the nature of change, "time and song enough/ to slough off the cells of who you once were," and continues with two spare poems for D., who is going through a sex change. In the first the speaker mourns the change in D's voice after testosterone treatments. In the second, the sonnet "Portrait of D., After the First Operation," the speaker observes D. after she has had her breasts removed. The poem comments on how the body is the vehicle through which we are touched by the world, on the ways in which we are vulnerable, both as women and as men.

you've brought your scars outside: you
wincing in the light, the air new, thick
as a hand under your unbuttoned shirt.

The organization of the collection is part of its power. The fourth time through I drew a map of the sections and made notes in the poems where the section titles appear, how they inform a reading of the sections and their weaving into each other. Although the individual poems are lyric, each of the six sections of the collection forms, through the accumulation of characters, events, and images, a coherent narrative of our fractured existence as beings in bodies that click and whir, and like the speaker in "In Response to Your Attempts at Seduction," I feel as though I have been "waking in the dark hall" of the poet's throat for days. It's a glorious place, even on the tenth read.

--Laura Newton

Dear Blackbird

Jane Springer. University of Utah Press: Salt Lake City, Utah. 2007.

Jane Springer's debut collection of poems *Dear Blackbird*, winner of the 2006 Agha Shahid Ali Prize, explores loss and recovery in a voice that is poignant and playful, filled with both urgency and nostalgia. At the heart of this collection is the thread of the title poem in three incarnations, three letters from Scarecrow to Blackbird sewn through the beginning, middle, and end of the book. The first of these opens with the lines, "Last night I drank to the measureless arc of you—your body's black / rivermark over the levy," and closes with a twice repeated "I do not say that I wished to go with you—," catapulting us into a rich imagery of longing through a voice that is at once breathless and controlled.

The poems that follow have the intimate quality of a notebook in which a wide range of loss—from beloved horses to a mother to parts of oneself and past loves—as well as joy of memory and motherhood—is artfully sketched and explored. The use of an ampersand in all the poems accentuates a sense of the speaker literally recording moments and emotions as they pass. Yet this immediacy is coupled with a precision that can only come in the wisdom of memory, and at the hand of such a skilled poet. In "An Aubade for Sebastian & Marnie," the speaker states, "This is how I / remember dawn: Two uncommon horses, locked / in silhouette—love—despite the daily barn coming on." In "Broodmare" we are privy to a delightful characterization through a "list of" a horse's "mind: bare back / good mud/pearl sky." In "Why Bother Resurrecting the Dead," this attention is turned toward the speaker's confrontation with death and the unknown:

I have to believe that what I love is not wrapped up in
the finite magic of a discourse,
already drawn.

& that the first place is moving on, so that the
first word is not, finally, spoken, but
stays on the palate—

The poem closes with the image of a sparrow "warbling in ways we/ have not known." A singular speaker's voice has become collective; such leaps occur gracefully and often here.

A recurrent use of the second person in several of these poems further includes the reader, often with playfulness, as in "Lamentations," in which the speaker begins "If you want to hear the stories about the sisters who thwarted chiggers..." and later states "I'll tell you the truth just once." In "For the Love of Turkey Vulture #2," we are told the speaker was in a forest, unnamed because "the name was so silly I can't even say / it, you would not take me seriously if I did."

Visually too these poems cover wide territory. We move from "Words," which shifts from the left margin to indented lines like a teardrop or a parenthesis filled with words falling down the page, to "If by Chance You Meet Three Small Town Southern Girls," whose three parts have forms as various as the three sisters they describe. Her varied and rich imagery ranges from such images as "ghosts grown fat / from the habit of absence," to pregnancy being described as "a coming on of love like daylight" and the soul as "Cloudshift, / rejoicing at/the center of / all absence."

With their innovative and beautiful language, Springer's poems are transformative. Even the scarecrow by the end of the book has changed: "I am a house now, delicate timber to see through." His absence is further noted in the lack of signature at the end of the letter. The blank space where a name should be on the last page of the collection is one final invitation to "Come, / join us—for the body repairs itself & there is much worship & choiring / left to do."

--Christine Poreba

Parasol: Poems 1977-2007

Hal Shows. Luniver Press: Beckington, England. 2007.

Poet and songwriter Hal Shows has an ear for word-music from near and far. In *Parasol: Poems 1977-2007* Shows' work captures images of his home, north Florida, but also locales across Europe, such as Germany, Greece, and Italy. Shows lived in Florence in the 70s, and the region grabbed his imagination as he soaked in the Italian atmosphere while working as a salesman, teacher of English, and translator.

The poem "Ode on a Train" gives the reader glimpses of an experience abroad traveling south of Rome by train. The first stanza shows a sleeping passenger surprising the narrator by draping her arm over his "until her rough palm / gripped my forearm tight." She awakes suddenly and quickly moves to the corridor to smoke. The narrator connects this small moment to the haunting memory of a friend. He asks, "What do you reach for in your dreams?" But then the memory lingers as it fades: "you shrink on the narrowing ribbon of track / until you are small enough to be everywhere at once, / until you become the air I breathe."

The majority of the poems in the collection are haunted by vivid images of the natural world. In "A Private Matter" a chance encounter between the narrator and a cottonmouth snake is powerfully described: "a big / cottonmouth rose from the thick, weathered roots / webbing the bank nearby, his head like a boot heel / his mouth the cold color of snow." In the piece "Camellias" the natural world again overwhelms: "the air was full of camellias, heavy, / blush-blue flowers hanging on stems close to your hair, and you / wanted to touch them."

Some of the collection's most striking imagery occurs in "Ode among Pines." The poem opens with "Over the green / winterless glint of pines / a mile-high hawk, / and at my feet / new snow melts in patches / among the trees." The trees become a gateway to the past as the narrator recalls how he "climbed to the highest fork in the tallest pine." The pine becomes a way to remember people--"a woman I know / who tell me she sees her death" and "my father's corpse . . . less of life than a stone in a road"--and to remember events: "One Florida fall / when the hurricane came." Shows adeptly describes the storm's devastation:

And every one of the oaks was down,
monstrously overturned,

showing thick, thigh-like roots head high to my father.
And all of the pines were stripped bare,
sleek as smokestacks, naked of branches
but standing still.

Here, as in many of the book's passages, the poem skillfully and precisely illustrates a striking landscape.

This poet's other sharp skills include versatility. Shows' collection flows with poems in both free verse and rhyming forms. The piece "Jacob's Ladder" sings with end rhymes: "And so in the end he came / home again to the halved house / alone, bearing only his name"; and the final passage in "Our Syracusan Adventure" dances through these lines: "who choked the streets to cheer such heroes home / to hovels, rattling sabers, raising glasses / and tossing bones: may they live long, and alone."

Whether formal verse or free verse, the poems in *Parasol* brim with word-music.

--Michael Trammell

The Dazzling Land

Brigitte Byrd. Black Zinnias Press: San Francisco. 2008.

With a combination of poems that borrow from the traditions of French automatic writing, postmodern experimentation, and language poetry, Brigitte Byrd in *The Dazzling Land* bravely offers the reader a range of work that crackles with unexpected turns and astounding wordplay. Her work is difficult, but if one is patient, the poems here will open up in an intensely intellectual and complexly emotional display.

The language of Sylvia Plath criss-crosses throughout the book. Not just in the raw nerves on paper quality of Plath's poetry, but also in borrowed lines. Byrd slips Plath's lines in slyly, and the fragmented quality of the poems allows for Plath's work to blend. In "3. (sometimes they let each other go)" the line from Plath's "The Colossus" (acknowledged in the book's Notes) "*the sun rises under the pillar of your tongue*" is neatly preceded by "You were prone to dreams, trapped in a voiceless throat." The surprising movement of images from line to line, sometimes connecting directly, sometimes connecting in a slant-wise fashion, is one of the collection's strengths.

Many of the works in *The Dazzling Land* take a prose poem shape, and this prose-centered format gives the lines an image-packed denseness, reminding the reader of the surreal pieces of Russell Edson, Karen Volkman, or Charles Simic. Some pieces feel like the language-centered word puzzles of Volkman, pushing well past the limits of narrative and signifier. For example, "(merely of the inquisitive)" begins with this assertion: "There is no margin to decomposition in any language." This line becomes the poem's "disorganizing" principle as the string of phrases breaks into jagged fragments: "A life on film. A puppet show. She did not get the full story. She was not and never would be. Alone like a sound traveling above clouds. Skyscrapers threw her off and she rested her cheek on paper." Byrd rattles the narrative, revealing pieces of it, but hinting how language can

sometimes not hold it together.

Other poems skate along a more linear narrative. In "(models of connections)" a scene is fleshed-out for the reader: a woman "on the same couch with the same cat against her hip." A powerful psychological crisis strikes the character, and much of her emotional angst is captured in the erratic movements of the cats: "Now the cats fled to another room . . . the cats jumped on the chest to drink from a crystal vase . . . the cats jumped down to walk over her legs like a red carpet." The images work well to center the poem's skeleton of anxiety.

Though some of these poems cohere via a shining skeleton of broken narratives and playful associations, the language and images in *The Dazzling Land* will challenge and entertain the imagination on reading after reading.

--Michael Trammell

Dixmont

Rick Campbell. Autumn House Press: Pittsburgh. 2008.

From his book, *The Traveler's Companion*, through *Dixmont*, his third full collection, Rick Campbell has sung the working man's song of steel town Pittsburgh and of growing up with baseball and family blues. In all Campbell's books his language, like that of Phillip Levine's, doesn't show off; the poetic narratives unfold evenly as they describe a blue collar landscape.

And yet, *Dixmont* turns to other facets of this working man's past—what he loves most. Family, poetry, this earth. Reading this collection by a first-rate poet whirls us along the way the mind travels. This ride takes you to unexpected places.

Take "Intro to Lit." It's about slovenly behavior, the blood and guts of Greek mythology and taking trips to Wal-Mart. It all connects.

Campbell's robust voice has opened over time. The poet plays mellow and metal in harmony. His voice echoes with vulnerability, asks crazy questions and answers with rock hard reality. And with love: "Wife and daughter gone a week / I revert to the nature of men. / Clothes litter the floor. / Dog hairs on the couch."

You can hear the musical drama in the long sentence followed by two short ones that begin the poem. Though the narrator sits in the dark, he can't keep from chuckling there. Later in the poem, we get plain confession without too much pain: "Testosterone tends toward // disorder and delay. Left alone / I have no morals to sustain. / Cleanliness, though still next to Godliness, / is far from me and I am far from God."

The internal rhyme always converts the words to song. The poem's narrator doesn't shy from admitting to that puritanical side of himself and his country, knowing that this has helped make the real mess. Still, the wry flavor, the parody keeps us rolling along: "One more day until they return. / It's only this which saves me-- / Duty. Obligation. Fear // O Chastisement. My God, / if I had one, would be Old Testament, / Puritan, a God whose Vengeance / and Fickleness are written larger / and more often than Mercy."

In the more somber poem, “The War, on Many Fronts,” I admire how the poet connects the personal with the political in subtle, anguished ways: “Why write a new poem for this war? / Throw good words after blood?” As we are made to think about the confusing war the U.S. currently supports, we are thrown by the crafty narrator to an unexpected other battle: “Halfway through radiation, my neck / Reddens, peels, dries to ash.” And in lines we might hope our grandchildren all must memorize, the poet continues: “My breath's scorched. Stomach's / queasy. I'm fighting // But with love.”

--Mary Jane Ryals

From May to December

Pat MacEnulty. Serpents Tail: London. 2007.

And how easy would it be to summarily peg a women's prison novel? In Florida? If you expect mangoes and chicks-with-knives in Pat MacEnulty's latest novel, you'll be devastated. Its writer cares too much to stereotype.

From May to December tours the lives of women who you come to know so well and like so much, you think of them as family, family you wish would do better. Two of the women are prisoners, and two work with the prisoners.

They all happen to meet in a prison writing workshop. All have big--very big--troubles.

First, you have two sisters who live outside the barbed wire fence but work inside it.

There's Lolly, eternal sweetheart and compassionate poet, who thinks the best of everyone and who gets a second wicked bout of cancer. When Lolly first finds a lump in her breast, she ruminates. “She wanted to marry and have children. She wanted to...work full-time developing arts programs for inmates, for at-risk juveniles, for anyone who needed a way to cry out.”

Then you have Jen, my favorite of the bunch for her acerbic wit. Jen is Lolly's “bad” sister. She drinks too much, and still resents the attention lavished on Lolly as a child due to the first round of cancer, which left Lolly with only one leg.

The two prisoners in the workshop are Nicole and Sonya.

Nicole has made the mistake of loving the wrong guy, and she is now on the wrong side of the prison bars. She keeps a journal, full of metaphor and song. In her journal she says, “...*I think about my man, Antwan. I know it is hard for him to be out there and not messing around with all those women who want him. He is like some kind of Black Cary Grant—women chase him down with a lasso.*”

Sonya, also a prisoner, has Polish ancestry and a family full of criminals, and fears she'll never see her young son again. Sonya's own mother, Dina, once advised Sonya, “Dress like a million buck, babe, and they will never suspect you of nothing.” Sonya has made the mistake of not only listening to her mom, but of robbing a retired sheriff with her husband, Duke. Sonya's son Tomas is being raised by street-struggling Dina and Duke.

MacEnulty has the gift of story—perfectly paced, concise, page-turning fiction.

Each woman has her own war to fight. Lolly must face her worst nightmare—cancer. Jen also has to reconcile herself to helping Lolly and to loving herself. Nicole wants release from prison and to figure out how to live on the outside. Sonya wants her son to have a better life than she had.

The plot centers on how Jen and Lolly have won a grant to put on a prison drama production. Both Nicole and Sonya become involved in the play. Despite how differently these women experience the world, they meet in the workshop class and on the stage, each beginning to confront her past, her problems, her future.

Perhaps one of these women will become your favorite character. But for me, the answer is *all of them!*

--Mary Jane Ryals