

is, freedom to shape her circumstances. The final lines allude poignantly to the symmetry of this predicament: “Let Daisy be in her little white dress on / a big blue lawn it doesn’t really / matter what she’s doing.”

Read exclusively through the lens of its literary allusions, then, “Daisy,” would appear to be a poem about the capacity for action—but whose? The poem isn’t spoken by one of our literary Daisies, or even someone else named Daisy (unless we imagine the speaker referring to herself in the third person at the conclusion). The “I” of the beginning speaks to the “us” of the middle about the way certain things happen (“all the chlorine would make my hair so / light”), about our fragile process of self-justification (People may think it’s / strange but...”), and about our attempts at convincing ourselves of our own reasonableness and normalcy (“Don’t / you think all of us keep tally / of something?”). “Daisy,” then, is not just about the capacity for action or the lack thereof. It is about fantasy, particularly the fantasy of a middle-class American girl to imagine that her own private experiences are what actually “matters”—“For years I’ve been / keeping a tally of my showers. Many showers / for many years”—and the capacity of a middle-class American poet to dramatize and thus ironize this claim. When the speaker of “Daisy” insists that that it doesn’t really matter what Daisy the character is doing on her big blue lawn, she both notes the character’s servitude and extols her freedom to keep tally of whatever she wants. It is an important and uncomfortable moment for a book whose roll call of names is something of a tally itself, and it comes very close to implying that there is little at stake in this attempt at poetic invention *besides* the ephemera of private pleasure. This is self-criticism at its most bracing.

V. Joshua Adams

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Dan Machlin, *Dear Body*. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2007. 104pp. \$15

Do you read first books differently than books by established poets? Hoping for something truly new, I nonetheless find myself settling for “promise” or “potential.” Such lowered expectations protect against the disappointment that comes from recognizing a first book as yet another example of a period style, at best a fresh minting of the common coin. But bracing for compromise has other effects as well: when a great first book actually arrives, it enralls.

The poems in the long first section of Dan Machlin’s debut collection *Dear Body* are a case in point. Even though the epistolary form is a popular poetic contrivance, and the mind/body problem is older than Descartes’ *Meditations*, Machlin wields both in ways so timeless *and* so intensely con-

temporary that the clock that checks “is it new?” simply breaks down.

By applying the epistolary form to query the body, Machlin brings a theatrical immediacy to this investigation of mind/body interdependence. Letters interrupt poems, prose blocks give way to lyric passages, punctuation varies. The poem constantly disrupts its own illusions. The reader finds her assumptions about familiar dualisms—mind/body, subject/object, reader/writer—continually challenged. Consider this passage from “Letter Read Walking Home”:

Suppose a text you wrote the very color of your skin became so laden
with the absolute it spun and wrapped you variably in its ethereal
nurturing

Dear Body:

At the end of a string, how eyes discern
but never blend, making of an instinct. Ice
spread over snow.

The supposed text might be the letter, or the poem that contains or relays letters, or the physical body, which is in fact written into meaning by the act of composition. Layerings and rapid shifts of sense are Machlin’s specialty: above, you’ll note that this “text,” with the intimacy of “the very color of your skin,” becomes so laden with the abstract gravitas of “the absolute” that you become wrapped, cocoon-like, in what has been “spun,” which is, paradoxically, both “ethereal” and “nurturing.” One might see this encasement “variably,” as a benumbed state, distanced from the real, or as a chrysalis that offers new life to some of the oldest and most vexing arguments about the materiality and referentiality of language.

Incongruous as some of Machlin’s depictions may seem, his lines exude a stirring candor that alternately holds a reader within a paradox and draws the reader aside to appreciate the paradox’s conceit. Note how the second stanza above offers a koan-like allegory of perception. The link between subject and object, or perceiver and perceived, is the precarious string that perception must follow. Instinct is all a perceiver has to trust. But “ice spread over snow” could be a metaphor for union or disunion, a metaphor for a perceiver in line with the object of her gaze or unreconcilably distinct from it.

Like many poets writing today, Machlin offers surprising combinations of language that illuminate our habits of perception and referential asides that remind us how distant reference remains from event. Here is the body’s heartbeat, in “Letter 2”:

How I felt the last dance
of a pulse—a cloud and—as cliché mid-sentence—proverbial stuttering.

Machlin emphasizes the difficulties and the pleasures of literalizing abstract positions. We can't help but laugh when the speaker, in all his tenacious striving, is thrown full force into the inevitable contradictions that his meditations manifest. Here, in a brazen analogy, he calls forth all the unrequited longing that mind feels for body:

Or you as your own forbidden lover who meets yourself
late at night in a forgotten deco motel.

A brief conversation about ephemera (each word drenched with sexual
potential).

(from "Letter to D.")

Humor as distancing device is only one of the complex variants of tone employed in this book. One might imagine a modern-day George Herbert in Machlin's lightning-turns between hopelessness and yearning as he addresses his ever-present, yet incomprehensible correspondent:

My body, my body, I do not seek to separate my head
from my heart, sweat from speech...
Who could shun thee, when you allow your hand to
write out these
arguments to justify the existence of even
flawed things entering into the universe?

Like Herbert, Machlin swerves from despondency to awe as he demands the knowledge or the faith to satisfy his exhortations.

In the first stanza of "Thursday Letter" Machlin further marks his resemblance to the metaphysical poets, reporting the expectations of the mind as it confronts the experiences of the body:

Cut off a finger to see if you would notice, but the blood said nothing and
I just stood there moments with an open mouth.

We are shocked by the "Cut," and again by the thwarted expectation of response suggested by "blood said nothing." Machlin presents the speaker as expecting to hear something "said." The reader understands that the body is offering a more immediate response—blood. The speaker, however, does not register this bleeding as a response—even as the poem presents it as speech.

Often, lines from the first section of *Dear Body* (which shares its title with the book) disrupt, even as they develop, propositions that were presented by earlier lines. The body of text—like the physical body and the physical environment in which our bodies function—communicates to us in ways that

our initial frames of understanding are unable to accommodate. In offering a paradoxical, even Sisyphean quest to understand body on mind's terms, Machlin seems to suggest that the true nature of body, however plainly and physically present, is always concealed in the preconceptions and prejudices that we use to determine its presence.

The two later sections of *Dear Body* evince what I will risk calling both “great promise” and “exciting potential”: neither compares with the first section of the book, which shocked me out of my typical mechanisms for reading—and maybe even for living. Machlin's is not light-hearted humor: it's the uneasy upwelling of a laughter that comes from recognizing what it feels like to be caught in the tangled pull-wires of desire, habit, belief—a trap inevitably of one's own making.

Rusty Morrison

§

Eileen Myles, *Sorry, Tree*. Seattle: Wave Books, 2007. 83pp. \$14

For many people, Eileen Myles's biography precedes her poetry: St. Mark's Poetry Project director; descendant of the New York School and assistant to James Schuyler; “openly female” write-in candidate for the 1992 us presidential election (with dog-clad campaign buttons); art critic for *Village Voice* and *Art in America*; performer with Sister Spit; and most recently, professor at the University of California, San Diego. Myles's persona spins grandly at the center of her work. The promotional leaflet tucked into the review copy of *Sorry, Tree* celebrates Myles's “trademark punk-lesbian sensibility and intimate knowledge of poetic tradition,” and the adjacent blurbs dub her a “cult figure to a generation of young, post-punk female-writer-performers.” She is the “rock star of modern poetry.” These frames, however, do not capture what is most vital in Myles's poetry. Her politics are overt, her physicality raw, yet it is the subtle, gentle *noticing* in her poems that overwhelms.

Sorry, Tree comprises three long narrative poems, a sestina, and twenty-six lyrics that embrace the ordinary. The poems rise up out of conversation and happenstance, as in the opening of “Cigarette Girl”:

a long rain
drop more
of a tear
fell from
an awning or a nail
shit the top
of a roof
and hit my neck