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Review of *Red under the Skin* by Natasha Saje

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Natasha Sajé’s first collection, *Red Under the Skin,* appears in the 1994 Pitt Poetry Series as the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize volume. The book’s cover, taken from a still life by Stone Roberts, is crowded with pears: golden-green, blemished, and erotic. And between the covers, Sajé’s poems do not disappoint: this is a substantial collection, written in a voice that is consistent without being predictable.

Sajé owes literary debts to Sexton and intellectual debts to 1970s-style feminism, but her dense, hard-working images make this approach both new and newly complicated. In the opening poem, for instance, Gilbert and Gubar’s famous question—is the pen a phallus?—gets pushed (so to speak) to the limit. Reading the late Henry James, Sajé writes,

is like having sex, tied to the bed.
Spread-eagled, you take whatever comes,
trusting him enough to expect
he’ll be generous, take his time. Still
it’s not exactly entertainment…

("Reading the Late Henry James")

This incorporative maneuver serves as an illustration of Sajé’s approach: she engages the intellect, but her voice is always located in her body, and calibrated to the needs of the body.

Words are made flesh in these poems, which often focus on appetites: for roasted quail with rosemary; for a gray-haired electrician; for both vanilla and the etymology of vanilla. “Consommé,” for example, unfolds as a recipe for broth, concluding:

For consommé, it must be chilled,
boiled again with fresh meat, and sieved.
Then it’s flesh made liquid,
sparkling clear like a mountain lake
you can see a body through.

Sajé’s metaphors are seldom gratuitous: an animal’s body has been boiled away by the end of the poem, and yet it returns to haunt the final trope. Section II of the book, called “Summer,” reads like an extravagant menu: “Spring Rolls,” “Chocolates,” “Mussels.” These are poems written by a child of refugees who understands that chocolate can be priceless:
I've heard stories about hunger:
my mother begging for turnips for two years,
my father roasting the tongues
of his boots when the war ended...

("Leningrad")

The long title poem, “Red Under the Skin,” excavates Saje’s Slovenian-Silesian heritage. Despite its corpuscular title, this is the least vital section of the book. The Balkan war provides a backdrop as the poem begins:

The hatred goes back for centuries, everyone says,
a tradition as old
as making wine, weaving rugs, playing flutes.

Already, we feel that we are in a country that Saje does not know well, and while “Red Under the Skin” avoids the distasteful self-dramatizing that can characterize “identity” poems (and politics), it never really finds its metaphorical muscle.

As a collection, however, Red Under the Skin is mostly muscle. Even in her moments of weakness, this poet commands respect, because she never strains for false epiphanies or connections. Saje’s prize-winning volume is smart but not pedantic, sexy but not simpering—like the swimmer in her poem, “Appetites,” whose “thighs / have the heft of a good dictionary.”

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Only a perpetually evangelical and evangelizing nation of would-be self-fashioners could produce such a book as John Lee’s Writing from the Body. Lee’s repeated invocations to such New Age luminaries as Robert Bly, Clarissa Pinkola Estes (author of Women Who Run with the Wolves), and Jungian Robert Johnson should alert us to the territory: self-expression meets self-help at yet another crossroads in the land of recovery. A glance at the