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## Review of *The Reef* by Elizabeth Arnold

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**Elizabeth Arnold. *The Reef*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.**

Elizabeth Arnold's *The Reef* opens with quotes from Heraclitus and Emily Dickinson: two pagans whose gods were capricious, violent and barely real. This debut poetry collection charts the author's struggle with cancer, and it proceeds from the premise that everything worth grasping—in language and in life—is too fluid to hold for long. Arnold's illness does not emerge as anything so solid as a metaphor; rather, it generates questions that are not quite answerable—or, as she puts it, “not quite ice yet.”

*The Reef* is miles away from Jane Kenyon, whose late poems (“Let Evening Come”) express the Zen of resignation. Instead, like Dickinson, Arnold maintains an off-kilter quizzical stance, detaching herself from “the body” even as its needs consume her. The language of these poems often recapitulates the mind/body problem as it moves, sometimes jarringly, from the metaphysical (“it's never what / we think ourselves with thinking into”) to the just-plain-physical (“Five year post-chemo, a knife stabbed through / my thigh. I fell in the street.”)

Arnold eludes the lure of confessionalism—a tough task when one is depicting not just cancer but also a paralyzing depression—and she does so by backing very gingerly into her subject. The first poem, “Introit” (only the first and last poems in the collection have titles) focuses not so much on the self as on consciousness itself:

Tremendous blocks of ice—  
smooth turquoise-tinted slabs  
—not quite ice yet, not even  
slabs but only seeming  
to be, through the slightly  
convex surface of the rushing  
(but not breaking) roiling  
water of the stream—go past  
as blurred or sharp, depending  
on how fast whatever duties  
the eye can follow...

(1)

This first poem is a bit too abstract for my taste but it is a very effective way to begin, creating a “reef” of uncertainty and change that acts as a spine for the rest of the book. How can a reef be a spine? My metaphor is deliberately mixed, because Arnold's book is about the protean human body which both internalizes and resists the “outside” world.

Arnold's poetry is not romantic; her interest in nature *per se* is minimal, and I find it refreshing that she does not offer up oceans or reefs as

cure-alls for the human condition. It is fitting to find a poem here about Francis Bacon, whose portraits evoke x-rays and butcher shops while they linger passionately over the human form:

the 1973 self-portrait, as if the man  
were all one piece, holds still,  
a yellow plastic watch around the wrist, the face  
like it's been smashed but nothing's broken,  
its flesh pulled like some putty, up,  
and dented. But then the hands,  
trying to hug the knees, are blurred and even disappear in places... (13)

Like Bacon, Arnold sees nature as a force that both constitutes and smashes the body. Early in the book, she recounts a story told by a friend:

Her stallion, black-bay, beautiful, had disappeared.  
Keman and Bo and Nancy backed the jeeps out,  
tore down the sand road, found him dead in the middle of a swamp.  
They had to use a crane to haul him out;  
one of his legs broke off. (5)

This is sensational stuff, but before we readers can be mesmerized by gore, Arnold changes registers, asking in her next poem:

What window opens from what's seen? What door  
cracks onto what? Door, window, song—  
what physical vibration for the eye or ear  
could hack a way through fact? (6)

“Hacking a way through fact” might serve as a description both for Bacon’s paintings and for the poems in *The Reef*. When facts (“one of his legs broke off”) are offered, they are never offered as easy sensations, but as the beginnings of difficult questions: “What door / cracks onto what?”

Another poem, about “the joy of accidents,” describes the cancer’s melodramatic allure:

As when my best friend heard, and suddenly  
her pointless teenage life took off.

For me there were practical concerns:  
thirst, for example—where’s the goddammed nurse?  
Insomnia. So every day this week,  
and the next, and the next, I go to that department

for radiation, down this hall, not that one.

While beyond my hearing, friends were thrilling to  
“six months to live”—only a couple of houses down,  
that happening, that. The whispering, wondering,  
camouflaged by care: what everybody wants  
they “can’t believe” or find “amazing”—intimacy  
with death, with that which awes, appalls (21)

Gravely ill people are sometimes accorded undue authority because of what they can do for us: they can make us feel superior, titillated, and safe. Elizabeth Arnold does none of these things in *The Reef*. It is an unsettling and original book.

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