

MEAD An Epithalamion

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Julie Carr

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The leg, a segment only, spins like a moral or a flame. Julie Carr conducts poetic form as if it were choreography in her “verse novel” *MEAD An Epithalamion*, winner of the University of Georgia Press’s Contemporary Poetry Series. Selected by Cole Swensen, who might be described as a sculptor with language, Carr’s book has the texture of clay, as bodies of words reappear in different shapes. At the same time, it radiates with a clean beauty in the way that words group and regroup, creating alterations in syntax, as members of a dance troupe use their bodies to gesture. These words-as-dancers pair off in different combinations to explore the edges of things, formally and thematically. Gesture is a major, if not the key, impulse behind this poetic sensibility.

One gleans from the title that *MEAD* is about a marriage. As opposed to the traditional epithalamion, meant to accompany and celebrate a wedding from start to finish, this modern day epithalamion tracks a marriage in crisis from sun up to sun down, figuratively speaking. Its opening line: *My first thought was “Good God, it’s over!* The reader—and the narrator—begin in a landscape in which the sun is *overabundant*—there’s “too much” light and warmth here. Furthermore, the reader knows right away there is a child too; so, a family. The crisis morphs impressionistically, an approach akin to Spencer’s 365-lined “Epithalamion,” which appears to have been the poetic bud behind Carr’s book-length poem. (Hopkin’s “Epithalamion” and Arnold’s “Dover Beach” also contributed.)

However, “An Epithalamion” is the book’s subtitle (there are sections in smaller type throughout the book named *subplots*). “Mead” is both a sweet drink and a field.

Marriage—a particular marriage, or its nature in general—is looked at within the wider context of a “field.” Carr writes, *Time-wrapped my rest is a field now advancing, now remembered. Nowhere appearing to rise up and meet, dissolves again. The rest is here.*

“Rest,” in this book refers to a pause in music, sleep, and the “rest” of the story. In fact, the border between things: sleep (or dream, characterized by *the bather*), action (characterized by *the teller*), and time (past, present, future/beginning, middle, end) are central preoccupations of *MEAD*:

How far does my life reach,
and where does the night begin?
The leaf is a border. The color green, a wall.
When the walls become vials,
drink.

It is this kind of paradoxical permeability that seems to be at the heart of the aspiration of this book. When green (field) fuses with borders (walls), borders can become vessels for drink, succor (mead).

Structurally, the choreography of the book shifts onto several stage sets that recycle throughout. Early on, Carr writes:

What can be added here to suggest development?
as story makes way for theme, theme for method.

“Problem: what to do with the body,”
once fed, clothed, put to bed...

Like the pages and pages, thousands upon thousands
the philosopher filled in the effort to prove something
could be known because it was invented by the knower.

Later, she writes:

Is it because the self, unable to fully see itself, is unable
to represent itself?

The book is an inquiry into definitions, an epistemological quest. There are five major sets, and it is through the poem titles that their recurrences are signified. One such set is an *inside* and *outside* self in some stance related to one another. This duality of self has, of course, its parallel in the marriage between husband and wife. Another set is the sentence as a container for a particular part of speech. At the same time as these poems demonstrate Carr's jeweler's-like eye as she directs energy, like light, through language, they have another function:

each sentence, each word,
hides its own finitude—

And, to the husband/lover: *I am a sentence and you a note held. Pocketed and so stuck in the wandering.* There is also a set devoted to the four elements, which give an archetypal feel to the passages along this unrest. No less significant is the set which begins with *What is ____*. Here terms resurface to be excavated in a poetical dictionary, accreting understanding for the reader, as well, as the tale proceeds. Last, but not least, is the *subplot*. These feel a little sneaky, as they arrive in much smaller type, and all except the final one (which is the last poem of the book) are numbered separately and reside on the bottom of pages. The patterning of the different sets and how they intersect combine as a virtuoso geometric dance. *Leaves turn and children turn out, as do the dancer's feet.*

There are poems outside the above structure, although a regenerative principle applies throughout. Braided in are poems that riff on Spencer, Hopkins, and Arnold. A poem called simply, "Definite/Indefinite," locates the conflict everpresent in this book. Others, like "Arrow," and "Doing" makes one think of an abacus, as the words, like beads, slide forward and back. Carr also writes hyperdirectly using concrete images in contrast with her disjunctive realm, that jut out with a painterly and visceral sensuality:

He zips up his leather tight as an orange peel.
I put my tongue to the button.

or:

On the table bathed in tomato and onion is the fish
he cleaned the night before by dripping its blood
into the sink.

The individual poems do serve as chapters, developing the “plot-line” further; as much fracturing as there is in the syntax of this book, there is a seamless continuity, an organicity that is almost animal-like in its ability to mutate and stay as one.

Section 13 is an example of Julie Carr at her most symmetrical—*haved, halved*—and a poem about the bather and shaped in a circle, “Water” (*water doesn’t break, says the son*) is utterly stunning in its climactic mix of surreal imagery and sound.

Musically, the book enacts the refrain *and my echo ring*, in Spencer’s “Epithalamion”: rhythm, alliteration, symmetry, and circling abound. Carr’s ear has the deftness, agility, and supreme seductiveness of a dancer. Even fracture belies completeness because of it. As she says: *Measure becomes direction. And: Rhythm is a powerful component of a tale. Finally: Over and over, a kind of rhythmic stubbornness, that, rocking us, like an echo does, let us sleep again, surrounded by cushions of intermittent fulfillment.*

What is “time” Transition is a door in the movement of time we call beat or pulse, we call meter.

There is a breakage in this marriage, though, and stammer and empty space are part of the lyric:

What is “ring” With a crack down the middle the bell could not again.
Held by its holding it solders as a circle.

The book begins on a “my” and concludes on a “we.” The tensions between eros, maternal, self, and familial love are evoked emotionally:

One kind of want is the kind that breaks worlds apart.
Another kind rests its hands on its knees.

The reflections about the place of borders in union and identity remain starkly lit and suspended:

the empty glass reflecting waves of light:
a shore where one can rest, one can rest endlessly in a glut of belonging.
Everywhere, one face.
You, rolling sand into wheels.
Sex, an impossibility the universe grew out of.

Carr posits three readers: one favors the end, reads for the solution; one rereads the beginning, never to arrive; and one is entranced with the middle, bathes in water unbound, unbroken. I posit the existence of all three simultaneously in the reader of *MEAD*.

Poems by **Shira Dentz** have appeared and/or are forthcoming in *Colorado Review*, *FIELD*, *Seneca Review*, *Chelsea*, *American Letters & Commentary*, *Salt Hill Journal*, *The Journal*, *HOW2*, *Barrow Street*, *Luna*^o and *Phoebe*. In 2002 she received the Poetry Society of America's Lyric Poem Award. Her poetry has aired on National Public Radio and has been featured on Poetry Daily, and her manuscript has been a semifinalist for the Walt Whitman Award and a finalist at Alice James Books. She has worked as a graphic artist, editor and NYC public high school teacher, and is currently in the Iowa Writers' Workshop.