

BOOK REVIEWS

LINGUISTICALLY TRANSFORMATIVE PAIN

Gary Hawkins

THE INCÓGNITO BODY

Cynthia Hogue

Red Hen Press

http://www.redhen.org
96 pages; paper, \$15.95

American poets have long heard Emily Dickinson as their muse. Taught to us in the common meter of a hymn, her measured cadence metronomes our iambs—or becomes what Annie Finch calls “the ghost of meter” undertoning our free verse. And although the mythic Dickinson of high-collared prudery has no doubt inspired a good deal of doggerel, too, the radical, current Dickinson of multiple variant lyrics and of abject and unfashionable epistles has loosened and enlivened contemporary poetic form. Susan Howe’s landmark hybrid *My Emily Dickinson* (1985) re-claimed the place of Dickinson as inventor of “quite another grammar” while extending her innovation in a book of remarkable critical autobiography; and Lucie Brock-Broido’s *The Master Letters* (1995) re-casts Dickinson’s haunting epistles to include some “American & cracked” subjectless addresses to an auditor unknown. Now, *The Incognito Body* reveals Cynthia Hogue’s direct lineage to Dickinson. Here, “another realm” of language emerges into the book via Dickinson, and we witness the emergence in much the same way that Hogue describes an arrival of memory, a process in which “[i]mages surface like artifacts in a midden.” Hogue’s shifting quest for “what is” follows Dickinson’s insistent telling of “slant” truths. And when we recognize Hogue’s prominent place among the contributors to the current “Poets on Emily Dickinson” special issue of *The Emily Dickinson Journal* (15.2) (joining an impressive cast from Susan Howe to Linda Pastan, Marilyn Hacker to Bob Perelman), we know this is no mere coincidence. In the crisis of Cynthia Hogue’s *The Incognito Body*, the pain suffered by the body inscribes a new prosody. Just as Dickinson outlives her crisis of confinement, Hogue survives by “letting go” into a remarkable form.

But the transforming, central pain of *The Incognito Body* remains unknown as the collection begins with its confidence in the “future perfect” of “modern life” pitched in fit, certain, stanzaed poems. This assurance aligns the poet with the trajectory of the book: from the surface where she initially finds herself, she seeks the depth of the “heart” where by journey’s end she will have found the “truth” she seeks. But if Dickinson on her journey from “what We see” toward “that We do not” is buttressed by her “Pierless Bridge” of “Faith,” Hogue on her quest to the heart of “The Book of What Is” proceeds on more shaky scaffolding. Hogue’s mode is more mystical but no less a grammatical challenge. To achieve that perfect future, she’ll “fluctuate verbs

to soothsay” a “dynamic” life which is ever-changing, uncertain (“very sofid or shifting?” she asks); her world is an “azure plain, / a blue that shimmers, that shifts,” a landscape she confesses to be made of “runes I cannot read.” Still, initially her divination matches a contemporary indeterminacy—where “truth” equivocates with “wave- / marbled water” and “man walking down path”—with the certainty of a Romantic excavation. As she melts her way through the layers of a figure, the “old flame” of truth rises as a river opening under the strata of winter, a line-by-line revelation of a series of still-green memories.

*We are “in another country,”
whose boundary is the body
and whose passport is its pain.*

But such revelations are soon luxuries. To enter into “The Incognito Body” (the long, sectioned title poem and heart of the book) is to “[w]ake to breeze and satin- / sheen of blue past.” We are “in another country,” whose boundary is the body and whose passport is its pain. A chilling epigraph from Elaine Scarry sets the stakes of the poem as they will reverberate across the entire collection, including its measured beginning: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it....” And these stakes of pain also inaugurate Hogue’s challenge to herself and to all of us, in all our pains. “[W]e must teach ourselves / a new language, simple / words with which to start—,” she writes prophetically in another poem that appears to predate most of the composition of the book (“The Sibyl’s Spring 1999”). In learning this new language, Hogue’s close ally remains Dickinson. Indeed, “The Incognito Body” is suffused with and structured by the abject witness of “After great pain, a formal feeling comes.” Titriling sections “The Hour of Lead” and “The Nerves Like Tombs,” Hogue embodies Dickinson’s “Wooden way” to create the early stages of pain in a limping prosody of “slow, slug- / moves,” short lines, fragments, and “[s]entences, raked / into small shames / like so many piles of leaves.” Yet very soon the “no-more being” of the body in pain leads her deeper into Dickinson, and Hogue recites her muse’s final line in order to transform: “First chill, / then stupor. Then the letting go.” What follows is unexpected but anticipated; the carefully unfolding lyric line cannot go on. Let go, the poems shatter. And while we could discuss this as a semiotic shift, what sets Cynthia Hogue’s poems apart from the crowd of overly intellectualized semiotics that masquerade today as poems is the presence of a human body for whom this is not an exercise. The body-poet facing a “decreasing capacity / to find words” writes new through the “O’s” of her mOans:

You were going to say
Could think of nothing to say
Had something to say
and suddenly after a sentence

lose language.

Reading Dickinson, we are nurtured into a veracity born of the domestic truthfulness of the poems. Her words seem to come out of deep, lived experience. Yet their confident profundities read like prophecy. Likewise, in reading Cynthia Hogue’s *The Incognito Body*, I find that these poems radiate with profound insight. Yet sometimes it seems as if Hogue would rather stop writing and step into the more radical immediacy of her life. And while the lure toward Hogue’s veracity could take me into her biography, eager to learn just what her “great pain” has been, I will not. Better to remain with the poems in their prophetic power, where body binds to prosody and both arc the vector to slant truth.

Gary Hawkins is a poet, essayist, and scholar who teaches at the University of Oklahoma. His poems, essays, and reviews follow his interests in subjectivity in modern American poetry from Dickinson to Creeley and in mid-century American art.

New Poetry / New Issues



*The World Cut Out with
Crooked Scissors: Selected
Prose Poems*
by Carsten René Nielsen
ISBN: 978-1-930974-70-8, \$14.00

Translated by David Keplinger, “Nielsen has reinvented the prose poem as a revelation in a paragraph.... Nielsen is a master who deserves to be better known outside his native Denmark.”

—Zack Rogow, Editor of
Two Lines: World Writing in Translation



The Boys I Borrow
by Heather Sellers
ISBN: 978-1-930974-71-5, \$14.00

“When you open *The Boys I Borrow*, you won’t find poems about angels or mythological heroines—what you’ll find is life the way we live it, but more clearly seen and deeply understood than the average human can easily bear.”

—Beth Arin Fennelly



Undid in the Land of Undone
by Lee Upton
ISBN: 978-1-930974-72-2, \$14.00

“Upton’s voice is like no one else’s, sad and funny and eccentric all at once, not surreal, but poised on the slithering brink of a logic so unexpected, spare and original that the reader is constantly aware of the exotic ‘perhaps’ lurking in familiar domestic scenes.”

—Dorothy Barresi

New Issues Poetry & Prose / Western Michigan University
www.wmich.edu/newissues
Books available from Small Press Distribution / www.spsbooks.org