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The Way I Am Modifying: On Michelle Robinson's *The Life of a Hunter*

The Life of a Hunter by Michelle Robinson. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2005.

Michelle Robinson's first collection of poems, *The Life of a Hunter*, is a book peopled by hunters, personae in various states of digging for something. These poems move between lineation and prose, lyric mediation and colloquial speech, often in quotation, which gives the book an urgent and frenetic energy, as the reader encounters the world of these poems with the same baffled wonder as the characters. What these characters find, in their search, is mostly other characters, and/or different manifestations of themselves, as Robinson observes that we seek ourselves in others, in our lives' events (and our responses to them), and in the strange materials (our "identity papers," for example) that act as proof of our existence.

These poems invoke the language of gangster movies ("sleep with the fishes," "pumped my chest full of lead"), Shakespeare ("who will make me laugh anon!"), Orpheus, Agatha Christie, and the person next to you in line at the corner market buying a pack of cigarettes. When these voices collide, something truly exceptional happens. The reader finds him- or herself encountering a poetry that is unpredictable, campy, desolate, vivacious, and reflective. Tonally, these poems move between the austere and the colloquial in gestures reminiscent of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but with an updated language of violence and verve. We can see this in the second poem of the collection, "From this miserable mutineer a stutter, for when we are reading Dostoevsky in caves," as the speaker interrupts his account of beating someone bloody behind a Mexican grocery store to exclaim:

Ah fuck it all sometimes!
I thought truth would speak from the thing that is
Physical. I am wrong.
I want it on my grave:
I am wrong.

We can see the speaker exchanging the physical for the verbal, suggesting an analogy between the body and the word as material manifestations of something more profound ("not the thing itself but the possibility of the thing"), and yet the poem ends with a failure of this exchange:

How can I persuade you of the imprecision of my sadness?
I have forgotten to take this body off

Whose letter ends, "I don't know what to write.
I don't know what you want to read. Not this."

This need to communicate is indicative of a broader need the people of these poems have to connect with others in their world, through speech or through physical contact (violent or sexual or otherwise banal). It is typical of the personae in these poems to be clumsily fumbling through romance, in an attempt, it seems, to connect to another, to be intimate, as if intimacy were another way of saying what is true.

Last night I slept with a belt around my neck.

I say to Keith, "Nick, you must have spilled
Something on your shirt." Keith says, "This is not beer.
I just don't bathe." Keith smells like beer.
Keith talks like something beautiful.

("Keith")

The inhabitants of these poems bear with them a sense of trying to hold on to something already lost, of seeking something that doesn't want to be found in the first place. But our seeking is, in a sense, our only chance at redemption. In "On the construction of a social reality," Robinson speaks beautifully to this idea of redemption through seeking:

So we are struggling into ourselves,
and it is even more insignificant than the way we feel about it.

And I will begin again. I am looking at you,
Our hands folding and your superb teeth—
What untranslatable witnesses! What if we could carry each
other?

In a book that often presents itself in hard-boiled detective novel language, there is an unmistakable tenderness that Robinson locates in these characters, who seem to somehow empathize with others who are also looking for something substantially immaterial beneath the surface. The reader might feel as though, by reading these poems, this thing might reveal itself. But the pleasure of these poems, as the poems themselves suggest about our world's unknowns, is in the mystery.