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All Eyes Begin in the Night: Review of *Shot* by Christine Hume

Shot, by Christine Hume. Denver, Colorado: Counterpath Press, 2010.

Over the last decade, Christine Hume has shown herself to be a poet of ever richer complexity. She has become a model for how a poet who cares deeply about direct emotional experiences integrates with avant garde textual experimentation. Her second book, *Alaskaphrenia*, used a wild and dense set of images and linguistic complexities to depict a psychologically resonant landscape that was absurd, lonely, and occasionally hilarious. At the same time it demonstrated Hume's use of the poem as a space of internalized meaning creation. Much of the book parsed as responses to individual occasions or ideas, but at the same time each poem reached beyond its own static interpretation. Her most recent chapbook, *Lullaby: Speculations on the First Active Sense*, consisted of a more dislocated dark surrealism of raw images. Its accompanying CD set the poems into musical compositions; additionally with Poetry Radio, her radio show and podcast, Hume has brought attention to experimental sound poetry. All the while, Hume never loses the visceral presentation of emotional events, what might have been referred to as confessional writing decades ago. She is one of the few poets working right now who balances the intensely personal with a genuinely progressive formal parataxis.

Hume's third book, *Shot*, is a book-length mediation on night, sleep, motherhood, and the need to escape individual experience. It explores the metaphorical relationships between insomnia, darkness, and the physical and psychological transformation of the mother. For a book that focuses on motherhood, it eschews any possible cliché of tenderness or traditional matronly tropes. More than that, *Shot* wrenches all its speaker's experiences out of the easily categorizable. The writing focuses on the disorienting space between experience and its intellectualization, rarely constructing a scene but instead aiming toward a linguistic reflection of a physical or emotional experience. It has a consistently dark surrealism, often dipping into the grotesque-

ness of the body, while other times speaking from a vatic distance. Near the end of the book, she writes

Once I couldn't get out of my own clutch
And the dark reshaped my eyes
All eyes begin in the night and are full of it

This moment encapsulates much of the work of the book. It is a book of transformation, a book of engaging physically with the murky reel of night and insomnia and with the equally reeling transformation of becoming a new mother, one both individual and one always in-relation. The speaker of this book is trapped within her body's functions; the inability to sleep and the mysterious dangers of darkness create an experience both surreal and self-flagellating. This is both the darkness of sleepless nights and the darkness of the body's interiority. The speaker progresses from pregnancy to motherhood, attempting to connect to the enshrouded body of the fetus and then the darkness of relation to a suddenly separate entity. It is this emotional development that is most impressive in this collection. Hume works through these Romantic elements of transformation without relying on the cliché structural elements of reflection and epiphany. The book moves from anxiety and terror into a difficult understanding that does not attempt to dispel those emotions, but brings them into relation with one another.

The book begins with the speaker pregnant. The opening poem, "Incubatory," records a series of questions and responses between a mother and an unborn child:

Are you comfortable?

I move inside night but am not its insides.

I jerk and excise, I do not express. Outside is not made of the same dark as inside.

In this call and response we see the mother-to-be attempting to relate to the child through an impossible language. The child speaks in its kicks and turns but the mother wants conversation and connection with assurance. The child's language soon becomes disrupted, revealing a nebulous dread:

Can you bear the sound of my voice?

*I place ears like traps on the
amniotic shores. Past the hammer, past the bridge, past bellowing
mares, past this cesspool, I go inward to check my traps.*

This opening poem sets the epistemological standard of the book, which is spacious connection rather than focused attention on correlative images or direct mediation and conclusion. Additionally, this call and response between mother and unborn daughter explores the self as the mother speaks for the child. The mother wants language to identify the child's condition, but only has access to her own ideas. The ontology of this polyphonic text is the self pleading with the self, attempting to escape its own clutch. Through this textualizing, the speaker wants language to contain the uncontainable lived experience.

The dread of the night and darkness is the defining feature of the first half of the book. It explores the physicality of being inside night, instilling anxiety and dread: "I turned away from the dark, but it felt hot on my neck. I kept my nightshirt shut. I had to quarantine myself so as not to inherit its haunted rooms." Night's darkness conflates with the darkness of the body's unctuous work beneath the skin and to the helplessness of being trapped inside the individual's experience. The poem, "Induction," opens "Stitches and liquid morphine cannot keep it closed / Lunar halo runs circles more hollow than *forgot*," and it closes "Under lunar halo, anyone who waits / For sleep waits to be seen to." Here the body is both a patient and an entity unto itself, willing itself open in the night. The night is metaphorically equated with the mother's body in "Shrines, Ditches, Bridges": "This night is a growing thing with its own mascara and lactation, its own ways of being hitched to two heavens." The mother's body becomes a place of dread and awkwardness in relation to the child, mirroring the anxiety of the insomnia that permeates the book. In "My Actress," the mother claims

. . . I try dissolving her in sobs oozing from some blank
world. I try nursing her grudges. I ruin her exhibits of
caprice, but this one looks real breathing the curtain. She's
pushing me down, unsatisfied. She breathes me to my own
rank, where I'm waiting with weapons in my holes.

The language of the mothering experience is mixed with not only the negative diction, but a nasty, suppurating body. The body becomes

something unseeable or indefinable, "some blank world" without a stable basis. In these anxious moments darkness and motherhood are the inability to be self-defined, the loss of identifiable boundaries. They blur experiential facts and nightmare surrealism.

The first half of the book alternates prose poems and lineated poems. The prose poems are punctuated and more seemingly personal. They take on an idea about night or motherhood and react to it, running their fingers over the speaker's raw nerves. In the poem "Looking for a Wormhole" Hume writes

My first mind is a night driving on and on. My blood
evolved from this pitch and one night's tar accumulated in
my mouth. If I go with my face made up, occult currents get
plumbed. Their magnetic air is self-taught and not handled
well. If I am fully in night, I cannot think ahead or use a
song to get there. Night makes time by not remembering to
go back.

While these are hardly organized arguments, this poem meditates its way through the idea, via expansive image shift, profundity, and obscurity. Finishing one of these prose poems gives the reader a fully realized, though illogical, understanding of the idea.

The lineated poems, on the other hand, are more open in their associations and more archetypal in their images. They use a more associative mode of meaning-making and revel in the dark surrealism at the heart of Hume's work. The writing tends toward razoring images, sonic repetitions, and a rhetoric of disjunction:

. . . I fall bed to bed to bed
If I could move toward it while moving away
Night kills what it shifts into; I pine for where I alight

The line-breaks give no closure, instead favoring a tone of longing and terror. These tonal fixtures are ultimately more of what the lineated poems are about than any sort of orderly conveyance. Even when the poem is more clearly framed by a nightmarish event, the writing extends the surrealism beyond any simple interpretive control:

Let a wolf leap out of a word out of a fog
Let the ocean uptake misshape your cover
Sleepers do not have feelings like real people do

Despite their avoidance of assured authorial intent, these lineated poems speak with confidence. They read like clinical renderings of moments that cannot be described. And along with these frightening moments come lines of paradoxical clarity, almost wisdom, for instance "The future of your eye is its past" or "I could be one of three people I might turn back into."

With these two different forms, the mother's and baby's call and response in the opening poem continues through the first half of the book. But this formal oscillation is broken by the poem at the heart of the book, "Interlude." This four-page poem is a series of odd-ball phrases defining kinds of mothers, such as "Mother-in-Visual-Purple," "Mother-of-Caged Aromas," and "Mother Confusion." The terms are then followed by a few lines of prose. They could be surreal definitions, or the script of a play. Each one speaks a line that is half oracular and half confessional: "Mother Ferus: But what if sleep were the parasite? Not these names, which like dreams simply domesticate sleep. What if sleep were the thing with fangs." Another reads "Cold-Mother-Plunder: Creatural sieve! I can hear the raw wind nursing your sores." The cacophonous forms of motherhood range from the wild to the depressed, but none of them are the archetypal mother of safety and nurture. These potential or simultaneously occurring forms of motherhood are at the heart of the book. These defining voices make sense of the multiplicity of identities, allowing the terror and anxiety of the first half of the book to exist alongside the motherhood and sleep and all their implicit associations of comfort.

There is a significant, though unannounced, change in the book after "Interlude." The formal structure loosens. The lack of punctuation that had characterized the lineated poems now shows up in the prose poems. The call and response of the prose and lineated poems that had earlier governed the book is broken by poems in other forms. Similarly, the rigidity and the terror of the first half begins to manifest as fable. In "Mirabile Dictu" the poem begins in the night, "Your sleep-eye has / its irreversible reasons // its ocean closes / and closes" but then arrives at a story in which "A dog leads / you home that night." The poem, "Obedience of Optics," opens

Law speaks of
a girl who bled

from her eye
until it turned

itself in and
cannibalized sight

While these fables maintain the nightmarish tone, they begin to make sense of the dark themes of the book through story. The narratives, still surreal, allow for a kind of resolution. Though in this poem there are two resolutions, perhaps arising out of the multiplicity of identities that "interlude" make crucial to the book. "Obedience of Optics" appears to be closing out the story with a moment of accomplishment when "Girl threw down / all her Accusers // in the trembling grass / at the Examiner's feet." But this act of valor is then followed by

A slut-eye
then lived illegally

in her navel
like a peephole

only trusting
what it saw on the sly

These two alternate endings of the poem show the girl's public and private escapes, which seem to make sense of the terrors of the first half of the book: rather than remaining a single narrative idea, the girl is allowed an additional move, a new potential identity. The poem, "Not for You," has the night "spilling out 'I . . . I . . .'" as if the night can choke out any number of identities or the speaker is left stuttering her own selfhood in the night. But the poem closes "give you my hand / like an amputee / feeling for a match." It's still gothic in its imagery, but there is a reaching out toward another, some kind of connection between individuals, whereas the opening of the book framed the deep connection between mother and child as alienating at best.

This outward reach culminates in another longer poem, "I'm Talking to You," which is subtitled "To be read silently beside a sleeping person." This poem works as a microcosmic movement through much of the book's themes and trepidations. It opens deeply inside the anxiety of insomnia: "Night sweats are evidence / of teeth puked and baked / into cakes like razors..." The body is denatured and unfamiliar. The nightmarish swirl of imagery now takes on a Steinian voice, more intellectualized and ironic:

after eaten out comes heart
after empty, a snapshot
.
.
.
after god, a second time don't hurt
after thank you, an inability to speak

The poem eventually moves to the direct address of the "you," presumably the person next to the speaker. There is both intimacy and emotional distance at this moment, as the speaker implores the you to "Tell me again the story / of why you lied, why there is no one / you cannot do something for." This turn toward the you, though in keeping with the miasma of the book, marks a turn toward confrontation, toward inclusion of others rather than the terror of the individual experience. The poem implies that the "you" is a spouse or lover; it could very well also be the child with whom the book opens in faux-dialogue. These kinds of narrative considerations are rarely the concern of *Shot*. Instead, conveying the visceral nature of the emotional experience is the primary goal. Always multiplicitous in its potential readings, there is no clear safety in the "you," just as there is no cliché comfort in the motherhoods of "Interlude." But when the speaker says "isn't it just like you to be quiet / when I'm trying to hear things" it is perhaps the most positive moment of the book up until this moment. The poem closes with these accepting, though still wary assertions:

Once you're in love
learn a dull blundering purpose
pulling above and below
do you see how it works
I speak to you (listen)
you speak to me (listen)

The next poem in the book is entitled "Trust," a word that is out of character with the previous work of the book and seems to arise out of this connection in the previous poem. The speaker has come through the long, dark night of the soul not to a point of salvation or reward but to a point of allowing connection and extending beyond the trapped sense of alienation and terror that characterizes the world of the book.

While the book continues to work in the mode of dark and occasionally gristly surrealism, it finds its way toward connection. The penultimate poem, "Leash," for instance, tells a kind of story of the

tongue, being both the physical thing disembodied and the language of the self:

Tongue went down south.
Put itself in a goat's mouth.
Making words reek and public.
If only Tongue wouldn't suck dick.

The simplistic prosody of the rhyme scheme works against the strangeness and base sexuality. Later in the poem, "Tongue burrow[s] a hole for feces" and is entrapped. However, the poem concludes with this somewhat perplexing, but seemingly hopeful stanza:

The mothers and fuckers are padlocked in blue.
Tongue has no one to talk to.
But the answer is no I do.
Love you, and love you.

Shot uses art to explore the darkneses of a human condition. Insomnia is not a set of diagnosable events, but a defining presence. Motherhood is transformative but alienating. These individual experiential moments cannot be divorced from the full life of the individual, just as the lived experience of event cannot be separated from any other part of the lived experience. Despite our attempts to taxonomize, define, and contain our personal incidents through psychological or social means, or through the discrete focus of individual poems, *Shot* reminds that we are all the mess that makes us.