

MARTHE REED

What Really Happened?: A Review of Shira Dentz's *door of thin skins*

door of thin skins, by Shira Dentz. Fort Lee, New Jersey: CavanKerry, 2013.

In her new collection of poems, *door of thin skins*, Shira Dentz takes the dilemma of the recipient of abuse as the occasion for levering open language and the page, the violence visited upon the speaker visually manifested within the text. Simultaneously, Dentz's book refuses genre boundaries, comprised of visual poetry, lineated poetry, and prose along with typographic interventions, creating an unsettled and unsettling narrative of physical and psychological abuse perpetrated first by a father and then by the psychotherapist tasked with healing those wounds. In the scissored, spliced chaos of the page, Dentz recapitulates the emotional catastrophe of its victim.

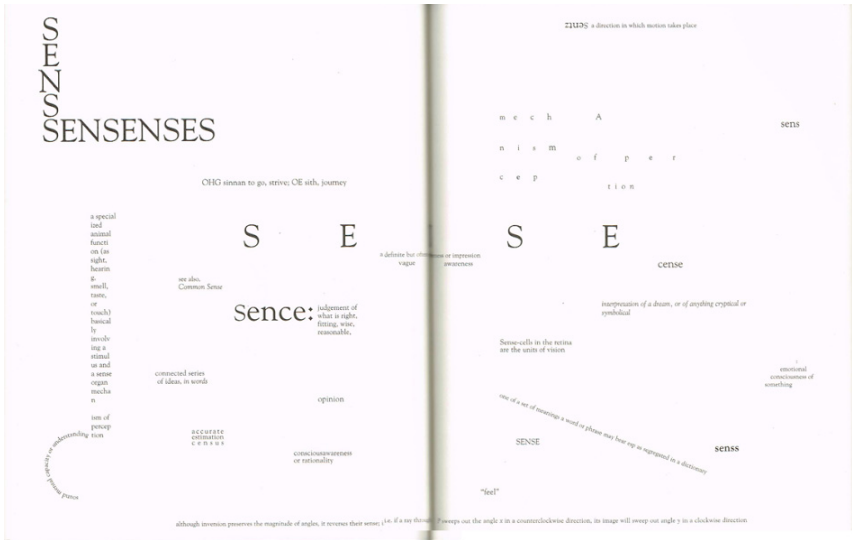
The book opens in the therapist's chambers via lineated text—"a door of thin skins" . . . / . . . the slight and gold," which quickly gives way to an enormous letter "A" taking up almost a third of the page's space, and then to a description of "Dr. Abe" himself, where "A" is the emblem of "A whale of man": Dr. A. Against the speaker's bewilderment at the doctor, a man she finds both both ugly and attractive, a carnival horror, Dentz juxtaposes the speaker's own sense of diminishment: "The Dr. says, *if I could put you in my pocket I would.*" Immediately the speaker collapses into "a fairy tale," small enough to fit in that pocket, a character written by the doctor himself, a prop easily manipulated. Unsure of herself, seeking approval, wounded, the speaker cannot hold her own against the therapist's predation: "*You need a boyfriend or I wouldn't be doing this . . . I'm saving you from being gay.*" Enacting a "reparative / nurturant experience" of kissing, fondling, and finger penetration, he deconstructs her sense of self by making her clean his apartment, edit a book, wash dishes in reparation for "reduced fees." When she finally leaves his "care," her attempts to prosecute his abuse are deferred by six years because of a life-threatening medical condition: "you're going to give me another heart attack."

Against the monstrousness of abuse at the hands of trusted figures, Dentz reconfigures the terms of the reader's engagement, using the page to visually map the confusion and dysphoria of her speaker. Unmoored by the dynamic of father/therapist/lover and daughter/patient/lover, the speaker is simultaneously gratified and terrified:

At night,
alone in his penthouse apartment
I stumble upon a closet full of shoes:
Old pairs, one for every former patient.
I search for mine.

Within this emotional landscape, Dentz's page proliferates in formal inventiveness. Though at first relatively stable in the movement between poetry and prose, the pages of *door of thin skins* gradually permutate into increasingly visual maps of the speaker's condition: the large letter "A" recurs, though turned on its side; a giant letter "O" figures as the hole into which our speaker falls; a textbox is emptied of text; letters fall out of lines; text realigns itself vertically, or appears as the crossed sticks of the brace of a kite floating in the white air of the page; narrative gives way to a simultaneity of voices or moments, is interrupted by the therapist's speech or squiggles on the page; the page devolves to empty space or a sheet bereft of all but the marks of punctuation. Perhaps most vivid of all are the passages in which lines are written one over the other, twining into and through one another, tangling in a visual representation of the speaker's mental disarray.

Dentz provokes the violence of abuse in her disruption of line and language. Following the visual layout of the pages, Dentz fractures language at the level of individual words as well as syntactically, or smashes words together without spaces, as if the speaker herself cannot parse her own thoughts. Her speaker unable to "make sense" of her situation, two-thirds of the way into the book, Dentz maps the speaker's condition onto the page in an etymological explosion of the absurdity of "sense":



A book confounding genre boundaries in much the way the father and therapist fracture the boundaries of propriety and moral authority, *door of thin skins* refuses to delimit the material of its making. Dreams, journal entries, memories, inventions, and desires are shuffled, leaving the reader to parse an unstable and uncertain text. Time, also fragmented and fractured, is reshuffled, each moment a torn remnant of the fabric of a life. In the disordering of narrative and time, in the use of repetition and variation, the juxtaposition of poetry and prose, and the deployment of visual poetry, Dentz has not only described the maze within which her speaker is trapped, but configured the text as a map of the way out. First tangling, then gradually unwinding the twisting chaos of the aftermath of abuse, Dentz figures the book as resistance and recuperation, reclaiming the power of language to redeem the voice of the abused.