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*Prehensio, Penitence, Penitentiary: On
Idra Novey's Exit, Civilian*

Exit, Civilian, by Idra Novey. Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012.

Reading Idra Novey's new collection of poems, I am reminded of Seamus Heaney's description of the tension writers experience between the aesthetic priorities of art for itself and the compelling moral pressures of the lived life—a binary he terms "Art" and "Life," or "Song" and "Suffering." One feels this productive tension at work in *Exit, Civilian*, especially in its sustained interest in the image of the prison, which appears at times as an objective correlative and at others as a kind of source citation, a place where histories and mythologies intersect:

In the spring
If pressed
The little prison that was once a field
Will admit it once likened itself
To the great amphitheater at Delphi

Novey's involvement in the Bard College Prison Initiative appears to have informed this book's unusual focus on the prison space, and throughout she ponders the dichotomy between the artificial sameness of prison life and the seasonal, social dynamism that characterizes life on the outside, sometimes by looking into the barred box and sometimes observing those changes from inside. Although she incorporates the voices of prisoners into several of these poems, Novey is careful not to lean too heavily on them, lest she be seen as exploiting their points of view in order to acquire an authenticity or ownership of the subject that isn't hers. Indeed, the title reminds us that reader and writer are trespassers in this place, and as the command "Exit, civilian" speaks for a kind of overarching, perhaps governmental, authority, so these poems are linguistic acts of resistance, lingering where they do not belong. Novey's work has always had a subversive

quality, exploring unsanctioned facets of identity, and her discoveries here are just as fresh as in her first collection, if more openly dangerous and political.

The book is divided into five sections of prose and free verse, three of which close with a brief index poem, "Titles from the City Library." By the numbers, these short poems reveal both our collective fascination with representations of criminality ("Heinous crimes by, films on: 146") and our relative disinterest in the real lives of the formerly incarcerated ("Housing and jobs for: 3"). By taking a more statistical view, these indexes counterpoint the book's individually voiced poems, which at times cite more recognizable sources.

The first section consists of a long poem, "The Little Prison," that responds to Vasko Popa's series of "Little Box" poems. Novey's piece recalls Popa's clarity and otherworldliness, deploying a fairytale admixture of wonder, "Enter a scallop / And you come out the shell," and violence, "Enter an apple / And come out the teeth marks / In its yellowed core." Where Popa's box grows to encompass "the whole world in miniature," hers expands into a world recognizably ours, and chillingly so:

Why come to the door
Of the little prison
When the world is full
Of revolving doors

Do you want to hear more
About the little prison
Have you noticed
It is everywhere

Novey's sense of playfulness is on full display in this sequence. Like Popa, she strikes me as a tinkerer, one for whom the prison is too perfect a geometric (and political) target to resist taking apart, turning inside out, and endowing with an unsettling tenderness.

Just as Novey's indexes source unidentified books, her other poems are an archive of unnamed voices that speak out from courtrooms, jury rooms, and parking lots, evoking the bland, bureaucratic flavor of the American justice system even as they undermine fixed notions of criminality and identity. In "As Charged," for instance, the speaker describes the scene of her trial and acknowledges being "guilty of M." The poem deploys letters as substitutes for specific terms, as though to protect classified or proprietary information, which produces an ano-

nymity frightening both in its arbitrariness and its lack of reassuring ethical cues. What are we to think of a voice that remarks that the crime in question "gave me a joy so oily and unlike me I might try it again and again" when the act itself is unknown? Innocence and guilt here have no more meaning than the letter *M*, as the poem enacts a liberation of experience from the terminology that seeks to constrain it.

"There is a certain jubilation and truancy at the heart of an inspiration," according to Heaney, and nowhere in Novey's collection is this more evident than in "On Bafflement," one of her most exhilarating pieces. Here we encounter the primal and seemingly spontaneous creative act—"We made a prison in the sand and it wouldn't go away"—that energizes other forms of making: "We felt compelled to make love in the sand a few feet off. / Then we drew another one, just to see if we'd make love again." This speaker cannot destroy but only proliferate her prisons in sand, a surreal situation made touchingly real by the poem's ambivalent tone. Novey's images and scenes are meticulously constructed, crystalline, inviting us into a parallel world that reflects back the darker parts of our own.

Such a world intersects with ours in "Civilian Exiting the Facilities," whose speaker wonders whether she is capable of committing a crime at all:

In the shine of a car outside the prison my reflection gets
wider until it splits. In one likeness the face I recognize. In
the other my face.

This moment reminds me of Frost, whose fork in the road offers a point of divergence, but here the divergence is more expressly psychological. Conscience, though underlying the whole book, takes center stage intermittently, and at moments like this it illuminates the work with new knowledge, supporting James Longenbach's claim that "language returns our attention not to confirm what we know but to suggest that we might be different from ourselves." One of this book's virtues is that Novey doesn't look away from moments of hesitation and mystery but treats them as essential parts of this introspective journey. In so doing, she restores to the act of witnessing its raw, preverbal quality—and achieves silences that can shock us into heightened awareness:

you have to go outside, put your body where the snow angel lies.
Feel her legs
widen under

your warm open legs
Feel her cold blank face
fill your mouth.

Novey explores historical landscapes in addition to imaginary ones, but whereas, for instance, the "The Little Prison" offers an object completely available to her shaping (because it is imagined), the real, named prison she seeks out proves to be more elusive. "*O Caldeirão do Diabo*" records a visit to the remains of the notorious Cândido Mendes prison in Brazil, home to violent criminals as well as political prisoners of the former dictatorship. The speaker, a sightseer, is rebuffed in her attempts to visit the ruins and instead encouraged to look for crocodiles living in the spillway. And in "*Memórias do Cárcere*," a man and woman tell conflicting stories about the prison and the fate of its inmates, narratives as tangled by the motives of their tellers as the ruins of Cândido Mendes are obscured by the jungle, which has enough "lushness to erase everything / that's not green or dengue fever, / mosquito or sky." One takes away from these poems, which occupy the last section of the book, a sense of how vulnerable collective memory is, and how easily it can corrode.

Broadly, this collection seems to have used Heaney's binary of Art and Life as an organizing principle, first offering the prison as an abstraction susceptible to imaginative molding, and then leading us through poems that are more closely indexed to historical events and that parse the fragile relationship of language to reality. Such a trajectory makes room for a wide aesthetic range while staying true to the book's topical concerns, and one has to credit Novey's resourcefulness in this regard; her achievements here are never overshadowed by the work's intense relevance to our politics. However committed this author is to prison reform, she also captures, with poignancy, the free and fixed moments of recognition that give life to her poems, as when a bus ride begins "as if forty invisible horses were beneath us."