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The Rashness of Form: Erica Dawson's *The Small Blades Hurt*

The Small Blades Hurt, by Erica Dawson. Evansville, Indiana: Measure Press, 2014.

"Ideation X," the final poem in Erica Dawson's second collection, *The Small Blades Hurt*, lays out a series of impossible propositions necessary in order for the speaker to rejoin the world of those who are invested in it, and ends with the implosion of that world and its deliberate, necessary resurrection: ". . . as if / Like all of us, it has something to prove." To evolve is to survive, but what does that survival look like? Which are the threads which anchor us, and which of them and which of us will be cut and reborn? *The Small Blades Hurt*, winner of the 2014 Florida Book Award Bronze Medal, proves how connections must work visibly, both with regard to form and to content, and with varying levels of specificity, asking readers to consider and re-consider solitude, space, our own conceits and needs, and what has formed us, along with what continues to shape us. Form carries with it a sense of obedience—the epigraph Dawson includes from Abraham Lincoln cautions us to "Beware of rashness" as we move into the collection and into the poems themselves. We can ask what it means for a contemporary poet to write in traditional forms, but—more importantly—we can ask ourselves why we ask these questions at all. What does it mean to use and to question form at this particular moment?

"A Poem That's Not a Song or Set in the South" represents the clear beginning of a trajectory, where form and content truly come together in a way that dazzles, terrifies, and stuns by the final line: "Black-faced, enough to keep my peeled eyes skinned." Everything we need to know as readers is included, pressurized here, due in no small part to the symmetry of that line, how it begins with the image of dark skin and closes with the idea of that skin removed from the eyes, a visceral and horrifying image, but one that dovetails with the idea of happy colorblindness; the ridiculousness of claiming not to see color is eradicated. The black face becomes the black skin; the visage envelops the body, and the part becomes the whole.

Form also establishes a series of fragmented possible identities for the poet, positing her often in conversation with the past, as we see in "In Celebration of Black History Month," "La Revue Negre," and "Langston Hughes' Grandma Mary Writes a Love Letter to Lewis Leary Years after He Dies Fighting at Harper's Ferry." As is February itself, "In Celebration of Black History Month" is brief, consisting of two Italian quatrains that begin with an allusion to Daphne, a minor figure in Greek mythology, one whose primary association is with the laurel wreath placed around the heads of victors. Before she was transformed into the tree that provides the laurel wreath, however, Daphne was pursued by Apollo; becoming part of nature (a part then used as a commodity and sign of "honorable" victory) was her escape and salvation from the threat of violence to her body. Considering the title of this collection and the levels of meaning of "blades"—grass, gentlemen, scissors, knives, and so forth, creates for its audience a conflation of nature and love and danger and vulnerability. The cover image suggests the literal, but the grass pictured is out of focus, wet, and abstractly dangerous. Nature is the chronic here, the consistent, the expected, and the ultimate victor, naturally.

"La Revue Negre" is a longer tour de force, monorhythmic, evoking Josephine Baker, Johnny Cash, Pinocchio, and the Alamo in a whirlwind that complicates the commodified version of the title performance we have now, available for sale in poster form, preframed and ready to display on the whitewashed wall. While the collection opens with nature and geography ("Layover" and "A Poem that's Not a Song or Set in the South"), which continues in the second section ("I, too, sing America" and "Florida Funeral"), it is with people that the collection closes; the final two poems evoke not only specific time periods in America's history of civil rights, but also foreground figures central to that time. We have moved from Lincoln's and Whitman's oppositional epigraphs to Langston Hughes and Malcolm X. Each of these poems feels, in some way, like a stunt-person poised at the edge of a precipice, a ledge, the opening of a plane, the window of a space shuttle, any place surrounded by emptiness and darkness and punctuated by stars, small reminders of lights that have been extinguished by two unavoidable forces: time and violence.

Violence is not limited to the human body; the small blades are capable of inflicting damage on the natural world as well. One of the most vivid and compelling poems in *The Small Blades Hurt* is, for me, "Chronic"—like "blade," a word with levels of meaning. The opening lines turn in on themselves, squeezing urgency and thirst from repetition:

I know the moon's persistent but a dead
Woman is rigor, more moonlight and branch
Than moonlight on a branch. I want to cut
My teeth on her . . .

Nature is a chronic problem here, the consistent, the expected, the ultimate victor, and Dawson's language, loaded and striated, creates texture imbued with tension.

What does form provide for, then? Does it allow the modern world entry into what readers view as alternately accessible and arcane? Is it a way to rewrite the past? Perhaps we can say that form works not as artifice in Dawson's work, but as armor, a layer of protection from the closeness of each subject, each allusion, and each smart(ing) enjambment and caesura. In the author's note that precedes her own 2005 crown of sonnets ("Emmett Till"), Marilyn Nelson explained how, for her, writing within the confines of "the strict form became a kind of insulation, a way of protecting myself from the intense pain of the subject." Positioned at the literal center of *The Small Blades Hurt*, "New NASA Missions Rendezvous with Moon," a seven-sonnet sequence, opens with the presence of the media, our awareness of being watched and recorded for posterity, and how this knowledge affects behavior and creates authenticity, at least for those who will examine the evidence in the future:

Countdown: T-minus seven, six, five, four . . .
The camera's posed. The moon can cast its spell.
Right at the perfect time, the two will score
The evidential view; they're doing well,
Better together . . .

That evidence will be necessary implies that everything is fair game to be questioned; perhaps this is why readers will question both the presence and the lack of conventional form in any contemporary book of poetry.

Later in the sequence, we are told to ". . . resign / Ourselves to nature," always with the awareness that we are being watched, whether on the moon and exploring new territory, or by re-seeing what we did later, revisiting. This notion fits into the conventional rules of the sonnet sequence, which depends on the last line of one sonnet to begin the next. As the forms coalesce, they unite to become something entirely else, a coherent sequence, a smaller collection of poems within a larger collection. The sequence opens with "Pre-launch" and

concludes with "Re-entry," the opening and closing required for both phase of exploration the same: "Countdown: T-minus seven, six, five, four . . ." The same words can function to liberate or inaugurate exploration, but they also bring us back, anchor us, the way form can render accessible and familiar (through its familiarity) a statement that might otherwise throw the reader (or fans of the Romantic poets) from the poem, such as "Fuck looking at the stars." It is not the stars we object to; it is the artifice of self-consciously looking at them, the certainty that we will miss what is already in front of us.