

# An Ecstatic Cartography of the Human Heart

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*A Camouflage of Specimens and Garments*, Jennifer Militello. Tupelo, \$16.95 86p • Epistolary to its core, Jennifer Militello's third full-length collection offers a series of "dictionaries" and letter poems. The book's breadth and range of approach shows a variety of syntactical moves within repeated anaphoric structures. This is a book of ecstatic revelations, griefs and betrayals. Relationships and narratives are implied within a lyric framework. It has been a long time since I read a book of poems that seems less about meaning and more about sound. In this approach, Militello reminds me of other lyric poets such as Karen Volkman, or Valzyna Mort, whose ecstatic surrealism is often made of sound rather than any direct references to the poet's daily life. In many ways Militello shares the same "sensibility" to let go of sense and search for un-paraphrasable moments in language, moments so true that make us hear the language anew.

This is the landscape that Militello has excavated since her first book. Here, though, she stretches herself into new sound-shapes, often employing a complicated scheme of rhymes and half-rhymes. Like Emily Dickinson, she likes to work in tiny containers; her poems are micro-metaphor machines. And like Dickinson, and perhaps Federico Garcia Lorca, she is simply unafraid of the ecstatic, though often that form of ecstasy is side by side with grief. Which is to say desire? Desire is what partly drives these books. Desire is the language of the preposition, for when we desire, it is *for* something. For. And it. It is that space of absence where this book takes its emotional surety and triumph. Between the preposition and the pronoun. Take for example these lines from "Dear B", one of a series of letter poems to a lover (lost, taken, and ignored):

*This black trance where I lie like a cat,  
these arrows living naked in the after of  
my hands. Such resonance tempers the  
dark. I fever with impossibility. I fiddle  
with the antithesis of love. What lies in*

*me is an armored starvation. I cringe  
at night. I go wild and pathological,  
schizophrenic as fire. The hiss you hear  
is my desire. I live on what exists before  
me and I thrive. Nothing amounts to  
much. There are many of us, shaped  
brazen in the dark.*

Desire and its fluctuating movement and failures are a theme underneath these poems. The book is structured primarily between the epistolary poems to B, and the wildly imaginative polyvocal "dictionary poems." These poems are often louder in tone and riff classical and biblical syntax. The prose poems to B are quieter, imitating the epistolary form. Many of the dictionary poems use anaphora to great effect. A few poems begin simply with the pronoun "it" repeated over and over, before transferring into the I. Or "its" as a strange ambiguous possessive. It makes its appearance in poem after poem. I can think of no other poet who so thoroughly interrogates the pronoun, using it to make ambiguous references. What is it? What is its? In "A Dictionary of the Garment," she confesses:

*It came to me without warning.  
It came to me coated with wax.  
It came to me threaded with silk.  
It came to me in wolf's clothing.*

*It was like a crown that claimed my land.  
Like sand, it slipped through my fingers.*

In those lines "it" is something big, large, grand, claiming "my land" (though it could be arguing the land is the body). And in the next line "it" becomes tiny, miniscule, barely material, ungraspable, as it slips through the speaker's fingers. Even by the poem's end a level of ambiguity remains, ambiguity that the poet and poem are quite comfortable with, leaving the final meaning-making up to the reader.

In one of the book's most syntactically varied poems, "A Dictionary of the Symphony in the Voice of Ludwig van Beethoven," Militello again interrogates the pronoun in wildly fantastic syntax and singing. Echoing Philip Levine's

"They Feed They Lion," the poem is near-Blakean:

*It's dark and it comes / it's dark and it  
comes / it's dark and it comes and  
it's dark*

*It comes and it's dark and it comes a  
man on a horse and a falter in a cry  
/ and violins in the trees sequins of  
dresses and in the clouds it's dark it /  
comes tasseled curtained and folded  
with seams*

The poem's repetition and sound creates a structure that nearly topples over upon itself to great effect, not giving the reader time to ask or ponder what it is, but instead accumulating meaning so "it" and "it's" become so many things, so many things both material and immaterial until the poem looks right at the reader:

*and its lion will fix on your sleeping face  
and its animal will cry at the entrance  
to your yard a house of cards and a stop  
of clocks a wing and drink of dry*

Repetition and varied syntax is crucial for Militello's approach to the poem. In an interview, she said, "So I love repetition for its songlike qualities. One of the things I very much believe in is reading a poem with the instinct instead of the intellect. I believe in reading with our ear and with our hearts, in a way, instead of with our minds, or as much as with our minds. And I think repetition creates a music and creates a sort of song."

These are coded poems, surrealist, nearly Eastern European in their sensibility. You won't find the specific details of the poet's life, her lover's name (masked with only the letter B as a signifier). This is another kind of autobiography. An intimate navigation in language. A kind of poem I rarely read from an American writer. These poems with their slippages and ambiguities, her long and brief litanies, cross many aesthetic borders and boundaries in their brilliant attempt to cartography the human heart. □