

Review: Laux, Dorianne. *Only as the Day is Long: New and Selected Poems*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019. ISBN: 9780393652338. (Paperback available 2020.)

Dorianne Laux doesn't ease readers into her collection of new and selected poems, *Only as the Day is Long*. She announces her terms from the first poem, "Two Pictures of My Sister," which depicts the sister in two attitudes: first in a playful, vampy pose, and then defiant, enduring a beating with a belt. Laux is unsparing in her description of this moment of family violence, the father's rage, the sister's injuries:

She does not move or cry or even wince
as the welt blooms on her temple
like a flower opening frame by frame
in a nature film.
It lowers her eyelid with its violet petals
and as he walks away only her eyes
move, like the eyes of a portrait that follow you
around a museum room, her face
a stubborn moon that trails the car all night,
stays locked in the frame of the back window
no matter how many turns you take,
no matter how far you go.

With the sister's bruise blossoming, her face unflinching as a "stubborn moon" in memory's dark sky, Laux depicts trauma with beautiful imagery and plain language. If Dickinson thought the truth should be told "slant," Laux wants it straighter. Omission and evasion aren't part of her art. Rather, she is interested in the beauty that emerges from telling the whole, ugly truth. The poem's epigraph, by the Czech Nobel laureate Jaroslav Seifert, reinforces the sentiment: "If an ordinary person is silent, this may be a tactical maneuver. If a writer is silent, he is lying." Laux deploys Seifert's words as an admonition: there will be no tactical, protective silences here.

A "selected" poetry collection is the poet's answer to an album of greatest hits. Providing a compilation of an artist's strongest or most well-known work, it can serve as a comprehensive introduction to new audiences and a hallowed retrospective for fans, although some may quibble about curation. This volume, while containing few surprises, does capture the consistent strength of Laux's work. Her poems are usually narrative and confessional, in the tradition of Anne Sexton or Sharon Olds and owing much to those poets' ground-breaking poetics of self-revelation. While she often depicts violence, sexuality, and grief, Laux just as often juxtaposes these with intimacy, pleasure, and awe to create complex lyrical voices capable of hitting a variety of notes. Her approach to difficult material is frank and unvarnished without tipping toward the lurid, a balance she has mastered over the five collections from which *Only as the Day is Long* borrows: *Awake* (1990), *What We Carry* (1994), *Smoke* (2000), *Facts About the Moon* (2005), and *The Book of Men* (2011). (Laux is also the author of four chapbooks,

Superman (2008), *Dark Charms* (2010), *The Book of Women* (2012), and, with her husband, the poet Joseph Millar, *Duets* (2016).) Above all, the poems selected here make clear that contrast characterizes Laux's work as a whole — contrast between darkness and light, vulnerability and strength, and perhaps most starkly, between the animal and the ethereal of human experience. The body, realm of physical experience and feeling, holds truths that our higher selves can struggle to grasp.

"Beginnings are brutal," begins "Each Sound," which explores how, despite evolution, the monkey still lives inside the human:

We've forgotten the luxury of dumbness,
how once we crouched naked on an outcrop
of rock, the moon huge and untouched
above us, speechless. Now we talk
about everything, incessantly,
our moans and grunts turned on a spit
into warm vowels and elegant consonants.
We say *plethora*, *demitasse*, *ozone*, and *love*.
We think we know what each sound means.

Juxtaposing the pretty syllable with the eloquent grunt, the speaker here communicates skepticism about poetry itself. Indeed, Laux's speakers often distrust moments that are too polished or transcendent, putting pins in their own poetic epiphanies, as in "Dust," which advises:

That's how it is sometimes—
God comes to your window,
all bright light and black wings,
and you're just too tired to open it.

Laux continually draws attention to her slips into high-flown diction. The speaker of "Vacation Sex" almost gets carried away, but checks herself:

...The best was when we got home, our luggage
cuddled in the vestibule — really just a hallway
but because we were home it seemed like a vestibule—
and we threw off our vestments, which were really
just our clothes but they seemed like garments, like raiment,
like habits because we felt sorely religious, dropping them

one by one on the stairs: white shirts, black bra, blue jeans,
red socks, then stood naked in our own bedroom, our bed
with its drab spread, our pillows that smelled like us...

Such checks, moments where straightforward diction is explicitly exerted, ground these poems again and again in the physical world. This preoccupation with the body means that sexuality and physical pleasure are frequent themes, and here again, Laux's frankness is refreshing. Her odes to orgasms and celebrities don't always work, but there is beauty in the nakedness of her

confessions of sexual desire and her appreciations of the male form, which read as both sincere and a send-up of men's objectifications of women. In "The Secret of Backs," the speaker thrills at beautiful cowlicks:

And the spiral near the top of the back of the head—
peek of scalp, exquisite galaxy—as if the first breach
had swirled each filament away from that startled center.

Ah, but the best are the bald or neatly shorn, revealing
the flanged, sun-flared, flamboyant backs of ears: secret
as the undersides of leaves, the flipside of flower petals.

The lusty, alliterative fun of this poem and others like it, mostly from *The Book of Men*, is a bracing contrast to Laux's darker material. Her command of and balance between these two registers is not just impressive, but representative of her work.

The twenty newer poems that bring up the rear of the collection were written in response to the death of the poet's mother, and anchor the book with the weight of maturity. These poems' gravitas is enriched with grief, regret, and the complicated love of an adult child for a dying parent. "We never knew which way to run: / into her arms or away from her sharp eyes," says the speaker of "Changeable Weather." The mother is far from idealized; even in death she is rendered in a light that asserts the beauty in truth. In the title poem the speaker imagines death setting her mother's constituent parts loose into the universe:

...her body's
water atoms, her hair and bones and teeth atoms,
her fleshy atoms, her boozy atoms, her saltines
and cheese and tea, but not her piano concerto
atoms, her atoms of laughter and cruelty, her atoms
of lies and lilies along the driveway and her slippers,
Lord her slippers, where are they now?

Even as it enacts bereavement, the poem is playful. The mother is conjured in our imaginations as she disappears, good and bad, atom by atom, leaving behind not even her slippers. Indeed, that even her slippers, in all their unremarkable concreteness, could disappear makes plain the absoluteness of the loss.

The collection's closing poem, "Letter to My Dead Mother," has a similar searching energy, as the speaker tries to reach her mother beyond death using repetition, alliteration, rhyme, and wordplay almost childlike in their tenderness:

Dear Pulse, Clobber, Partaker, Cobbler.
Dear Crossword, Crick, Coffeepot, Catchall.

You told me when you were 72
You still felt 25 behind your eyes.

Dear Underbelly, Bisection, Scimitar, Doge.
Dear Third Rail. Dear Bandbox. Dear Scapegrace.

How could I know—I want to go home.
Don't leave me alone—Blank as stone.

Dear Piano.

The grim sweetness of these pet names, set against the spare confessional honesty of lines such as, “No one on earth more hated / Or loved,” make grief palpable, expressing it succinctly while preserving its ineffability. *Only as the Day is Long* makes clear that this is where Laux’s power lays: in making poetry from what she has called “the gristle of the living.” When her poems are extraordinary, it is not in spite of the human frailties and ugliness they portray, but because of them. The warmth and playfulness with which she transgresses are her trademarks. This ability, to speak into silences and say beautifully what ought not be said, is her gift—and readers are indebted to her for the space that truth-telling opens.

-Abby Paige