THREE WAYS TO TOUCH THE WOR(L)D

Mary Jo Bang, *The Eye Like a Strange Balloon,* Grove Press, 2004. Beth Ann Fennelly, *Tender Hooks,* W. W. Norton, 2004. Pattiann Rogers, *Generations,* Penguin, 2004.

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> "We see by being seen. We are never
> alone where we are."
> —Pattiann Rogers, "Seeing What Is Seen"

It is always a pleasure to read the work of authors who are confident of their poetic vision and deft in their techniques. Here, readers find three volumes written with assurance—two by established poets and one by a relative newcomer. Rogers adds another impressive volume to her oeuvre, and Mary Jo Bang puts her startling creative powers to work in a volume of ekphrastic poems. Beth Ann Fennelly, in her second book, develops her acute observations through deceptively simple lines. Read together, these three books evoke a sense of mindfulness about the powers of spirit, of desire, of perception, and of relationships that both sear and fulfill.

The most accomplished poet in this set, Rogers offers the greatest consistency of effect and the fewest surprises. Rogers' many readers will find her usual style in *Generations*, where observations about the seasons, animals, a few humans, and homely quotidian truths provide a means to "contemplation" that "grows receptive to complexity."

From the first poem, "Generations," the anonymous persona seems to look backward and forward at once, noting rituals of growth and succession ("They have been walking from the beginning, / through the foggy sponges of lowland / forests, under umbrella leaves…. They walked / through the words *let there be light* / more than once…."). This inexorable march of existence emblematizes humanity's moral position in the universe: "their walking / was constant, unmoving, invariable, / and the seeing of the people was ever / present, immutable, liberation." The flow of Rogers' diction tends to lull the reader, who must remember to notice the metaphysical reach in Rogers' Eliotian paradoxes (how can "moving" be "unmoving"?). Sounds and ideas shimmer on the page. Rogers generally holds to her characteristic stanzas of similar lengths, shaped by internal rhymes, and adds texture with a handful of poems in tercets, quatrains, and free-verse forms. These gently formed patterns allow for a satisfying play of thought within flexible boundaries.

Repeatedly envisioning ascent and descent, the poems in this book's six "story" sections evoke aspiration and vision as well as a persistent turning toward one's deeper nature. "I climb around / and around almost circling myself / in this narrow space, almost / meeting myself face to face," the persona muses in "Aspiring, Now and Then." Images of flying seeds, falling leaves, feet circling on bicycle pedals, flocking birds, and swirling water serve as emblems of the metaphysical unity underlying all change. Rogers' recursive meditations on presence and absence, potential and persistence contain many sharply drawn moments, as in "Tabula Rasa":

> The landscape in this country is entirely
> bare and blank, undistinguished
> by any feature, except for a stitch
> of swallows appearing and disappearing
>
> above the sky-smooth lake, in and out
> through the portals invented by their own
> journeys….

The relaxed observation of everyday life is suddenly pierced by a sensation, a Woolfian moment of being, in which the poem and unidentified persona each simultaneously achieve their own "reality."

Occasionally, Rogers provides glimpses of a more personal intertwining of self and other. "Truth and Falsehood," for example, tenderly recalls "last night" with "the stars falling" and "the snow falling," leading into the metaphorical realm of a couple in an ambiguous but sustaining intimacy: "as naked as light, neither // beckoning, neither denying, both ancients / broken and unchronicled, // both out of the pit / into the instant and back... the way things were for awhile last night." "The Match," on the other hand, reimagines a pair (of lovers? of children?) who "struggle, sweaty, grimacing / and cursing… One heaves / and lifts the other on her back, off / her feet…. Clinging body to body, / they fight to choke each other at the ribs, / encircling arms squeezing tight." Such broad strokes can seem comic, or violent, and are atypical of the book as a whole.

Despite a consistent delicacy of effect, Rogers' poetic techniques do not invariably please. Sometimes her rhythms fail and neologisms jar, as in "Interdisciplinary Studies" ("These interdisciplinary studies / are being assembled by those venerated / experts responsible for discovering / and translating heretofore lost / beetlescrolls, sanddunedocuments, / the ritual anthems of tumbleweedchoirs…"). The most appealing aspect of Rogers' work is the apparent effortlessness with which she can invoke faith and mystery in the movements of the natural world, although this approach can lapse into vagueness ("In bed asleep we might approach / a settlement of inner union where / it exists in a thousand definite / coordinates around the earth"). When Rogers maintains her characteristic balance among rhythm, vocabulary, and a sense of immanence, her poems achieve a richly satisfying expression of spiritual awareness and the interpenetration of all aspects (and senses) of "nature."

Bang's book is the most creative and elliptical of these three. Any fan of modern art will be curious to see what Bang has done in this collection, titled as it is after an Odilon Redon print of—yes—a huge eyeball aloft, carrying what may be a balloon gondola. Bang's poems here create a dimension well beyond the empathetic, descriptive responses that one may expect of ekphrasis. Although several of the artworks are recognizable simply through Bang's passing references to titles, figures, or visual details, often no overt connection is made. Instead, the original piece seems to provide inspiration as an ethos or expressive force that guides Bang's tone.

In the title poem, placed quite late in the book, Bang's poetic voice makes a series of surrealistic vernacular statements that evoke not the image of Redon's eye-balloon but a sense of existence as constant flux, continually evading both description and understanding:

> We were going toward nothing
> all along. Honing the acoustics,
> heralding the instant
> shifts….
>
> Always asking, Has this this been built?
> Or is it all process?
>
> Molecular coherence, a dramatic canopy,
> cafeteria din, audacious design. Or humble….
>
> Looking up
> at the billboard hummingbird,
> its enormous beak. There's a song that goes…
> And then the curtain drops.

Bang's language recreates the conceptual and visual dislocations of avant garde art. For readers, the effect is dizzying—both exhilarating and anxiety-provoking. In good reflexive fashion, the poems revel in as they enact their difficult surfaces: "The intelligent remove (art is text) / is the distance we desire," claims the opening poem ("Rock and Roll Is Dead...").

A number of pieces, such as "Mulholland Drive," effect a suitable congruence between Bang's technique and the ostensible source-texts. "The narrative coexists / with certitude for just a few seconds," this poem declares. "The characters play games / in a circle at some remove / from the world.... The object is conscious / awareness." For most of the selections, however, links between the visual art and the poem are oblique at best—appropriately enough, since Bang draws from symbolist, surrealist, Dadaist, and decadent artworks and includes installations, pieces of furniture, sculptures, photographs, interactive pieces, and films. Many moments delight by their sly play with cultural literacy, for example "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living…": "Another nightmare / in which an antigravity theory falls / off the bell tower and looks for all the world / like a limp Kim Novak in *Vertigo*. // A thriving scene and was seen turned lifeless…."

Readers entertained by the challenges of surrealist texts will enjoy the potential of Bang's short, nonsequential sentences. From "Blue Thought Circle":

> A statement followed by an "oh,"
> perfectly equally matched to an "and."
> Was it as simple as that?
>
> And *now* what?
> The clock stopped and restarted.
> Chemicals coursed
>
> through a bloodstream
> slowly pouring a pitcher
> of bright yellow….

Such apparently objective statements do not cohere into explanation or analysis but rather make dramatic quantum leaps among ideas. Bang recontextualizes her source-texts while retaining familiar (post)modern themes—the illusory nature of perception, the impossibility of fixing meaning. Her management of rhythm and rhyme is masterful; it usually carries even those poems in which theme has been overly obscured.

Bang's vocabulary provides constant explosions of surprise, calling to mind the innovations of language poetry and precursors such as Wallace Stevens and Sylvia Plath. Bang's heavy use of modifiers can drain energy from her verbs, however, and her relentlessly elliptical technique can make a poem full of fine observations seem ultimately unsuccessful. *The Eye Like a*

Strange Balloon is the kind of idiosyncratic achievement that will strike some readers as impenetrable, others as profound; certainly this book highlights Bang's ability to toy wittily with ideas of representation. (For readers who wish to savor the interlocking references created by ekphrasis, Bang appends a list of the artworks that correspond to her poems.)

Fennelly, on her part, probes deeply into the complicated emotions of close relationships, particularly those prompted by the birth and growth of her daughter. Nuanced, funny, and occasionally disturbing, Fennelly's poems describe the "tender hooks"—the private, sometimes embarrassing, and certainly conflicting responses—that hold mother to child, spouse to spouse, and friend to friend.

In the book's first part, the recurring image of nursing an infant suggests a closeness that can prove uncomfortable on several counts—for what the poetic voice learns about herself as well as for the residual pains of childbirth and the child's bites and pinches. Fennelly's approach deftly balances moments of irony and sincerity, as in the opening poem, titled "Bite Me," that transcends the shock of its title by literally rendering how the one-year-old greets her mother ("This month you've left your mark on me / through sweatshirts and through jeans, / six-teeth-brooches that take a week to fade / from my collarbone, hip, wrist"). This minor but persistent pain reminds the persona of the physical punishment she endured giving birth ("finally I burst at the seams / and you were out, / Look, Ha, you didn't kill me after all"). Another poem about nursing characterizes the "Strange Country"

> where I lived with my daughter while I fed her
> from my body. It was a small country, an island for two,
> and there were things we couldn't bring with us,
> like her father. He watched from the far shore,
> well meaning, useless. Sometimes I asked
> for a glass of water, so he had something to give.

Fennelly's awareness of the complexities of devotion allows this book to speak to fathers as well as mothers; it characterizes the intense inward focus of a new family, the jealousy of each parent wanting the infant's attention.

Other poems return to lingering physical effects—hair loss, stress incontinence, flab—and celebrate both the joy of new life and humanity's animal nature. Some readers will find the poems' overall effect too casual, considering the strength of the emotions being recollected. At times, Fennelly's language provokes visceral responses that will baffle or repel some readers. While a certain degree of shock may be expected in order to depict childbirth's rigors, there are occasional distracting lapses of taste ("my asshole turned inside-out like a rosebud," "Yes, I wanted to soul-kiss my daughter").

The central portions of the book shift to memories and adult musings about faith and friendship. Part II immediately explains the book's title—"that's how she came to understand growing up: erosion. She was all edges, on *tender hooks*, which is what she thought the expression was," one persona says ("Waiting for the Heart to Moderate"). The poems in these sections display more formal experimentation and a greater range of topics, although Fennelly's scope and style seem less urgently engaged with these themes. One persona claims, "I'm tired of the hip cynicism / of atheists, tired of metafiction, / of winks at the camera, / of poems using dinner knives / to check for spinach in their teeth. // I want to reclaim the optimism / of the grand old religions, I want exclamations, / exultations, belly laughs, shaking fists, / tears for all my friends, tears on the house!" ("Telling the Gospel Truth"). A more serious long poem addresses an apparent miscarriage, a surprise that deepens the celebratory effect of the earlier poems.

Part IV returns to the child Claire, although to milder effect, for while this final section includes refreshing variations in formal development, the shortest poems seem unfinished. The most notable piece in this closing section of the book is the playful, free-form "Having Words with Claire," which again shows how processes of change refresh one's view of the world:

> Magnificent new word I trace into pollen on the car hood
> because all is spring and budding through the beds
> of your gums are two new teeth….
>
> word that grows siblings,
> they tumble in your wet mouth….
>
> words like waves, like sand, like spume, like salt
> in wounds, on rims with limes,
> with crumpets trumpets O strumpet spring
>
> words that make nothing happen
>
> others that make too much….

Invoking the little girl's word-play helps Fennelly build toward the closure in the last poem, as the speaker claims that she will remember and treasure the shocks and discoveries of early parenthood—"I'm writing everything down…. I want everything back, every blessed thing," the voice declares in "The Gods Tell Me, *You Will Forget All This*." In its open form, alternately chastening and confirming, this final poem reiterates the fierce devotion of the book's first section and concludes with a promise: "I'll have another."

These three poets surprise readers in distinct ways—Rogers, through experimental word combinations and inspired blending of style and theme; Bang, through the imaginative tension between abstract statements and concrete imagery; Fennelly, through intensity of emotion that breaks past everyday language. The range of achievement in these volumes indicates that contemporary poetry by women is, indeed, in robust good health.