Tool and Weapon

Patricia Brody

American Book Review, Volume 41, Number 2, January/February 2020, pp. 26-27 (Review)

Published by American Book Review

Tool and Weapon

Patricia Brody

To Suture What Frays

Jaclyn Piudik

Kelsay Books
www.kelsaybooks.com
104 Pages; Print, $17.00

In the introduction to his 1912 edition of John Donne's (1572-1631) poetry, Herbert J. C. Grierson writes of "the vein of sheer ugliness which runs through [Donne's] work, presenting details that seem merely and wantonly repulsive." Meanwhile, in the eighteenth century, the good Doctor, Samuel Johnson, pronounces "somewhat disapprovingly" Donne's technical accomplishment or "metaphysical conceit" as: "*Discordia concors*, a combination of dissimilar images" or, "the discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike … the most heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together." A couple hundred years later, in *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler* (1921), T. S. Eliot describes Donne's "device" as "the elaboration … of a figure of speech to the *farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it*." Eliot illustrates *Discordia concors* with Donne's poem "A Valediction" in which Donne compares two lovers to the legs of a pair of compasses.

(Have patience, please, Reader, we will come soon to the book at hand!)

"But elsewhere we find" observes Eliot, "instead of mere … comparison, a development by rapid association of thought *which requires considerable agility on the part of the reader*." Through a study called "Discordia Concors and Bidirectionality: Embodied Cognition in John Donne's Songs and Sonnets" on the metaphors in Donne's poems "The Bait" and "The Flea," Chanita Goodblatt and Joseph Glicksohn discuss the *grotesque nature* of his poetic imagery as constituting "a clash of incompatibles, generated by the great distance between the two semantic fields." The authors argue that it is this clash that sustains *bidirectionality* in a metaphor, by preserving the tension between its two subjects, while allowing each to alternatively become the focus of one's attention while reading the poems.

So finally, why has this reviewer yoked together criticism from eighteenth and twentieth century critics Johnson and Eliot on seventeenth-century poet John Donne, to review the poems of New York born, Canadian scholar-poet Jaclyn Piudik in her twenty-first century debut, *To Suture What Frays*? Let's start with the title:

Piudik — who holds a PhD in Medieval Studies — could have used the serviceable "to mend" or "to stitch" what wears or tears, but plain words are not the terms of a poet whose red-hot language swirls, spurts, spits and sometimes shows off with a wink to her readers, and perhaps to herself.

> Out of despair, I revert to a Cyrillic
> alphabet.
>
> — "Empathic Physics"

> These are the howlings of my soul
> A whispered perversion of godiva.
>
> — "Dogmata"

To Suture What Frays: Note the odd pairing of the medical *suture* — which suggests the repair of opened skulls, flesh, and wounds — with the fabric-related *frays* as in a worn coat-sleeve. "[T]o wear (something, such as an edge of cloth) as if by rubbing: FRET … to separate the threads at the edge of … to wear out or into shreds … show signs of strain … Fraying nerves," says *Merriam-Webster*, where definitions reveal that Piudik (whose degree requires months and years of rigorous Latin study) might well have found her title, in part, in the overlapping of Middle English, Anglo-French, and Latin. Where in fact "suture originates in Latin *sutura* seam, suture, from *sutus*, past participle of *suere* to sew." So, ruptured spirit, torn flesh and worn cloth are indeed woven — or yoked — together. Coincidentally or not, the dictionary definitions here read not dissimilarly to some of Piudik's poetry: "To convey a lullaby … a square of love / renamed: an ankh, a needle— / to seal the dew." Her adoration of the word and the Word — her training in medieval Romance and Hebrew literatures — are apparent on every page.

"By violence yoked together" is a fair place to enter the physics, chemistry, and certainly biology, of these red, rose, velvet, blood and hunger-shocked poems. (As Piudik writes, in "Empathic Physics," "What would life be without physics?... A lesson in lipstick … Treason!… Unethical, at the least.") Fair to note, as well, that fifty shades of red, roses, blood, black, hunger, roses, roses — followed in frequency by velvet, cream, leather, and salt, pour out on nearly every page, including in the intriguing black and white cover photo (taken by the poet) of a woman dressed in what appears to be punk and California-gold-rush era velvet, lace, and feathered Mohawk, while contemplating her "Vicissitudes" (one of the poems) on, we assume, red leather opera seats. There is also an obsession with thinness, hunger, a craving to disappear. While this barrage can be distracting, hearing Piudik read her work aloud, as an enthusiastic audience recently did in the poet's native New York City, greatly benefits the impact of these poems — and we who are rewarded by hearing and experiencing their cumulative power.

Piudik's mighty pen flashes feminism and rage.

Such power! Violent yokings from Sylvia Plath strike out from the page, in sound, the hissing of "sss's": "innocence softens the / cardboard soul" and brutality: "North of the well polished boot," from "Her Greening"; "Force feedings / lackluster suicide" (in "The Annals of Red"); "amid such famine I live on nothing" (in "Notes on Hunger"); and also perhaps from Mexican artist Frida Kahlo in Piudik's vivid color baths: especially from one of Piudik's *ars poetica* list-spill-offerings, noted above, "Crimson.... Scarlet?... allergic reaction taken for rubies … arm of Eve … to pierce, to kiss … Rouge … Sumac … Kidneys … War paint … Hibiscus … Satan … A used tampon."

until one and a half pages later:

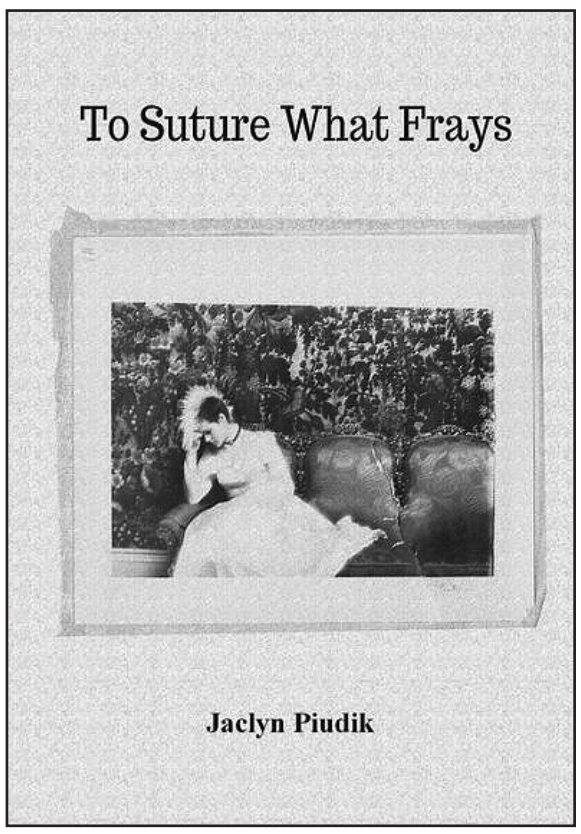
> And when she died they punctured her wrist
> to find color.

There is also, as in the best art, irony, and humor:

> Desire is obvious, but what tragedy
> could take its place?

and

> **GINGER**: …Your lover will have a bumpy
> penis.



The opening "Bruised Threads" (note flesh and cloth) is one of Piudik's most narrative, concrete poems along with "I Remember" ("mother's meat / gizzards and throat hells") and "Kisielin," a father's town in pre-Holocaust Poland where his mother mended holey socks, "saying nothing" and where "Milk doesn't grow on trees." Even these narrative works demonstrate Piudik's image-loading skill: there is no story that's not bruised, red with life's gore: Bleeding under the skin — a bruise; Thread sutures a wound or forms the bloody ties which tell the poet's story, which begins: "He died on her birthday. / On her birthday?... An omen … that he should pass when she was born." Three short stanzas later, following a repeated chorus of "Two times shiva":

> Winter's feet dragged her
> dead uncle through the white
> …
> The uncle shot for his money
> when he closed the paint store
>
> and the icebank bled.

A birthday, Moe from Brooklyn, a store, death, and then: "They sat low / in Flatbush that year." Shiva, money, gunshot, bleeding, Flatbush — the immigrant story: bruised threads. Piudik heats up her yoking of unlike things in "Errata," a poem about writing, perhaps to the Muse, perhaps to a lover, or both.

"Errata"

> Dickinson with an "e"
>
> Errata
> …five write in pencil
> simultaneously scratching graphite, truffles
> …
> Errata
> A cabbage moth flies out of my purse
> …
> Thousands of books and I
> do not have the heart
> to squeeze you out of flutter
>
> Errata
> Heaped with rosed salt
> catharsis in gouache steps out

——— *Brody continued on next page*

Brody continued from previous page

of shoes that have been here before.

Who said that stars are outdated
…
Answer my call

Piudik, who acknowledges poets Elaine Equi and Mary Stewart Hammond as mentors, employs free verse and freely plays with traditional forms. Though many poems are braced by the backbone of formal structure, in others, the poet breaks open and mixes sonnet, sestina, cancion, alba, haiku, and list-poems. "Some sonnets resolve themselves" she writes in "Tripta," while "Banquet of Empty Spaces," for example, has seven pairs of unrhymed couplets including,

Quail eggs teach us the expression of tulle,
the difference between an hourglass and a
palindrome

But only you can explain the molecular
composition of eros

(Note here again the yoking of flesh/egg and cloth.) Or "Pink" a fourteen-line unrhymed list poem that begins:

The legend of a minor cupcake
…
…Hand tinted Marxism
Photo-shopped souls

Or, "Dogmata" a fourteen-line sonnet-like poem which uses the repeating end-words pattern (soul, god, poetry, one) as in a sestina:

…These are the howlings of my soul.
A whispered perversion of godiva.
The impossible colors of poetry:
my crinoline — when I choose to wear
one —
or a glass slipper that has been unsoled
To hobble awake the real gods and poetry.

As a poet-reviewer, I'm grateful for Piudik's praise of the craft; in so many of these poems she gives us the actual word "poetry," its nature, its "crack of the lip … its thought … it eludes me sometimes, the poetry. " Even this elusion is a Piudik "illusion."

Last night she said that poetry is
a waste of paper
— "Deconstructing Buckwheat"

unsheath my pen from its half chime:
Philomela get your tongue back
the palimpsested hand
the poem squeezes through
— "In Half"

but my healer is poetry, not prozac
— "Elsewhere"

Piudik ends her volume (and each reading, she told us in New York) with this fourteen-line anaphora-poem of defiance, which like a Shakespeare monologue, or sonnet, turns on wit, and closes with a parry at both the listeners and the lyricist.

"Why She Ate Her Hair"

Because she lived in the house of hunger
…
Because she ran out of sky
and this could bring heaven
…
Because if she ate enough of herself
she might find herself

Because mortality was not enough
…
Because they accused her of being
full of herself
and she thought she'd prove them right.

History teaches us that a woman who writes commits a political act. Language is both tool and weapon. Piudik's mighty pen flashes feminism and rage, and her hyper reactive "delicate nerve endings" engage with creation and death. The poems don't rant. They pull you, they show you their story, if you work at understanding — back to Eliot's caveat, *"Considerable agility on the part of the reader*."

Listen! Jaclyn Piudik sings "where God is still a burning bush" (from "Morphologies") "among barking orchids" (from "Devil's Alba") in red, leather, velvet, salted rose, and blood. Truly, there is much at which to wonder in this sumptuous collection.

Patricia Brody's books include Dangerous to Know (2013) *and* American Desire (2009 FLP New Women's Voices award). *Work has appeared in* The Paris Review, Western Humanities Review, BigCityLit, *and others. Brody uses Marie Ponsot's observation method to teach Seeking Your Voice: Poetry & Beginning Memoir in NYC. She and photographer Tom Kostro raised three children one block from the Hudson River. You can read her poems on https://brodypoet.wordpress.com*

Eternal Returns

Laura Jok

Undoing

Kim Magowan

Moon City Press
www.moon-city-press.com/store/
216 Pages; Print, $14.9

The stories in Kim Magowan's collection *Undoing* suspend characters in states of dissolution — adultery, divorce, forgetting, impossible decisions — and contemplate whether the process of undoing itself can be reversed. This double meaning of undoing, to ruin your life or to take it all back, creates an atmosphere of brutal fatalism and brutal hope. Through this indeterminacy, each story is able to hold, in intense compression, the best and worst possible scenarios, the characters' very best and worst selves, as capacious as experience itself and subject to eternal revision.

In "When in Rome," the introductory story from which the collection takes its title, would-be lovers salvage their marriage and their extramarital desire, their incommensurate states, through the openness of story. They relegate their potential affair to an "alternate reality," an imaginative space in which their pasts can be rehashed, replaced:

> We are in Rome. Why Rome? Because it is not the place where either of us live… Perhaps, in the kind of eternal return of dreams and stories, because Rome is where I lost my virginity, and I will undo that night…by replacing it with you. So, we are in Rome. You stand in front of me. Your arms are at your sides, or perhaps you lightly press my shoulders, and you look at me. But I do not meet your eyes. I am concentrating on undoing, one by one, the mock mother-of-pearl buttons of your shirt, to reach your invisible and secret skin.

In this passage, the combination of the potential ("perhaps") with the declarative ("We are in Rome" and "You stand in front of me") and tangible detail ("mock mother-of-pearl buttons") valorizes fiction as its own form of truth. Between two unsatisfying choices, characters preserve the path untaken through the stories they tell, which in this case, saves them from destroying themselves and their young families, if it does not protect them from wistfulness. "When in Rome" is bookended thematically by the final story, "This Much." in which a couple conceals their imminent separation so they can watch their daughter walk down the aisle, holding hands, divorcing but not yet divorced, eternally in-between until, unless, they choose to tell the news.

Even when the reader can assume that the moment of grace is short-lived — that the characters will make the wrong decisions — the choice to end the stories before the turning point forgives without forgetting that they are capable of doing harm, whether by transgression or neglect. The story "On Air" ends with Alice observing her ex-husband, finally, for a moment, pay attention to their anorexic daughter, after neglecting her in favor of his new baby. Upon Alice's insistence, he looks at Laurel: "She watches the expressions (annoyance, perplexity, then concern) shift and slip across her ex-husband's face. 'I'm looking,' he says at last." The narrator knows Nathan's concern, and this elegant instance of seeing his daughter will not last because the narrator knows Nathan. Even his expression "shift and slip," is transient across his face. He is inclined to boredom, the parent who "refused to read" *Curious George* to baby Laurel because he found it tedious: "So boring, that book!... Nathan treated parenting as a menu, from which he could choose the entertaining items."

Jok continued on next page