



Pity the Bathtub Its Forced Embrace of the Human Form

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Comic, elegaic, and always formally intricate, using political allegory and painterly landscape, philosophic story and dramatic monologue, these poems describe a moment when something marvelous and unforeseen alters the course of a single day, a year, or an entire life.

Pity the Bathtub Its Forced Embrace of the Human Form Details

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Rachel Becerra says

some good poems. there was such range that it doesn't all seem written by the same person.

Melissa says

Picked this up because David Foster Wallace had it on his syllabus. And, because of his recommendation, this part made me sad:

The bath has a place in our lives and our place is
Within it we have control of how much hot how much cold
What to pour in how long we want to stay when to
Return is inevitable because we need something
To define ourselves against even if we know that
Whenever we want we can pull the plug and get out
Which is not the case with our own tighter confinement
Inside the body oh pity the bathtub but pity us too.

Great titles of these poems. But I often liked the titles better than the actual poems.

Mark Desrosiers says

The title reminds me of how writers named them clunky yet beautiful olden SF novels: Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said; I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream; There Beneath the Silky-Trees and Whelmed in Deeper Gulphs Than Me etc.

Peter Derk says

I couldn't finish it. I'm sorry.

The author enjoyed playing with the line breaks like so:

At their hems that seem to map out coastlines left far
Behind the new songs are the old absurd hopes

I don't understand, really, how one is meant to read this. "Coastlines left far behind"? "Far behind the new songs are the old absurd hopes"? Both of those phrases work for me, but using the "far" and "Behind" twice and with a line break between the two words, this just doesn't make for a pleasurable reading experience for

me.

I'm not rewriting the poem here because I think there's a better way or anything, but just to illustrate my confusion reading through

I know it's nit-picky, but this is something the author did A LOT.

With their nose in a posy & then came the stuttered
Explanation was required if one seemed to be admiring

If I may make a running analogy.

Once I saw a high school kid run a 400-meter dash in 48 seconds and change. This is pretty damn fast. The current Olympic record for women's 400-meter dash is in the 47's, if that can provide some context.

It was a sight. It's been at least ten years, and I still remember what the kid looked like. His maroon uniform and big hair.

There's something to enjoy in watching a runner who is struggling, crawling forward after the bear jumps on his back, as we say. After the rhino jumps on the bear's back. After the sperm whale jumps on the rhino, who jumped...you get it. There's a pride there, and a strength there too.

There's also something similar, yet sort of different in watching someone who runs in a way that you'll never run. Who, by running a lap around the track, makes you sure that this is what the human body was meant to do. The ease of it, the simplicity.

In poems, I prefer watching the elite athlete. By that I don't mean that this or that poet is "better." That's a distinction I'm very uninterested in outside of the track analogy. In track, the time is faster or it isn't. In art, an objective better or worse is impossible to find, or at least a question that doesn't interest me in the least.

What I mean by the elite athlete is the person who makes the poem feel effortless. Almost teases me because I think, "I could write that." Of course, once you really start to examine it, once you clock it in and do the math, you figure out just how much work went into it and how woefully far away it is.

And though in movies and in life and even in running I like the dogs, the Rocky Balboa's of the world who show every footfall on their faces, that effort, that pain in reading, that step-by-step progress is just not my thing as a reader of poetry.

Ryo Yamaguchi says

I came to "Pity..." after having read "Sad Little Breathing Machine," so my thoughts on the collection are a bit in reverse. Dean Young's string-of-similes blurb, "this book astonishes me the way I am astonished by jeweled clockworks, siege machinery, the musculature of the shark and hummingbird," thus, in hindsight, seems more fitting for Harvey's second collection, which is much more a collection of little machines of ornament and maneuvers (not pejorative!). Thus, I am in fact struck by the coherence of the poems in "Pity...", the fidelity to scene and conceit they exhibit. There are in fact quite a number of narrative cycles,

all of them stunning, though perhaps the most narrative of note (and I think the best) is "Thermae," a collection of prose poems that follows a very tight sort of day-in-the-life.

Of course, the "Ceiling Unlimited Series" detours a bit and is perhaps my all-time-favorite of the collection, and really, for what I can gather, links us as readers to Harvey's future endeavors, hints at, foreshadows, etc. It's most adept at musically linking a quickfire chain of statements that feel too distant from each other to offer the kind of tenable arguments and complete scenes the other poems afford. When these are most successful the feeling is that of a fusillade of aphorisms (even when the lines are descriptive), which, for me, is accomplished exactly because of the proximity of the lines to one another. In other words, she is being pretty D. Young here; she is making metaphors that we can't explain in paragraphs:

...Like most
cadenzas I need something to come back to.
I push the rubble out of the second-storey window.
I put the money in an envelope and it's sucked up
a transparent tube. Only the rusted bits of roof
stand out against the sky. Yellow water
in the gutters--always the fault falls somewhere.

Now I feel like I must mention the other sort of detour Harvey takes from fidelity, though, ha!, it also just supplants one for the other--her perhaps most frequented technique (I mean, these is almost a new entry in the Book of Forms she nails it so fully) in the collection is this thing that all the Goodreaders (me too!) are having a really difficult time naming, the "carry over," the "enjambment," etc. Essentially, the line breaks, and the next logical word appears, but that word is now, in the new line, ACTUALLY functioning in an entirely new syntactic structure, i.e., the natural ellipses between statements, the synapses, are actually CONNECTED by a single word that is performing double duty. This does not happen at every line, but the effect is that every little area of concern, every argument or scene becomes kind of modular, connected to the next by a "joint" or "hinge." Ah hell e.g.:

Again housewives took blue pills to magnify the moment
When they rounded the curve of a chocolate cake &
Were about to find out whether the frosting would
LAST year when something truly predictable happened...

From "The State of Expectation." My emphasis. See what I'm saying? A lot of folks are put off by this, but I have to put myself in the OMG-Love-It camp. Doesn't this remind people of the "Miss Susie" game?

Miss Susie had a steamboat, the steamboat had a bell,
Miss Susie went to heaven, The steamboat went to...
Hello operator, please give me number nine,

It's a pretty clear, formal conceit--I think it's form introduced from on high, and while I'm one to think that that doesn't typically lead to glory and flowers, in this case--well Harvey is just brilliant--she really pulls it off, she UNDERSTANDS what this technique can and should do, and she wastes no time getting us there. This is not to say she is ALWAYS successful. The most successful moments are, perhaps, like above, when this advances us into a new scene, esp., moment in time--other instances of the technique feel slightly more random and not quite as finely executed, perhaps, inhabit that same superficial space as pun? Taken from the same poem:

Something went wrong with the lottery & someone won
Though the government claimed it was one of series of
Tests in school were rarely given but frequently announced...

It's difficult to measure when we are only reading the excerpt, but here, in that old workshop adage, function seems to be serving form, and we give Harvey a B+ for it.

O but I'm so sorry to end on a sour note. Read this book. More importantly, read it twice.

Dusie Press says

i have been wanting to read this b0ook forever...the title has haunted me for years now!

Robert Beveridge says

Matthea Harvey, *Pity the Bathtub Its Forced Embrace of the Human Form* (Alice James Books, 2000)

My crush on Matthea Harvey grows with each of her books I read. *Pity the Bathtub...* is her first collection, and it's incredible. There's so much wow factor here that I'm not sure quite where to begin. There are two basic types of poems here, so we'll start there. The first type takes enjambment to its absurdist conclusion; this type of poem comprises about three-quarters of the book. The only thing to which I can compare them is Claude Simon's unreadable novel *Conducting Bodies*. In prose, it was an awful experience to try and read; *Conducting Bodies* is a single two hundred fifty-six page sentence that doesn't make one bloody bit of sense. In poetry, however, and with Harvey adding such niceties as punctuation and imagery, it works fabulously:

“Pity the bathtub that belongs to the queen its feet
Are bronze casts of the former queen's feet its sheen
A sign of fretting is that an inferior stone shows through
Where the marble is worn away with industrious
Polishing the tub does not take long it is tiny some say
Because the queen does not want room for splashing...”
(--p. 3, from the title track)

Okay, that Apollinairian bit of grand guignol may have not been the best example of how she introduced punctuation into the form. But just listen to the way those words bounce and rattle, every one of them dripping with context. That's crazy talk, right there.

The second type is more traditional, relying less on form and wordplay than on image and story. They're just as good, a shade less striking for obvious reasons but just as accomplished, and let's remember that this is a debut collection.

“Dear dust-ghost, the instructions don't make
sense unless I sing them. If the bottom-most hem
is six feet from the ground, how do I get into this dress?”

Bird ode: dark triangle feet in a wind-field.
Fifth Museum Poem: O swim on through.”
(--p. 57, from “Almost Anything”)

I totally stole “the instructions don't make/sense unless I sing them” as a title for an upcoming XTerminal track. Not sure I can give you a more strident recommendation than that. I have loved, loved, loved every book of Matthea Harvey's I have read so far—and this is the best of the lot. **** ½

Heather Gibbons says

Because I'm futzing with my own sectioned book, I'm particularly attuned to how contemporary poets use the unit of the section in a collection. I'm not totally sure I understand the hows and whys of Harvey's sectioning vision here, though I do appreciate the break and breath it provides.

In the first section, the title poem has wonderful dynamism and a strange, jerky music, and the persona of the Self Portraits sequence I found compelling and the sense of form that felt very sure to me. I could not get into the poems in the second section-- I'm easily intimidated by long lines that eschew punctuation. But then the third section comes, and it's just packed with gems: "The Oboe Player" is a dead-on, witty idea finely-rendered, "Thermae" is fascinating, and a nice shift in terms of voice, form, and concern, and I loved "Letting Go." And all four poems/sequences/pieces of the final section are *gorgeous*-- "Ceiling Unlimited Series" gave me chills. What lovely, heartbreaking episodes.

karen says

these are really beautiful poems. they are playful and image-heavy and inventive - very pleasing to a girl whose strengths/interests are not in poetry, but would like to be convinced.

Kayla says

This is a somewhat difficult book of poetry to go through simply because of the stylistic approach Harvey takes. Most of her poems have sentences that blend into each other, as the word that completes a previous sentence is used to begin a new sentence. Reading the poems can leave the meaning a little disjointed if you lose your place; reading them aloud sometimes doesn't help because you don't know where to stop to catch a breath. But Harvey's fantastical ideas still shine through in this collection, so I ended up enjoying it.

I like how Harvey can take one completely unrealistic idea and roll with it, turning it into an entire poem. She never states her idea for the reader outright, skirting around the unconventional thought like it's a normal aspect of our lives and waiting for us to figure out what's different in the world of these characters. She creates different figures and stories within her poetry, which I really enjoyed.

I think that a lot of people will like these poems, if they take the time to sit with them for a while. This is poetry that you can't read quickly; it demands to be held at arm's length and read a few times until you understand the general meaning. Then it needs to be analyzed even further. While this isn't a bad thing, it

means that Harvey's collection may be overlooked as people search for poetry that is an easier (and faster) read.

Milo says

Wordplay-esque/intensely structural poetry (obviously all poetry is structural, but do you know what I mean?) will sometimes read as gratuitous and distancing to me, but the way Harvey brings it into (some of) her writing--whoaaa. The craft/structure/voice(s) here are incredible and new and A+.

In terms of the collection, the poems were a bit hit-or-miss for me, but the ones that got me, GOT ME.

Here's one of my favorite pieces:

“here I am the trapper littering the landscape with corpses
no longer feeling as if the path of my life is being cut into rock
by passion’s aimless meanderings I look back to you as though
through a telescope in this I mean I know what I want now
are the hidden things the intangible and unimaginable all
that you spoke of long ago I thought it was all about the chase
I reveled in hardships practicing sleeping on the dormitory floor
for when I would have the ground as my bed but I never practiced
sleeping with my knees in the hollow of another’s knees or breathing
slowly together instead I learnt the shallow breath of one who must
always remain undetected and in this way I have let my face slip from
your dreams I am here I am combing the grasses for hidden lions
riding after herds of elephants coming home with my own skin torn
my disguises and ploys seen for what they are by simple animals
who turn around and charge when they have been betrayed.”

-from “Frederick Courteney Selous’s Letters to His Love”

Chris McCracken says

Longer more "ladylike" poems from Matthea. Still playful. She uses words like hinges from one line to the next and still keeps the poems steady. Very very pretty stuff. See: "One Filament Against the Firmament".

Michael Vagnetti says

A myth of reading: retrieve the work from a marketplace, then engage it somewhere else (the languagesphere, time, memory, theory). This book left strong contrails of the market: how it was published, rather than how it made meaning.

Some technical features read as more arty than artful. Bleeding phrases into one another so that the last word of one phrase is the beginning of another, encourages the circularity of a subject, or her letting go. Combined

with a lack of punctuation, it feels aggressive and ungenerous. It left me in a small room, with no air to gasp or sigh. A freer or more open syntax can actually discourage flow, like trying to curate the rush of a waterfall.

The episodes here had forgettable sightlines, and with my view blocked, I was left willing to fight for little.

Molly says

Impossible to ignore this perfect title--I remember first finding it in the bookstore. The poems were lovely, playful. I particularly enjoyed the series of portrait poems as well as the ornamental poem, which surprised me as I don't often like concrete poetry--but the words and phrases were so well done, it was hard to not enjoy them. I had difficulty with her frequent device of carry-over; I'm not sure how to describe it technically, but she writes one line where the next word or phrase connects, but the line starts anew. My eyes would swoop around in circles, caught in the last thought, confused at the next. I would have perhaps liked it for a poem or two, but would brace myself when the technique occurred again. Lovely collection, however. I look forward to reading more.

SmarterLilac says

Charming.

I was first attracted to this book because of the title--I've been reading a lot of social justice blogs and some are a little over the top in their quest to make sure that every last thing on earth is treated with respect. (I can actually picture some of the blogs using the title for a serious post about the ethics of furniture use.)

This book was a pleasant surprise; its unpretentious writing encourages us to take our environments, physical and emotional, more seriously, (but not *too* seriously) while treating our relationships like works of art. I read it as a plea for more conscious living. The structure of these pieces, most of which feature a kind of enjambment that draws the reader into each line as an intimate continuation of the last one, has an entirely gentle approach to communication. (The poets of this decade, many of whom have a hard, fast and garish way of getting their point across, could learn a thing or two from this author.)

And my copy (surprise!) turned out to be autographed. Thanks, Amazon sender!

secondwomn says

3-3.5

Craig says

A couple of things that I don't personally care for in poetry:

1.) seemingly impenetrable walls of text. -- Though I do like a longer, meandering line break system sometimes, I am not a fan of bricks of text - that is, not unless it is prose poetry.

2.) Lack of punctuation. This, I'm just not a fan of in any way. I realize that it can be used for many different purposes.

These both greeted me while reading this collection. Those gripes aside, I still found much to like about this collection...

I loved the long Ceiling Unlimited Series. I liked Frederick Courteney Selous's Letters To His Love. I enjoyed the series of Self Portraits.

In general, I liked the playful language (though I often felt like I wasn't 'getting' some sort of humor in places.). I liked the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) questioning.

I want to say that I loved the book -- There was just too much that I didn't like, though.

D'Argo Agathon says

Frustrating and compelling at the same time, this collection expects patience from the audience and yet the style is not conducive to eliciting it. Thematically, these pieces are tight-knit and woven well as a whole, but the lack of punctuation and “bleeding” of lines in individual poems creates discord on the micro scale. Quite unique images and turns-of-phrase pepper these pieces to give them great flavor, but as a reader, I do not feel that I am able to savor the taste because Harvey’s sea of words coerces me to continue on reading the poem; perhaps this “liquid” feel is the point – it certainly fits with the water/bathtub imagery – but I think that focus on the “form” of things downplays the impact of the content.

Though “bleeding” lines really annoys the piss out of me, Harvey does it perfectly; she’s a master of using each new line to compliment two separate “sentences” and even ideas. From “One Filament Against the Firmament”, Harvey writes, “...he decided / That finding beauty pointless might actually be the / Point at something & see past it” (66). This is a great example of why this bleeding both works and doesn’t work: on one hand, Harvey finds a perfect, monosyllabic, pointed word to act as a fulcrum between two ideas – almost like the word itself is its own semicolon and subject, and yet, on the other hand, the reader is forced to leave the previous point and let the image float away... but I wanted to stay on that idea of “finding beauty pointless”! Why do I not get a breather to contemplate that? Yes, I get the form is trying to tell me something as well, but the form, to me, is far less important than the message she was trying to write about.

Now, thankfully, some of Harvey’s pieces include punctuation, but frankly, that doesn’t really help vary things enough for meditation. The book is a short collection – rightfully so – but the small deviation in form throughout does little to make the whole thing less dense or more accessible. Ironically, I think her “Nude of a Horsehair Sofa by the Sea” has a phrase that embodies my ambivalence toward her poetry: “...I’m avoiding / the subject, still fretting over how to paint / the word *sometimes*” (5).

Terry says

In her first book *Pity the Bathtub Its Forced Embrace of the Human Form*, I was delighted to find poems that were not only beautiful and eloquent, but also cheeky and fantastical as well. Much of her first book utilizes narrative, but not in ways that one would expect. For example, in “Outside the Russian-Turkish Baths,” (8) she is able to inject vibrancy into the poems by creating narrative yet introducing images and sounds to set the scene: “A child surveys the street for a lost toy,/ goes inside the slamming door, two stories up a stereo/ shuts off as a young woman settles to sleep...” Things shift so colorfully and unexpectedly in this poem - “the older man’s confusion becomes wonder, the younger’s malice, delight” - that it is as if the reader is watching the scene unfold in a non-linear fashion.

Harvey is somehow able to write poems that are both mischievous and insightful. The title poem of her first book, “Pity the Bathtub its Forced Embrace of the Human Form” (3) is a prime example of this, evident in the very title itself. Her titles usually give structure or added meaning to the actual poem and in this case the title sets up the three parts to this poem: the story of a queen, the story of a glassmaker, and the relation of the bathtub’s condition to the human condition. In the poem she uses line breaks as a technique to challenge and broaden the way that we read. An example of this is, “For improvement within try a soap dish that allows for/Slippage is inevitable as is difference...” (4) where “Slippage” can be read as both an object and a subject. This kind of play with language and line break placement which occurs at odd intervals makes for a layered reading experience similar to Impressionist painting. As usual, the ending of the poem clinches it:

“Return is inevitable because we need something
To define ourselves against even if we know that
Whenever we want we can pull the plug and get out
Which is not the case with our own tighter confinement
Inside the body oh pity the bathtub but pity us too”
- (Pity the Bathtub 4)

For subject matter she draws on the personal, but withholds her own personal life. There are few poems that seem to speak directly to love, although many indirectly touch on love and desire. One exception is “In Defense of our Overgrown Garden” (29) which ends with “To close I’m sorry there won’t be any salad and I love you.” Even then the poem seems to be more funny and clever than personal: “It has always puzzled me that people coo over bonsai trees when/You can squint your eyes and shrink anything without much of/A struggle” (29).

Leif says

Matthea Harvey isn't the blushing poet shyly sliding handwritten poems in pure, handwritten manuscript across the table at you. And we should all be glad about that. Her blocky forms and shuddering rhythms --- "Liked it because his barks got better reactions & it was / Easier to sneak up on the servants & steal bits of their / Dinner was always served at seven & though she hid her / Lovers in cupboards & made them tiptoe past the trellises / They never lasted long because..." --- hide their own seductive, coy logic, an associative pattern that's more honestly human among all these machine-typed, inhumanly compressed shapes than many a poetic scrawl in cheerful ballad stanzas. The pattern fits her subjects, as well: close, dysfunctional, straight-jacketed relationships, sometimes terrifically one-sided, as in the gorgeous "Frederick Courteney Selous's Letters to His Love", and sometimes pushing against the disappearing human and the doubleness of

identity in artistic creation, as in the ekphrastic "Self-Portraits: After Paintings by Max Beckmann". Here's the first one in that sequence, "Double Portrait, Carnival, 1925":

I worked on us
for weeks. Painted my face, then yours. I loved yours,
made it smile as our doubles struck silly poses.
Me the hapless clown, you both general and horse ---
the fore-legs your legs, the hind legs, horse,
high heels mimicking hooves. I gave you a huge hat,
a soft grey jacket, a white cravat, closed your fingers
around the reins. And for myself? I painted a cigarette,
a purple suit and shiftless feet. I thought I was painting you
a poem of color, of spotted horses and orange cuffs.
But the horse had a wild eye, the tent flap gaped,
and we stood there in disguise.

Carnival Double Portrait Max Beckmann and Quappi 1925

In each poem, like in each of Beckmann's paintings, identity's fractures make for great poetic play. And those notes of melancholic failure? Exquisitely placed, following the charm of wistful ambition: "I thought I was painting you / a poem of color". Incidentally, if anyone is rehabilitating the enjambed line, signature to poetry *qua* poetry, that person is Matthea Harvey. Why ask for more? It's only her first book of poems.
