

SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

In her essay “Image,” which has as its epigraph Pound’s famous dictum on the image (“an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”), Ellen Bryant Voigt argues that the power of imagery finds its source in a paradox: that image (the “picture in words”) is a filtered utterance, “the body ‘thinking’ through the senses, the mind embodied.” This paradox in turn reflects another paradox, that of human consciousness—“the fact that the mind *is* body, whether sense, organs or cerebrum.” Voigt concludes: “Thus the most effective images in poetry may be those in which the two opposing poles, the two ends of that mind-body spectrum, are collapsed in on themselves.”

Image is more than what the poet sees. Between mind and brain, image is a feeling state patterned in electrochemical signals and made available for reappearance by the complex inner workings of the body—the mind “seeing” what the body “feels,” and vice versa. In the reader, the image reproduces how the poet thinks and feels. Evidence of this extraordinary relationship abounds in Jessica Abughattas’s debut poetry collection, *Strip*. Take the opening of “Dinner Party,” which initiates the book:

At the Chicago home of two of the film’s well-to-do backers,
Irish Catholics.

There was talk of the baby their daughter had adopted from
Uzbekistan.

The trauma of not being held.

There are not enough women in the orphanages
to hold all the babies, so they put them in one crib.

The night outside was black
and I felt the chill inside my womb.

Within a few short lines, Abughattas travels from someone else’s home to crib to womb (a life journey in reverse), from affluence to poverty, from imperial liberalism to disempowerment, from inconsequential party chitchat to unspoken inner longing. Sentence to sentence, absence is deeply felt. The baby and the daughter who

adopted her are present only by way of talk. Mothers in Uzbekistan are missing from the lives of their children. So, too, is their mothers' necessary touch, an absence that will be felt, as trauma, long after the children leave the orphanage. And in the excerpt's final image, the exterior absence (of the sun's light and warmth) reveals that of the speaker's interior. What the poem's images actually describe, then, is not the titular dinner party, but the poet's mind and body making sense of the world to which the poet belongs. Said another way, the description recreates the poet working through the entanglements of that inescapable burden: the self. And the self that emerges in *Strip* continually subverts expectations.

"Dinner Party" strips down one dominant version of our America "in some seamless, unnoticeable way" without acrobatic visions. The mystery that Abughattas composes is always moving toward an impossible freeing of the self from its numerous frames. Yet frame by frame in "Dinner Party" she suspends our disbelief, catalogs those potentialities in an America always ready to shoot, direct, and produce the film of itself. *Strip* is "in love with possibility," "in praise of here I am, here I've been," USA style. *Strip* celebrates the body—its rise and fall, ebb and flow, in a carnival of parties—restlessly, shamelessly, searching for a way out:

to drown

the phantom selves
looming like sea foam—
to thrust spectacularly
into the singular
body so that the ocean fears me.

Most of the poems in *Strip* speak in conversational breath. Lyricism's transformative power is what the poet shares with us to announce her departure from the lyric into the ordinarily stated. Between "*Fuck you Charles Bukowski*" and "The Pure Gold Baby" of Sylvia Plath, "Poetry" for Jessica Abughattas "is a plain woman who comes and goes as she pleases."

A reader can imagine the poet's search for her body in the world through her dance with language. Even as Abughattas claims that "I can't believe sometimes I have a body," her poems

teem with an awareness of the body's unavoidable centrality in our lives—in how we view our lives, and how others view them; in how they progress, and how they end; in how they become meaningful, and how they are stripped of meaning. And no stripping escapes memory. Whether in terms of dispossession or sexuality, admiration or pity, Abughattas renders her treatment of the body with candor and poignancy, and she is not embarrassed to write sensually or humorously (“I have measured my affairs / in skivvies”).

The most startling moments in Abughattas's poems, however, depend not on shocking or intimate details—but on the “I” pulling away from the self, abandoning the ego, and gazing outward. She tries to see something else, to escape the body's restraints.

If this cure lasts, even for a few hours,
I'll take it. Even if we're dead

we must undress each other.

Identity in *Strip* shifts from poem to poem, along with the ways that Abughattas speaks to her readers. She is a wallflower in a goth club falling in love with “a bleached blonde punk from Texas” with “pinches for tits, heroin in her eyes.” She is a young, upwardly mobile professional who writes “taglines and property descriptions for houses / where I'll never afford to live.” She forgets she's rich while “drinking in the faux vintage establishments,” forgets she's poor “until rent is due,” and still gets “high in the middle of the day.” She is the daughter who knows a good deal about rosary beads and penance and who understands that “upturned shoes means you're stepping on God.” She's “brief and iconic,” as are her many references to popular culture. She's “someone to fall in love with at an airport.” And insofar as she's Palestinian, she's Californian.

Abughattas finds brilliant expression for the void shared by an overwhelming majority; a majority void where the intense visibility and the compelling rhythms of our American treasures can't alleviate the internalized image of a self in isolation—of a fiend for love and abandon, exhibitionism and voyeurism, kinesis and stasis. (In this, Abughattas's aesthetic concerns bring to mind Zeina Durra's beautiful film *The Imperialists Are Still Alive!*)

Jessica Abughattas's Palestine is American par excellence. The personal narratives and lyrics scattered across *Strip* are allegories of the American national self. In America, the illusion of a psychologic split between the private and the public (a euphemism for engagement with and judgment of a political-identity spectrum) can be a capitalist enterprise of the highest order. Abughattas reflects this in her poems as the moon reflects the sunlight at night. She isn't after a glaring declaration. But the orbit she finds herself in is inescapable.

"Her hand's her land," announces one of the last lines in the book. The echo of Woody Guthrie's song is unmistakable, but the poet is speaking of her grandmother from Bethlehem (who also makes an apparitional cameo in the mysterious poem "Secondhand"). Arguably, the American allegory of the immigrant at work here is an outgrowth from the likes of Flannery O'Connor and Willa Cather. And yet, Abughattas offers us something different in the truncated syntax of "Litany for My Father" and in the haunting tenderness (against the performativity of "witness") in the short poem "Semantics":

When the census came
When we went to school
When we met the Arabs
When Moroccan couscous
And when the towers fell
When at the airport
When our accents were
And when we were Syrians

When my grandmother is tired
A swallow flutters from her throat

Several short poems—"The Desert Doesn't Know" and "Orgy (Bat Poem)," for example—highlight Abughattas's brilliant capacity to crystalize a world in passing, as if in a gathering of friends with alcohol and weed around. In Jessica Abughattas's poems, one returns to the "hand" far more than one returns to the "land." The

hand as part of the body in a repetitive process of being stripped—
of skin, memory, desire, health, time, love, and secure living in the
modern world—a hand that paradoxically and incessantly insists
on holding on to what is hers:

Love is not love—we get altered
and in our alteration find—
it's danger or a spell.
There's no greater hell than wanting
what dismisses wanting, expels
from the lips of whiskey glasses—
creatine arms & keratin lashes.
I got your text, I was two gins deep.
I'd rather go out with you than sleep.

And later in the same sequence of “Grand Marnier”:

Whoever invited jealousy
into our dishonorable affair?
Our experiment in modernity
afflicted by disrepair—

The difference between return and repetition is not in the passage of time but in the effect time has upon its subject. Return is change, mutability; and repetition is reenactment, an idea of precision. Abughattas's poetry balances these two states magnificently. Throughout *Strip*, Abughattas employs riveting choreographic and cinematographic methods. We are in California celebrating the body. California exports the body to the world. And there is no system or culture that does not depend on the body's use or representation to make a claim for itself over its willing or unwilling members. This tragic, dramatic, and grave reality is just what Jessica Abughattas counters, mostly with humor, unexpected tenderness, and absurdity:

In California
we grow grapes in the desert.
Music keeps the time.

At least the birds are not bored.
It's all the same, dirty wing over nameless tree.
I have never known meditation to make any person
more tolerable to others.
You must love your misery.
You must feast upon it.
I give orgasms to my misery.
My misery is more beautiful
when it smiles.

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