

Shauna Osborn. *Arachnid Verve*. Mongrel Empire Press, Norman, OK. 91 pp. ISBN: 978-0997251715. <http://mongrelempire.org/media/press-kits/arachnid-verve-by-shauna.html>

from fingers
from feathers black & red
ink drips across the page¹

If writing a review were like sitting on a jury it would be rare for Indigenous writers to get a fair trial. I point this out as a way to introduce my bias in this case. I've been aware of Shauna Osborn's work for some time, if I weren't I wouldn't qualify as a peer. In this corner of poetry we review our relatives. Oklahoma poet Carroll Arnett / Gogisgi pointed out some time ago that if you live in the "two worlds" there are very "few of us" (qtd in Sanchez 144) So, grab a coney and a fried pie and let me give you a tour of *Arachnid Verve*, from someone who has deep roots in a different small Oklahoma town nearby. Osborn is a Numuunu and German poet and this is her first full-length solo collection.

My first reaction to this book was, "Seriously? Why have a glossary and notes?" I don't like that kind of translation. Too many people come with their begging bowl to poems and ask to be given something in exchange for limited effort. I think that poetry deserves deep reading, investigation and empathy. In particular I resist the notion that work that is culturally unfamiliar to larger populations owe the readers a free ticket. Then I grumpily read the glossary. I still resist them, but it is difficult to get too unhappy with a glossary whose clarifications include "my pussy," "to eat toothpaste on toast" and "slow moving warfare marked by repeated stalemate" (89). There are also notes. The poet has made things easier on the reader.

"If you were a man," the poetry avatar is told in the two part poem "Double Standard," and later, "Cause that's the way it is" (p 8-9). Frustration is measured in chopped potatoes, "Furious thick brown skinned cubes" (9). The human identity in many of these poems is an escape artist. She, like the spider in the poem "Truss," is "persistent & intractable" (23). External and judgmental forces create and try to enforce shackles, but locks are picked, handcuffs slipped, and the heroine continues her curious investigations. In "Altitude," "I recognize that my stubbornness, will be the end of me" but in a subsequent section of the same poem, "only clever prey survive" (29-32).

"Guionista Sangre (Blood Writer)" may be the clearest thesis statement of all. The poet with "ink maps [...] carved into her flesh" (81). She is "covered with paths [...] cultural maps." These poems come from the body of the poet like the spider silk or other, more difficult extractions. "We've never been taught geography never known the contours of ourselves" (82). The landscape of body; the identities of women; iconic images of what power looks like in a female form: the poet runs her stories over the topological evidence, finds the unspoken there.

"Song for Nina," exhorts "tell me I'm beautiful, tell me I'm real," because the witness is "right alongside me, and you knew" (69). The poem is lean, almost stripped. It's a cry for recognized identity "in our voice our tongue" (70). In the book's quest, this issue of identity, of beauty, drives on through line break, broken glass and damage and calls for someone powerful to speak. In an environment of erasure and self-imposed invisibility, that of women, that of Native people, that of poverty, this voiced wish itself is a truth telling.

Some wounds are so deep, have caused so much damage that it is difficult to even begin the conversation. In “Wing,” “Someone left an intact left wing on the sidewalk. There are no signs of foul play-” (76). What mayhem caused this? There isn’t enough left to evaluate the crime scene. There is just a beautiful artifact, posed in a public place. The poet wants to change the wing, “strap it onto my arm,” or “carry this wing” (76-77) There must be some way, in this vista of the avatar’s “beautiful war scarred students,” to assemble something vital from all of these pieces.

Invoking social media in a review of a poetry book is probably unforgivable but I’m going to do it. Every day on every group page that filters into my social media there are dozens of challenges to the authenticity, the reality, of some writer or other who claims a Western-Hemispheric identity. It is a prevailing topic, like weather we might not have chosen, and like hard weather it has also swept away some bridges and caused some to drown. For good reasons and for bad ones this issue comes up and up. I have seen the authenticity argument explored in poetry, in prose and in rant. If I look at my newsfeed right now I feel certain that there are a few of these conversation threads underway. When an Indigenous poet contemplates their reality, that contemplation is freighted with more than some residue of a traumatic reading of *Pinocchio*. In *Arachnid Verve* Osborn remains very raw on this subject. The poet isn’t protecting herself or the community in this book any more than in the explorations of poverty or of being a woman. The word is thrown around too often with respect to poetry but this work displays a deep emotional honesty that is recognizable. This material is not easy.

I was always going to love this book. Osborn has a muscular, grown woman style of writing that speaks to me. These poems work hard, they sweat, they have unreasonable relatives, they wear jeans and old boots, they aspire, they read widely and they bleed. This book is an antidote. In a world moment where so many women ask to be allowed to speak, these poems stand, feet planted, in the very center of territory they know is theirs. These poems tell you exactly what they think. Osborn exists as witness for self and fellow travelers. In our own languages, somewhere in the broken glass, next to the scars or down the bike path next to the disembodied wing, there is a place where we are beautiful, whole and real.

Kim Shuck, California College of Art

Notes

¹ Sauna Osborn, from [Antes Taabe \(Before the Sun\)](#).

Sanchez, Carol Lee, *From Spirit to Matter: New and Selected Poems, 1969-1996*. San Francisco: Taurean Horn/Out West, 1997.