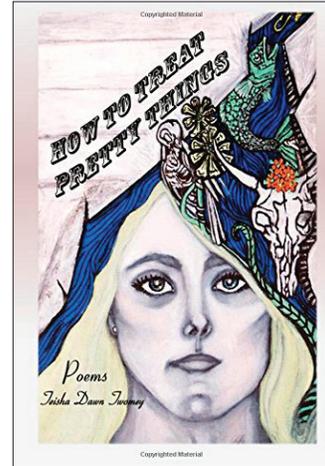


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HOW TO TREAT PRETTY THINGS, Poems by Teisha Dawn Twomey.
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Reviewed by Julia Carlson



I recall being at a Smithsonian exhibition of Italian Renaissance art many years ago with my father, a “Sunday painter” of some talent. We were looking at a painting about the Visitation to the Madonna, and I remarked on the shimmer in the tones of her blue and red robes. My father explained that back then, painters ground semi-precious stones to a fine powder and mixed it into their paints to add luminosity; in this case, he thought it was most likely lapis lazuli and carnelian which deepened the reds and blues of her robe. “In painting, light is the most important, you need to see,” he said. “Like in all great art,” he went on, “you should feel an emotion when you look at it. The technique draws the eye into the painting and if it’s done right, produces an emotional response.” Heavy words from my often-reticent Yankee father. I asked him if he thought this applied to poetry as well. Then, I was a budding poet (still am), and curious about how people might react to poetry. He replied it was more of the same - when reading a poem, you should feel some emotion, and it’s up to the poet to give that to you through whatever techniques he/she uses. Over the years, I’ve become more familiar with poetic techniques and forms, but the bottom line for me is always: a good poem elicits feelings. Good, bad, sweet, sour, but never indifferent.

That being said, Teisha Dawn Twomey’s verse in *How To Treat Pretty Things*, does just that. At first read, I was drawn in by the both poetic structure and the human (and at times, animal) relationships presented in her poems, and my feeling response to them. And I am a big fan of couplets and punctuation, which Twomey uses extensively. Although punctuation appears to be demode in poetry these days, its use, along with the structure of couplets (and the word chosen for line’s ending), slows us as we read. We are thus drawn us into the poems, as the reader is forced to take in each and every word in each line. In “Hometown Decay” she writes:

*I’m just another local girl in cut offs, bent over,
a garden bed daydreaming: Greg’s fuzzy dice*

*swung from his rearview mirror in synch
with his moans. My face was in a lap,*

*forehead clinking against the flask,
growing warm between thighs. ...*

And then:

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*After, he'd huddled close to my breast
like a heavy-eyed newborn. It's a small town.*

*There's nothing else to do. It's this or a trip
To the meth labs just up the road. ...*

Twomey has a keen observing eye and a fecund imagination. In her short poem, *Self-Portrait at Age Seventy-Nine*, she imagines her elderly self:

*I am so old, these birds could outlive me.
I am relieved by this. Like some great weight*

*being lifted from my chest. The one that's been bearing down
on me, demanding. My only guests are goldfinches. I am not naive*

*enough to think I own them. I unlatch their bamboo doors
every morning, always honored they stay.*

*I comb my silver hair away from my face, still in love
with my collarbone. I have a hundred plants I overwater,*

*saying each name, like a prayer:
begonia, anthurium, liliium.*

Twomey hones in on relationships - some "confessional" (maybe), or merely a reflection of what she has seen - between adults and children, family, friends, lovers, and the betrayal that can exist, while psyching out the unpleasant anger and despair within. Some of her poems deal with animals but their behaviors, instincts even, take on a human cast. In *A female Redback*, Twomey introduces us to this creature:

*Spider looms her tough untidy web,
another male offers up his abdomen,*

*somersaulting towards her mouthparts
in exchange for a moment or two close*

*to her. This vulnerable posture only elicits
a predatory response. The smaller he is,*

the more forceful he'll be cannibalized.

This collection suggests how we should treat "pretty things". In this case, the "pretty" of this female Redback Spider is sure to be the slow death of any who fall into its web. At the end of the poem, Twomey moves the she-spider forward, as it "bares a bright blaze on its abdomen," a warning, probably unheeded, to her masculine prey, animal or human.

It warns: don't draw too close.

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You're sure to lose a hand.

Twomey grew up in Western Massachusetts, and uses the small town and rural environments of the region as a stage for her verse. Her poetic language is rich and complex, and her chosen analogies and metaphors are provocative and well-drawn. There is much to like about this collection, Twomey's first, and hopefully not her last. I look forward to reading the next, and encourage readers to read this one now.