



Sex & Other Slapsticks by Ellaraine Lockie

Reviewed by Gregory J. Wolos

The title of Ellaraine Lockie's latest poetry collection, *Sex & Other Slapsticks*, begs a question, which her poems answer with candid mirth, spirit, and often a touch of wisdom: what do sex and slapstick comedy have in common? Remembering that the term "slapstick" derives from the joined slats of wood used in 16th century commedia dell'arte (think "Punch and Judy"), we have our answer—the two terms of Lockie's title both require bodies, both imply performance, both can make us laugh or cry; and both remind us of our shared humanity.

A slapstick is a prop, and props and performance draw Lockie's keen comic appraisal in the poems and brief

prose pieces comprising this collection. In "To Dana," (subtitle: "Whose Deathbed Wish Was for a Friend to Dispose of Her Vibrator Before the Family Found It"), Lockie describes her personal history with props of self-stimulation, highlighting her own fear of "embarrassing" exposure as she imagines her own "piece of personal plastic" "mauled in front of my mother-in-law" by the family dog or accidentally activated at airport security where it "purred itself into a bomb bluff."

Another poem centered around a prop and imbued with physicality is "Bidet in a Haebun," in which the narrator and her husband consider with growing curiosity the bidet in the bathroom of their Florentine five-star hotel. At first they guess at its function, then misuse it. After discovering its purpose on Google and absorbing the knowledge that "Americans are unhygienic" compared to most of the world, the poet's period arrives during the night, while "Light from the full moon/ floods the bed where she sleeps." The next morning, she follows the instructions on the internet and, experiencing the satisfaction of "[w]ater like a spring brook," orders her own "Biffy bidet converter" for her "American" toilet.

As in "Bidet," ignorance or misunderstanding is pivotal in many of Lockie's poems, such as "Sex 101," where the narrator is informed "[a]fter forty years of pacifying penises" that her lover's "morning erection" did not signal "a need for sex," and she wasn't "obligated . . . to lighten his procreative load/ in my most copulatory capacity." In "Reading at the Little Joy," the narrator, "Daydreaming on a winter evening . . . on Sunset Boulevard," is mistaken by two young men as a prostitute. After she asks, "You guys wanna read," they move on, determining she's "[t]oo whacky" for what they had in mind.

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In "Nomenclature in Montana" Lockie uses language as a prop to trace the loss of innocence that parallels a loss of ignorance. "As children," she writes, "there were no body-part words" for the animals as they were "making babies." Her father used simple "bodily function" words like "Pisshole and Asshole," and her mother favored "a more refined Number 1 Place and Number 2 Place" /Like they were addresses." Eventually, the narrator discovers "Number 1 ½ Place" that could accommodate fingers "and even welcome houseguests," but didn't learn the word "vagina" until high school, believing until then that "twat" was the past tense of "twit." Like most of Lockie's "ignorance to knowledge" poems in this collection, "Nomenclature" concludes on a note of personal affirmation, as she considers how the value of "my little piece of property . . . increased exponentially when it served/ as an annex through which my two daughters passed."

Because, after all, the poems of "Sex & Other Slapsticks" are about accepting ourselves: of our ignorance and fear of humiliation; of our bodies and our sexuality. With or without props, Ellaraine Lackie performs her "slapsticks" for her readers with a kind of warmth and humor that enables us to accept ourselves. She encourages us to appreciate our lives as we would a situation comedy, as in "Sitcom in a Café," where we watch the narrator's deaf and nearly blind ninety-one year old mother deposit leftover restaurant food in what she believes is her handbag, but is actually the mouth of "my niece's Guide Dog for the Blind in Training." And, in a final prose poem, "The Robe Also Rises," Lockie sacrifices her dignity for our mutual identification and self-forgiveness. Futilely chasing after her escaped dog at a mountain resort, she lies down in the snow, and oblivious to the public performance, "spread[s] out into an X-rated snow angel," a trick that had lured her dog in the past. She raises her arms, revealing a "naked pubis that was as black and silky as my robe," and, in spite of a little boy's concern that "Mommy, that lady doesn't have any underwear on," the trick works: the dog returns to see what she's up to, and she snares the pet's collar. As she leads the dog back to her room, she "ignored the fairly large audience of gaping faces."

Sex and slapstick, props and performance: in the same way Lockie recaptures her dog, her poems capture us, and we share not only the humiliation of exposure, but the triumph of her success.