

**If One of Us Should Fall**  
by Nicole Terez Dutton  
Pitt Poetry Series  
University of Pittsburgh Press  
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*Review by Lo Galluccio*

Not since I first came across Lucy Brock-Broido's "The Hunger," has a poetry collection excited and challenged me as much as "If One of Us Should Fall," Dutton's debut. In "The Hunger" Brock-Broido takes on the persona of different characters: baby Jessica who fell down the well years ago, a child in the cult group MOVE in Philadelphia and creates an idiom for each of them. At other times she writes with a plethora of images that are at times baroque, but each poem holds its own based on the character and the situation. This is different from Dutton's equally brilliant work. When a writer invents a new syntax and manages to keep a unified voice amidst different poems, it is always a fascinating achievement.

Whatever preconceived notions I had based on the title –that she was posing a moral question and would she, in fact, answer it? – vanished as soon as I plunged into the first poem, which like a bookend, is mirrored at the end of the work: Girl#1 and Girl #2. We are met with "clear, coal-hot squares of disco" and "a Doppie" and an ending "like horses," It is a poem with one declaratory sentence: "Listen, I am girl," thus signifying herself in a general category of people, but specifying that she is indeed girl, female. Horses serve as an emblematic force throughout this work – and they seem to represent something American, some kind of independent motion, a grace of mobility and speed. We are dealing in some measure with a language poet, one more interested in playing with juxtapositions of images and objects, than in their literal meaning in a typical narrative poem. However Dutton does write in the first person quite often and in an abstract way, tells a story of place or relationship or disposition including the weather and the objects that together stitched form the vibe and ambiance of each episode. She is almost always traveling somewhere, to Austin, to Ohio, in an airport. It is a book about coming and going and how to signify what happens in between those poles. Dutton does pen some prose-poems in this work but all her poetry has velocity, mystery and concrete sensuality, as in:

*"And guitars burning us up, quick,  
as malaria, strapped into the hind bucket  
of second hand Buicks, speeding  
away, always, and always dumbstruck  
by the drums trundled in our bones  
the whole interstate home."*

*p. 4 "Every Answer is Yes."*

These poems give us a sense of motion, take us from one place to an-

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other through unlikely brash metaphors that often tantalize.

In "Playing the Room" Dutton writes about the aftermath of a show or event of some kind. We seem to be in a bar. But her sense of the context is wild associations that transmute from one thing to something vastly different. Like a good jazz improviser she takes us beyond the original key.

*"behind the words,  
the carcasses of steel mills*

*and rivers on fire. They try  
to reassemble the logic the way*

*people interrogate suicide notes  
cold trails that could lead*

*to the coordinates  
where certain hearts lay*

*unspeaking buried  
in the earth like gold."*

*p.7*

Her endings are always satisfying, usually providing some kind of closure in the positive vein compared to the journey of the poem itself. It seems she is always looking beyond the present moment, through a crystal ball of language. Traveling to Austin or to some other place along the interstate and yet describing a state of mind or a strange association of verbs that burst with action:

In *Minor Key*, she writes:

*"Time swallows itself. We will  
begin slow and tell the truth, Tomorrow*

*a world, ten fingers less, will move  
forward. There will be more*

*soldered wires, more chords and flesh  
held close with butterfly clamps"*

*p 14*

Or, in *Chaser*, she takes the gerund lying and gives it a series of unrelated descriptions, a whole new story. It is a great poem, which ends with "shut up, shut up"

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*"Lying is many scavenger birds, knees  
beneath dinner tables  
crossed and uncrossed, a virus  
fortressed in blood and spit,  
a name you do not speak,  
feathers left in the mouth,"  
p18*

Like beautiful black and white photographs, concrete objects are set against landscapes and declarations and questions. In one sense every poem is a missive describing where the author is and what it may mean to you. Sometimes there's an episodic plot as in "Holding Us This Away" which is interlaced with arresting metaphors/similies, like:

*"their clay ramshackles lining  
the interstate like molars."  
p 11*

The expansive vocabulary alone of these pieces is impressive, their apposition and fine line of both concrete identity and abstraction from their usual source. One would deduce that Dutton has created a poetic travelogue of a trip across America, but she never tells us that explicitly. We jump from Austin to Nashville to Ohio and no place is depicted in any sort of predictable or stereotypical way. We are treated with the inebriation of alcohol and music and road signs, yet the poems are soberly constructed with a fine, if non-logical force. In "When we get there we are Gone," she writes:

*"We can only sing razorblades over the brim of Nashville." and  
"We know that language won't survive past Ohio."*

There are so many finely crafted and imaginative poems in this book it is difficult to pick out the plums. The whole pudding is quite delicious as a kind of celebration of language and an American cultural experience. Both the titles and endings of her poems frame each experience of reading them in a brilliant and suggestive way. In "Many Kingdoms Toward You." she begins with the image:

*"The map in yesterday's suitcase, a river  
whose name dropped vowels and feathers"  
p. 45*

referring back to the alphabet of a common language combined somehow with the silky ephemera of the object, feathers... and she ends with the bold declaration: "I avalanche forward." Such are the turns and twists Dutton takes in the landscape of each piece.

The end of the book is mostly a collection of prose-poems and experimental pieces that are almost like Gertrude Steins list of objects and their qualities in such striking poems (about gambling) called "City of

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"Candy-Colored Light" or "Within these Squares of American Heaven" (about a tribal bonding of friends moving through time zones,) or "Welcome Home" (which celebrates "blackness" "with pulled-pork televisions, "hammer shanks and cornrow," and "Musicians, Mojomen" "Mamis")

This is a truly arresting book, inspiring and highly original. I recommend it whole-heartedly. Or catch Nicole Terez Dutton at a Boston or nearby venue. While I haven't heard her read from this work, I'm sure it is a lyrically-charged rendering of the many "razzle dazzle" poems she's created. This book won the 2011 Cave Canem Poetry Prize and Dutton studied poetry at Brown University and has won fellowships from Cave Canem, the Fine Artswork Center in Provincetown and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts.

Lo Galluccio

Author of "Hot Rain," "Sarasota VII" and  
"Terrible Baubles."