

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

Beautybeast
by Adina Dabija
translated by Claudia Serea
Port Alworth, AK: North Shore Press, 2012
ISBN: 978-0-9794365-5-0

Reviewed by David P. Miller

Romanian poet Adina Dabija, living in New York and a practitioner of oriental medicine, has published two award-winning books in Romania. *Beautybeast* is her first collection in English. Although I'm not able to respond to the poems as originally written, I find Dabija's poetry lively, dreamlike, and sometimes ecstatic. Her writing describes a world of continuous, unpredictable metamorphosis, grounded in the body and its many extensions.



Transformation pervades her work. The frequent density of her imagery makes any illustrative selection reductive, but examples are necessary. As one instance, in "The world seen through a toilet paper tube," the lowly cardboard object begins as a tool for "cross section views" -

*In a New York subway car, two rows of midgets.
Nature had fun carving us in various ways.
Yes, we are the latest adventure of the matter:
chunks of clay with eyes
making history on the edge of the pipes
that spit and swallow us again.*

The viewing tube has already become both the "tube" of the subway and a kind of cloaca, morphing later on into her hat, and in the next poem, "At the end of the tube," resuming its cloacal status:

*[...] I descend carefully on a straw
into the garden. [...]
through pipes clogged with clotted blood
and dinosaur bones,
through the hungry mouths of the earth,
into the digestive tubes of the worms*

In the book's title poem, an accidental encounter with an undescribed creature leads to a radical change in her sense of her own being:

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

*Running, I stepped on
a sleeping beast.
She opened her mouth and swallowed me.
Now I sit in her black belly and bang on it with my fists.
[...]
Suddenly, I turn my head, and in a corner of the belly,
I see myself.
I'm afraid.
Is it possible that this creature
with bloody soles and phosphorescent breasts
is really me?*

The human body, and in particular the woman's body, is both the agent and object of changes among living states. "The woman who ate the day and the night" is a kind of anti-creation goddess, who "sucked all daylight / into my colossal breasts." But even that was insufficient, as the night remaining "soon disappeared / into the crevice / between my legs." This seemingly destructive energy is linked in other poems with unexpected acts of re-creation. In "The woman of wind," deaths of relatives and acquaintances lead her to a new survival strategy, fashioning a surrogate body:

*I'm thinking, if my body would die,
I'd hire a wind
to wear my dresses
and imitate my walk, my shape, the way I move.
I'd put lipstick on my lips of wind
and call men into my room.*

And in "Jazz," though violated and seemingly murdered by "the devil," she finds a resurrection: "From my buried body, the good plants grow on my tomb / and embrace my lover's feet." Carnal being is inherently fluid and, of course, erotic. She describes "How I turn into an old wine":

*Your lips are the fruits that make me turn into wine.
Come, step down into the cellar
to drink me directly from the barrel.*

To make oneself unavailable to this state, to keep this bodily knowledge at arm's length and submit to hypothetical dualisms, enables another sort of metamorphosis, into desiccated being. "Impossible to make sense" describes this using images that, with humorous irony, invoke food in a metaphor that negates its function as nourishment:

*Everything could ultimately be reduced to an idea,
you figure, walking down the street,
parting the world in halves with your chest.
The juicy, impenetrable world*

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

*seems rather a hard piece of cheese
you cut into pieces into order to chew on it easier.*

[...]

*The binary machine of making sense
ticks deep into your veins,
its cold metal slowly replacing your blood.*

Strikingly, the act of lovemaking can only be imagined or described beforehand or afterwards, as - assuming it is not also reduced to an idea - sex's immersion precludes the possibility of naming or distinction. In "On love and blowing bubbles,"

*The best time I made love to you
was before making love to you.
Then we held hands, told everybody
everything.
We allowed ourselves to be watched from a window above.
We laughed, our hands filled with air,
throwing into the others' faces the whipped cream
extracted from our ears.*

This joy, which comes up again "after making love to you," becomes "impossible"

*while making love to you.
At that time, you don't even exist
and I don't even exist.
We can't even imagine our existence.*

[...]

*with your mouth, with my fingers,
with my scar caressing your scar,
with my pain sipping your pain,
until nothing is left of us*

Beautybeast concludes with the prose poem, "An undifferentiated state," which may not have been intended as a summation for this collection, but serves as one for me. Adina Dabija describes the simple exercise of covering eyes, mouth, and nostrils - the latter "with your middle fingers, or, even better, with your little toes."

Imagine you are an amoeba -- you don't have lungs, eyes, ears or a mouth. You are the world itself, before the world existed.

Re-emerging from that imagined primal condition, you re-enter the world of distinct perceptions, separate things and beings:

Let the light come to you, the air, sounds, like an old friend coming for a visit. You sit together in the kitchen, share a watermelon slice, then you say goodbye and each of you goes back to your business.

The value is not in pretending you aren't this person, with this body and this sense of self, but in remembering the flow beneath, where every-

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

thing perceptible exchanges its matter with all other things and all boundaries are permeable. Where, as in "I chose the pumpkin pie,"

*There is no difference between my poem
and the pumpkin pie.
It's an undefined state, best described
by a bug climbing my leg
on a lazy afternoon.*