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Search

Reviews/Critique

Essays/Features

About Us

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Archives

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Shadows Play at Being Whole: Thirteen Years of Faye Kicknosway

All These Voices: New and Selected Poems

by Faye Kicknosway

Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 1986

Paperback, 175 pp. \$9.95

Who Shall Know Them?

by Faye Kicknosway

Penguin Books, 1985

Paperback, 84 pp. Out-of print.

Jason Schneiderman

Faye Kicknosway's 1986 volume of new and collected poems, *All These Voices* spans her career from 1972 to 1985 and includes selections from ten books — a prolific output over thirteen years. 1985 also marked her emergence to a major press (Penguin) with *Who Shall Know Them?*, a book of poems triggered by the photographs of Walker Evans. These volumes provide an important view into Kicknosway's poetry.

Fragmentation marks Kicknosway's early work. "Job's Coffin," (3) the first poem in *All These Voices*, links its parts to each other, but not to a traditional narrative whole. The poem begins

Job's Coffin
is a constellation
near Sagittarius. Sagittarius
once used it as a shrimp boat. He kept
his mortgage
under the bunk.

The rest of the poem concerns the cockroaches in Sagittarius' coffin/boat, his dream of being a cockroach and of being rescued by Jesus from copyright infringement ("and would've gone to jail/ only Jesus saved him/ by turning him into a candle/ and shoving it up/ a Greek's ass").

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The poem, "Orange Sailor" (48) is in five parts, none of which easily connect to the others. The poem "Time" (12) begins with "Treachery by a friend/ indefinite delay" and ends enigmatically with "Before the change, 3 days. / After the change, 3 days." The fragmentation often resolves itself into hyper-consciousness, a state where the thought process seems to be either missing stages or simply so advanced that we can never hope to fully understand. The final stanza of "One Window" (4):

Friendship means eat. Sailors
know that. They catch it with hooks. with
fishnets that disappear, easy
as winking, into the sea.

The urgency of this stanza is clear, but the sense, rhetoric, and logic are not. Each sentence segues into the next without difficulty, but what is the reader to take from this? Kicknosway's difficulty is her strength. The reader has to trust the poem will yield, but not in order to reveal sense, rhetoric, or logic. Kicknosway offers sub-liminal truths that have to be felt and intuited, not glossed or paraphrased.

Often, the fragmentation makes the reader a player in the piece, a reader whose very self and position become part of the poem. "Morning" (9)

begins by locating the reader ("Morning. The water bleached/ silver where the sunlight touches it"), then addressing the reader ("Wake up. Wake/ up") and then making demands on the reader ("The fish are calling you, are asking/ for your daily garbage, for their/ daily food"). The reader is quickly placed, implicated, and then demanded upon. Suddenly, Kicknosway switches modes and dislocates the reader: "Funny prayers from the other side// of the mirror." The reader is now both himself and his reflection, a divided self that cannot act: "Your face could be a fish." Yet by the second stanza "There are no fish" — a fearful self-effacement. The reader is thus pulled back and forth through location, division, and demand.

The fourth stanza of "Morning" opens with a parallel to the first line: "Angels. Dreams of angels." The location has gone from "morning" to "angels." The reader has entered the metaphysical world that cannot hope to be understood — the mystery of Christianity is at work: "Angels are the bread moving in your body." Kicknosway closes the poem with a series of directions that would seem to further distance the reader from himself:

Pretend you have black hair. Pretend you are
a radio. Look out the window. Watch the air
turn into afternoon.

A first reading of the poem might yield the sense that Kicknosway has given up on the reader entirely — thrown him out of the poem and asked him to be someone else — someone who hasn't failed the poem. But this sense of the poem yields to an understanding of the dissatisfaction that permeates her work. It's not that you, dear reader, have failed the poem, but that the world is easier to take as lies. The reader ought to find a way out through pretense. Kicknosway's world (like the sun) is too painful to look at directly, but too important to ignore.

As the poet's voice develops over the years, it moves from fragmentation to coherence — the earlier work shifting as if filmed in soft focus — the later work taking on a gritty *vérité*. One of the earliest "narrative" poems is marked off as such by its title — "Short Story: The Rings and Donkeys and Sand." (104) Not surprisingly, there are no rings, donkeys, or sand. The poem in full:

Once there was a small flea
who loved to sing Italian opera
while sunbathing in between the hairs
of a small German sheepdog
asleep on the Cote d'Azur.
There was another flea, his brother,
who lived a miserable, niggardly life
on the back of a Mexican hairless.
Their sister Roxanne, unsatisfied
with her ordinary life, ran away
with a flea circus and,
after leading a long, horribly dissipated life, died
an anonymous death
in the tail
of a black Pekingese.

As a reader who generally looks for narrative content on a first reading, I find my foothold for all of Kicknosway's work in this poem. Where so many other poets of fragmentation have pushed farther and farther into their personal worlds (I am thinking of Jorie Graham's *Swarm* or John Ashbery's *Your Name Here*), Kicknosway tries another tack. She brings her audience with her, and with this poem, accomplishes the same effect as in her poems of fragmentation: she disorients the reader.

A narrative is always selective; it shapes the way we view events, and which event we deem critical. Just as Kicknosway challenges the dominance and trustworthiness of narrative in her poems of fragmentation, offering up constant revisions of where the gaze should fall, so does she accomplish the same shakeup with the overtly more narrative poems. Where *is* the narrative of "Short Story..."? What is at stake? Should a

reader focus on the flea's personal goals? Should she try to find the rings, the donkeys, or the sand? Is there a right question to ask, the answer to which will bring a kind of sense to the narrative? I find this poem to be an act of great generosity within the spectrum of Kicknosway's work, a "letting off the hook" for the careful or over-earnest reader who wants to make the wrong kind of sense of her poems. I hear the poet saying, "Don't worry — it's not supposed to make that kind of sense."

Kicknosway often concerns herself with expanding and contracting selves and bodies, persons who shrink and blur, losing their distinctness, creating the fragmentation that propels her poems forward. In "Who Is She" (34), one of the photograph poems in *Who Shall Know Them?*, a photo subject comes out of the poem to conscript the speaker as replacement photo subject: "She'll catch me by my arm, // and this picture/ will be lying/ on an ironing board... she'll iron me down, / making me flat/ so that I fit." "Heroin" (16), discusses a metallic body ("How can you inherit sweat? / Body Gold, that's what it is") and ends with a metaphysical conundrum ("someone with a big toe full of animals/ packing their clothes lies buried/ in your throat"). In such poems, the human body often appears as malleable; opening up to subvert the natural order. In "Mr. Muscle-On", (68) a poem of masculine bravado and misogyny, the narrator speaks of "boobies up his ass where it feels/ so good." The poem "Once" is a quiet manifesto to the expansive and retractile self that destroys the natural order:

once,
 when my mother's
 belly was a circle, i
 lived there with
 my brother and my sister. It
 was crowded. My
 brother ate
 my sister. i
 ate my brother. then
 i got born. When
 i get
 old and my
 belly is a circle, i'll
 ask my brother
 and my sister
 to come live there.

The bodies in Kicknosway's work sometimes shift back and forth between the animal and mineral world, often taking on metallic hardness or sharpness. In the poem "Mr. Muscle-On", for instance, "she's his motorcycle, his cold metal tit."

The feral nature of the poet's characters sometimes manifests in painfully polymorphous contortions. One of the most terrifying moments in *Who Shall Know Them?* is in the poem "And He Did Not Know Her" (12) where the poet describes a man's increasing hatred of his wife:

She had given him daughters,
 painful to his eyes,
 brittle, with tiny mouths
 that bit moisture from the air
 leaving it more parched.

The ability of these children to rob the air is stunning. In "I Wake, My Friend, I" (74), the voice announces, "you think i am an enormous plant, a carnivorous plant/ come to lick you off the surface of your life./ and i am." The speaker takes on the aspect of knives and revolvers, coming to "kiss holes in your gauze/ face." The violence almost always occurs in a family context. In "Religious Poem 2: For Robert Bly" (50) Kicknosway begins, "This is my mother. I cut/ her hands off and take them with me into my dreams." The violence of her voice permeates the poet's work of these thirteen years. It seems the core around which the voice shifts. In "When Speech Comes" (147) the final section begins, "You could boil her like an egg. Drag her across the yard as/ if she were one of her own dolls." The

violence plays out over and over, with the daemonic force of a storm—neither right, wrong, nor predetermined, but powerful and destructive, landing where it lands and damaging what it damages.

It is most certainly unfair to assume that one can take a biographical approach to any artist's work, particularly without biography at hand, but the play of family life across Kicknosway's pages is fascinating, and one feels a voice spinning closer and closer to the core of the violence and the anger — centering most clearly on the mother in the 1985 section of *All These Voices*, "How Everything Got Dead." The section consists mostly of prose poems in which the storm stays still long enough for us to see how it formed. If I may be allowed to identify Kicknosway as the protagonist/speaker of these poems, then I may take the nightmarish family romance to have started with the violence, physical or psychological, of her mother. "She carried stones in her pockets and leaped up on the foot of my bed and threw them at me." These poems, I venture tenuously, are the stones thrown back.

Kicknosway's work stands, as she so eloquently puts it, as "shadows" that "play at being whole." Their complicated project is to present the part for the whole — either because the whole is unknown or too horrible to be described. I liken her work to a good look into a cracked mirror. It's the same image in all of the slivers, and each reflection is perfectly accurate, but it's not a pretty picture. After having spent a great deal of time with Kicknosway (13 years?), I still don't feel as if I've taken it all in. There is bound to be a certain dissatisfaction with these poems for a reader like myself who looks for the satisfaction of narrative's full arc — the poems yield slowly, and certainly never into a unified whole. Rather the poems bleed forth their meanings, each poem meaning in parallel to itself, casting light on a part of something too big to see all at once. Is the whole that she pushes towards too terrible to admit or too terrible to know? The peculiar push-pull to the revelation and obscurity of Kicknosway's work is the life of the work — that is, the need to explore/recoil, to touch/flinch is the engine driving these poems.

Kicknosway's poems do not flinch from the enormity of their purpose. What she offers glimpses of is not something that can fit into a reviewer's neat summation of her work. Like the plan of God or the meaning of Life, it can only be seen in part; a beautiful, painful part.

Faye Kicknosway is also known as Morgan Blair, under which name she teaches creative writing and literature at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Her former students, including R. Zamora Linmark, Justin Chin, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka, are among the most influential TransPacific writers.

Kicknosway/Blair has been the recipient of an NEA fellowship for poetry and a P.E.N. Syndicated Fiction Project Award.

Since the publication of the two landmark volumes under review here, she has published two chapbooks with Ridgeway Press in Roseville, Michigan: *Listen to Me* and *The Violence of Potatoes*.

DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY

Ashbery, John, *Your Name Here*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000. Hardcover, 127 pp. \$23

Graham, Jorie, *Swarm*, The Ecco Press, 2000. Hardcover, 114pp. \$23

ALSO BY FAYE KICKNOSWAY

Kicknosway, Faye, *Asparagus, Asparagus, Ah Sweet Asparagus*. West Branch, IA: The Toothpaste Press, 1981. Hardcover. Available by special order.

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