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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “but I remain curious what the whole head would have been like.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

UNLOVABLE OBJECTS

Poet Cate Marvin relentlessly explores passion’s pitfalls.

by D. H. Tracy

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Fragment of the Head of a Queen, by Cate Marvin. Sarabande Books. \$13.95.

The world of *Fragment* is in part one of horses and town criers, a fairy tale setting without the fairy tales. The tales that do exist are fairytale grim, mostly about relationship dysfunction, recrimination, and gluttony for romantic punishment—you could say they investigate what happens when the irresistible urge to love meets, in a man, an unlovable object. The dirty laundry, within the pseudo-anonymity of Marvin’s methods, is flown from a flagpole; Siegfried Sassoon is notably more gentle on the subject of trench warfare than Marvin is on the subject of love. Marvin understands from the outset that a life lived at a certain level of passion is bound to make no sense, and will have topsy-turvy notions of what is appealing and what isn’t. “Marvel at the corrupt!” she writes, “Make disgust your / lust and cast your fresh pain to the trash!” And:

I am like a table
that eats its own legs off
because it’s fallen
in love with the floor.

—From “Scenes from the Battle of Us”

Notwithstanding this directness, her style is comprised partly of ancillary, thrown-off gestures—the lines are bristly and seem to radiate from the armature of the poem rather than be it, like sparks flying tangentially off a grinding wheel. The poems have very little inertia; as they begin there is never that sense of a locomotive leaving the station. Marvin

unmutteringly brings in disjointed fantasia, personification (especially of rooms and windows), and a hyperbolic projection of feelings in which “The world felt bad” and “Every leaf looked / like it needed a cigarette.” This energy clears space, and has the unexpected effect of mitigating the self-absorption; the poems are not as solipsistic as their single seething emotional life would imply. “Dear less-than-a-man,” she writes, “I think with my blood.” Only she doesn’t, quite, and the nature of *Fragment*’s speech acts seems to me its big question. The book is part voodoo doll, to be sure—I suspect when it went to press some ex-boyfriends somewhere got spontaneous nosebleeds—and she does write best from the inside of experiences, whose passions correlate closely with the intensity of her language (though “A Brief Attachment,” a wary, medium-heat poem about a same-sex crush, is an exception and one of her best). But she does not go over to pure curse, and she seems to want a connection to a frame of reference outside of her, even the exoneration of some independent tribunal—although she is not interested in the thorough post-mortems or courtroom reconstructions that would allow such a judgment to be seriously offered. At times propriety couldn’t matter less; at others, it is the bottleneck:

Reader, do I border on the obscene? Have I forced
you to give up your sympathies in exchange for more

lurid curiosities?
—From “Muckraker”

If the answers were no, she would have no poem. I am of two minds about Marvin’s unsettledness, which is sensate and alive but limits the quality of psychological insight she can sustain: for all the presence of the poems, one is left in mind of what they cannot talk about rather than what they can. I can infer only in general terms what she feels—frustration, rage, disappointment, righteousness—even though the book is principally about her feeling. In avoiding the pitfalls of self-interest by a kind of excess, Marvin resigns herself to a patchiness, even coarseness, in her understanding of experiences, especially the experience—love—that matters most to her. Perhaps this is to say that *Fragment of the Head of a Queen* is just that—but I remain curious what the whole head would have been like.

D.H. Tracy's poetry and criticism appear widely. He lives in Illinois. This review originally appeared in the September 2008 issue of *Poetry* magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Cate Marvin, and her poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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