

***Pomegranate Eater* by Amaranth Borsuk
Kore Press, 2016**

Reviewed by Ariel Kusby

Amaranth Borsuk's newest collection of poems, *Pomegranate Eater*, is a rich feast of sensuality: nuanced diction, vivid imagery, and musical language relate to the physical body and makes us believe in the possibility of senses beyond the ones we know. The atmosphere of these poems is unique, distinctive, and odd.. It brings us to a newfound awareness of hidden realms—not those tucked away in distant ethers, but the ones residing instead in food, domestic spaces, nature, and our own hearts and bodies.

Like the extravagant, delicate, and slightly disturbing cover image, a painting by artist Julie Heffernan, this book explores the fine line between ripeness and decay, between beauty and excess.

Take the opening poem, “Self Portrait As Radiant Host,” which tells us:

It's bright here
and everything grows.
We're lit from within
by systems of exchange.
The feast of ingathering
is laid.
What we love
is not the rose,
but the smell of its decay.

In this opulent collection, the bounty of Borsuk's garden of poems nourishes our own internal roses. Perhaps radiance

is unsustainable, beauty an illusion. Despite the lushness of setting, the “rose,” the ultimate symbol of beauty, femininity, and sensuality, is decaying, becoming less, and that is reason to celebrate. *Pomegranate Eater* is a dinner party inviting us to rejoice in our dying, through living fully in our senses.

Like an exquisite pastry, these poems are richly layered. While studying them, one intuits that infinite readings would render endless meanings. They are not always understandable at first glance, and perhaps the speaker wants it that way. Take the poem “Endgame Endmost Endomorph,” which opens:

New cool night (waterslick quarry, wetaqua, raw silk)
 leans you into nickeldark shadow
(a wakened, eaten-up thing gone slack)
 shifts a hip, seismic.

Atmospheric in nature and full of movement, this poem features images of shadow, water, coldness, and fluidity. A tension exists between an unnamed “thing” which is “wakened,” a state typically associated with daylight and morning, and its sudden “slackness” or lack of movement in the night. What has eaten it and impeded its energy? The imagery of the poem suggests subtle but powerful emotional shifts, and the resulting mood is difficult to translate into plain language, but ultimately represents a mysterious yet relatable feeling of change. The speaker seeks refuge in their shadowy, “nickeldark” language, which offers us the chance to make our own associations.

Esoteric sensation aside, this is an enjoyable reading experience for those who take pleasure in encountering obscure words (have a dictionary handy when reading these poems) and for those who read poetry in an associative, intuitive way. Borsuk reminds us that poetry does not

necessarily need be entirely transparent to be enjoyable, that it can be a visceral experience. We can listen to finely chosen language that plays, trips, riffs, and dances across the page. Take the poem “Fortified Internal Night,” which begins:

Steadied, you’re night-lit. No matter
incident gypsum’s new polymer.
Crushed augur in ark, you could
mention summer’s aqueous rose.
Perron tryst, I quern, ever gravity’s
saddle. Sea-pink minnow, valentine
ache, in vignettes I summarize ostomy.

Dense in meaning, aesthetically and lyrically light, these poems can be taken on multiple levels. There is a glimmering surface beauty to the way the sounds and images roll through the mind. The phrase: “Sea-pink minnow, valentine/ache, in vignettes” sounds wonderful when read aloud and summons a sense of tenderness, and also of pain, a subtle vein that runs through these poems. This ache is often hidden behind scientific words like “ostomy,” which refers to a surgical incision to create artificial drainage of bodily fluids such as urine. By “summarizing,” the speaker glosses over the gorier details, creating distance between the reader and the subject at hand. Still, bodily pain and vulnerability remain.

The speaker never allows self-pity to enter the poems. When it is touched upon, it is done with wit. For instance, in “Perception,” the speaker admits:

I chose the hardest thing to eat among
wheat-cakes and shriveled dates.

and later:

You can't imagine—a curtain rose,
and when he entered flowers burned.
Really the underworld's a perfect place
for girls like me who never tan.

In this poem, darkness and difficulty are wrapped up in the speaker's gendered experience. Societal standards imposed on women, like the pressure to be “tan,” or at least capable of tanning, and to eat dainty foods like “cakes” and “dates,” provide a point from which to diverge. The speaker can approach these things in a different way, even if it's “harder” or dark like the “underworld.” These poems are an underworld unto themselves, unearthing sensations that glisten even as they ache. What is the reward? What is it that sparkles, and how is it useful to us?

This is a collection about fruit, and that plays with all of the associations that accompany fruit. The poems are about indulgence and desire, and exhibit a confident sensuality that eschews notions of sinfulness. The speaker is doing her best to have her fruit and eat it too. While these poems are preoccupied with the body, they also concern the spirit. Perhaps, the work suggests, when we reclaim our desire to savor and devour fruit, our spirits can live triumphantly and joyously through the body. For example, “Mulberry Bait:”

Mûrier, you multiple fruit, sorosis (sweet
association of dark chambers), your
catkin parts synch up, blossom in stage
whispers. More?

“Sorosis,” a many-chambered fruit, like a mulberry or a pomegranate, describes the complex structure of this collection. Each poem is its own sweet entity, but part of a larger whole. This type of “multiple fruit” implies abundance, as when the speaker implores, “More?” Fruit is a reproductive organ for plants and is associated with pleasure and desire, or “dark chambers.” Perhaps it relates to the dark “underworld” mentioned in “Perception.” What is clear is that in this and many of the other poems in *Pomegranate Eater*, indulgence is celebrated, even when it perhaps verges on excess. It is a reclaiming of pleasure. It is a suggestion that perhaps too much is sometimes just enough.

Amaranth Borsuk’s newest collection, as dense as a pomegranate, invites multiple readings. Deep and sometimes difficult, its sweet, dynamic taste will linger and change inside your mouth long after you’re full. It adds depth and insight to experiences that define our aliveness, suggesting that beauty and decay are intertwined. Ultimately, it tells us that our bodies and senses, which have caught us here between life and death, should be celebrated.