

## Review

### Silence and the Language of the Body

Harry Garuba

*The Dream in the Next Body*. Gabeba Baderoon, Kwela/Snailpress, Cape Town, 2005.

This debut anthology of poems by the respected and widely published young Cape Town poet Gabeba Baderoon takes us assuredly through the physical and emotional landscape of the poet's journeys. The poems recall people, objects, and events, depicting them in their ordinariness while also inscribing their figurative resonance. The dense texture of symbol and meaning gives each poem a significance worth treasuring in and of itself.

The first poem in Baderoon's anthology focuses on a master tiler at work. The poem enacts a day in the life of this artisan. We follow as he rides to work on his bicycle, watch as he takes the floor, cushion under his knees; we note the way he fixes his eye on the surface and plots the line with a chalked string, following the line to its end. His knowledge of the materials of his trade is described with reference to the body – “how [t]erracotta ... cups the foot”, how pristine porcelain is “also used in the mouth”. This is the bodily knowledge that he brings with him as he lays the tiles, ordering the nondescript space of a cement floor into a “sweet geometry” of squares. People love to walk where he has kneeled, we are told; the smoothed surface, an invitation to aesthetic experience accessed through the body. Finally, we watch him at night as “he rides home over ground that rises/and falls as it never does under his hands.” The contrast between the undulating ground he rides on at close of day and the smooth, patterned perfection of the floor where he has knelt is carefully placed at the end of the poem.

The title of the poem is “True” and it begins with these lines:

*To judge if a line is true  
banish the error of parallax.  
Bring your eye as close as you can  
to the line itself and follow it.*

*A master tiler taught me this.*

We normally think of lines as being straight or bent, so the word “true” placed in this first line and repeated later in the poem alerts us to other possibilities of meaning. Together with the literal line the tiler draws, we think of a line of verse. As we are here enjoined to bring an eye close to the line and follow it, we imagine the method that literary scholars refer to as “close reading” – follow this line, reading as closely as you can. Soon – as the poem proceeds – the tiler's craft and the art of poetry begin a subtle interface of word and symbol, of denotation and connotation; the manual labour of taming “unordered space” merging with the imaginative task of ordering inchoate experience into the coherence of meaning. And in the final two lines, this vision of order, carefully crafted like a “well wrought urn”, encounters its opposite – the messy unevenness of the world, outside the confines of art.

It is tempting to say that it is the layers of meaning beneath the surface that draws one to these poems, which ask to be read again and again for the sheer joy of discovery, the promise of further revelations of this kind. But this will be only partially true. Beyond this is the poet's keen sense of observation, her focus on the details of everyday life, exemplified in this poem by daily, even humble routines, that transform the ordinary and the mundane into sources of profound insight. These, perhaps, represent the most enticing aspects of *The Dream in the Next Body*.

This first poem sets the tone and register of the poems in this collection. Everywhere we encounter the studied attention to words, the refusal of extravagance and the lofty gesture. That the titles of the poems do not aspire to any grandeur – that they might seem singularly “uninspired” – is part of the strategy of understatement, the refusal of the transcendental truth, the focus on micro-meanings. (Remember, the title of the first poem is “True” not “Truth” – the latter is too large, too ostentatious.) In the poems, the exploration appears to be geared towards finding the modest meanings hidden in the minutiae of the everyday, the unacknowledged significance that undergirds the most ordinary events or activities, like receiving a call from one's mother, adopting abandoned cats, watching a televised cooking show, searching for a lost object, and so on. The meanings are contingent upon the contexts from which they emerge, rather than aspiring to transcend them. Are these what feminist and postcolonial scholars variously refer to as “standpoint epistemologies”, devalued or subaltern knowledges?

Among the more moving poems are those that deal with the memory, distance and yearning associated with temporary and permanent diaspora. In “The Call”, a phone call from her mother halts the speaker as she is about to set out on a journey to a new place. She struggles to put her packed and unwieldy suitcase down and answer the phone, the distance in space registered in the seven-hour time difference. Nothing is quoted of the conversation apart from the first “Hallo Mama”, and perhaps this is as it should be, because the dialogue, interposed between farewell and departure, acquires its full meaning from what is left unsaid, undisclosed to the reader.

Loneliness and nostalgia surface again in the poem “Hunger”. Watching day-time cooking shows on television, the exiled adult is flooded with memories of childhood:

*A girl learning to keep from crying  
when she slices an onion, when  
she remembers the country she has left.  
All day I watch to keep from crying.*

The juxtaposition of keeping from crying when slicing an onion and keeping from crying when remembering a country left behind evokes both the physical country and the country of childhood. These and other difficulties of the global subject, especially in the post-9/11 world of intrusive state surveillance, are further outlined in “I Cannot Myself”, a poem in which the body, already an object of the othering gaze, also becomes the site of uncertainties and anxieties that need to be carefully, bureaucratically managed to meet the demands of the watchful state. This short poem deserves to be quoted in full to give an indication of Baderoon's lucid, yet multi-layered style:

*To come to this country,  
my body must assemble itself  
  
into photographs and signatures.  
Among them they will search for me.  
  
I must leave behind all uncertainties.  
I cannot myself be a question.*

The uncertainties of subjectivity, the questions that undermine our singular narratives of self and identity, cannot be allowed to challenge the transparent correspondence between self, photo and signature that bureaucracy demands. If this stability is questioned, how can the profiling be done, how can the knowledge on which the power of the state depends be

preserved?

In this collection, it is not only identity, but also the body that becomes a motif around which the poet's preoccupations are organised. In the poem "The Dance", the speaker stands in a museum looking at Matisse's painting Dance. A man walks in front of her, tilts his head as if listening rather than watching, "and, for a moment,/[she] sees the dance pass/through his whole body". An aesthetic experience is accessed through the senses and transformed into a bodily experience, like walking on the floor of the tiler in the first poem. Seeing the painting or the "sweet geometry" of the tiles, it would appear, is not sufficient; we also need to hear it or walk on it to feel the full aesthetic power. For "true" artistic vision, sight is articulated with the other senses to produce an embodied knowledge, simultaneously visceral and cerebral. It is through this language of the body "spoken" in silence that the poet learns to communicate with her cats in "Something I Know So Well" and the child in the poem "The Machine" obtains "a purchase on the world".

Baderoon segues effortlessly from exploring the location of the body in all the minutiae of daily life to more sensual celebrations of physicality. While the poet herself is married to a man, it is worth noting that her poems eschew heteronormative expressions of love and eroticism. This is true not only of the title poem, "The Dream in the Next Body", but the lyrical "Cinnamon":

*Eyes run down my skin  
Like single finger.*

*I find you*

*open as a tent.  
You are cinnamon  
curved around me.*

In these and other poems, the poet lays claim to tenderness, the joy of physical merging and sensual celebration that extends beyond orthodox or patriarchal narratives of sex, romance and partnership. She is also attentive to the potential for sacred space in the sensual body: writing of Muslim boys at play, she notes: "Prayer is a ligament/ on which their skin hangs".

"Witness" points to another arena in which Baderoon expands the reader's expectations; while there is no overt feminist project in her work, she notes manifestations of masculinity that disrupt conventional narratives. In this poem, the speaker describes an encounter of comfort, even intimacy, between her husband and a blue-collar American man facing a term in jail, that concludes:

*From the passage, I hear  
what men give each other,*

*silence to lean their bodies against.*

Although Baderoon is a respected academic and researcher in the field of media representations of Islam, there is no overt commentary on this topic in her collections of poems. Her faith is seen in the same warm domestic light as the other everyday subjects she canvases: she observes that "the architecture of mosques aims to create/ a space for love", and recounts the tale of the praying prophet whose "warm robe" was chosen by a cat giving birth to kittens: "He did not move/ until she was done".

Rather, she turns her political attention to the anguish of war, particularly in the Middle East

and the Gulf States. In "War Triptych: Silence, Glory, Love", she refuses any polemic, any posturing, any expressions of outrage. True to her project of paying close attention to small, everyday details, she frames moments of human dignity in situations of appalling loss with such intimacy that she leaves the reader breathless: of a dead girl whose mother asks to watch as her daughter's body is washed, she writes, "The quiet of the girl's face was a different quiet". And when a father is brought news of his son's death in the Intifada,

*He felt a hand slip from his hand,  
a small unclasping,  
and for that he refused the solace of glory.*

There can be little doubt that Gabeba Baderoon's debut collection demonstrates that she has mastered the lessons of keen observation, acuity of vision and symmetry learned from the master tiler. But she is not only a skilled craftswoman; her work is infused with compassion and wisdom that bodes well for her future writings. It was for these qualities that she won the 2005 Daimler-Chrysler Award, South Africa's richest poetry prize, and also the only one that is awarded not only on the basis of the poems themselves, but the poet's ability to perform them. *The Dream in the Next Body* has set a benchmark for quality and intelligence in the Southern African poetic community.

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