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A Review of Jen Karetnick's *The Burning Where the Breath Used to Be*

Alexandra Umlas · Wednesday, April 7th, 2021

My knuckle has been sliced open by a butter knife (long story) and now is held together by two dark stitches. Life is tough, isn't it? And yet poetry is often like these two stitches, holding together sections of life, making them coherent and whole, so that we can take them in, explore them, and maybe feel less alone. Jen Karetnick's latest collection of poetry, *The Burning Where the Breath Used to Be*, is a brilliant compilation of poems that straddle all kinds of interesting portions of life, tethering them together, examining their implications, and reminding the reader that the poem is a place to be, where there are no easy answers, but energy and life and connection.

In "Borromean Rings," Karetnick writes, "She knew a snip to the heart / would be permanent and, with one ring / removed, the remaining two would float / as they do, side by side, catches released, / fundamental products of the unknot" (19). Borromean rings, three simple closed curves that are situated so that when one is cut, they all become untied, ushers us into a space to think about what we are tied to and how the cuts we experience both release us into an unknown space and redefine us. As much as we might long for a past where all the rings are linked again, this is impossible. There is a sense of loss in the poem, but also a sense that this is what it is. These poems are powerful without being overly sentimental. Karetnick dedicates this book to her sister, "Betsy: peace-broker, best friend, boss," and wrote "Borromean Rings" after the sudden death of her brother, who was only 51. The poem is masterful in its quiet grief. Although the poem comes from Karetnick's deeply felt, individual experience, it is also incredibly universal and indelible in its impact. It is one of those poems that stayed with me. I look at the world with a sense of those rings now and am simultaneously disturbed and comforted.

If you are looking for a verdict, an easy answer, a stamp that says "complete," you won't find it in this collection of poems. What you will find is a mounting sense that we are all in this together. The poems vacillate in that space we all occupy of composure and disarray; they are interesting, lyrical, large in their scope, and intelligent. Karetnick also uses forms, which further intensifies the energy of the collection, and takes the poems in surprising directions. In "Photograph of a Boy and His Dog," Karetnick employs the pantoum, with its haunting, repetitive patterning. The poem begins, "We chose what looked like the drowsiest one" (43). But, of course, one never really knows what one is getting, and the photograph, with its implications of stasis, is quickly set against a reality of movement and chaos:

The girl wouldn't give up her furred slippers.
The dog dragged her down the stairs by her feet.

Of course, the boy saw the possibilities.
He began to feed the dog her possessions.

The dog dragged her down the stairs by her feet.
It was tough to tell who laughed, who howled.
He began to feed the dog her possessions.
Only smiles dripped from their open mouths. (44)

As a parent, I can very much relate to this animal/kid-imposed chaos. As a human, the line “It was tough to tell who laughed, who howled,” created in me a shock of recognition. Karetnick has a gift for clear storytelling, for form, for language that is powerful (sometimes electrifying, other times soothing), and for those lines that leap off the page, through your eyes, into your very being. Who is laughing? Who is howling? The liminal space between the laugh and the howl is a fascinating place for these poems to dwell.



Karetnick’s poems are filled with the varied assortments that come from real life. There is a generous honesty to the poems, an attention to detail that populates the poems with the buzzing of a unique life-energy. Karetnick deals with her chronic illness, her Jewish heritage, her sense of social justice, her role as an educator, all with the wonder of a poet and with the precision of a scientist. Her husband, who is a doctor, and her body’s uncooperative responses to illness, root these poems in the technologies of math, science, and medicine, of figuring out the strange ways in which things work (or don’t).

In “My Son’s First Brain,” we are drenched in an unforgettable deluge of brains. There is the brain that smells like corn chips, the vocabulary of the brain, the “supple brains” of crimped cheese ravioli, the upside down brain, the growing brain, the “stony brains” of mangos. The speaker of the poem is thinking / all day long about the thousands of young / brains misfiring, emotions stunted as cactus, / in chicken wire cages, parents wracking / their brains to get their children back” (96). This is a poem of association, one brain taking us to the next brain, the stitches between each brain forming a life-web that holds everything – the personal, the political, what is in place and out of place in the world, the alternate angles by which we view the world – together. It is dizzying and wonderful to see such large slices of the world living on these pages.

I type these lines slowly, my hand just beginning to heal, the stitches doing their job well. Sometimes we come apart at the seams. Poetry for me has always helped put me back together. In poet Charles Harper Webb’s essay “The Quick and the Dead: An Energy Crisis in Poetry,” Webb writes that poetry “can help us get more out of life (...) It can provide assurance that others have

thought and felt as we do. It can rekindle in us the power and joy of naming—the sense of exaltation that makes a two-year-old point at her feet, yell ‘Shoe,’ and dance with delight.”

In the last poem of *The Burning Where the Breath Used to Be*, Karetnick offers a poem of hope, an inventive, surprising poem that compares millennials to a nebulizer: “They are the compressor to spirit change, / the mouthpiece to deliver an open-throated, unifying mist” (111). Karetnick’s collection allows us to walk with her into the world’s questions, slightly afraid perhaps, but un-alone – Who are we? What are we doing here? How will we survive? Buy this book and breathe deep of these poems. *The Burning Where the Breath Used to Be* is an energetic, captivating, and necessary collection.

[Purchase the book:](#)

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