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Book Review: *Bulletproof* by Matthew Murrey

John Brantingham · Wednesday, May 27th, 2020

In the third poem of Matthew Murrey's *Bulletproof*, Murrey tells the story of his mother going to the backdoor of his childhood home and firing his father's pistol into the sky. When the family comes running at the noise, she speaks to her husband:



She just slowly turned and said,
“I don't know, Honey—
I just felt like shooting the gun” (11).

Murrey's collection is about the confusing relationship that we as a society have with guns and really violence in general. In this collection, reactions to violence and power like his mother's reactions come out of forces that people don't seem to understand. Some seemed to be based on logic and others are buried deep inside of us. I found this assessment to be very real, very much like my reaction. This world in which we live is often filled with violence that can be found without and within.

This violence and Murrey's understanding of it runs through the book, creating a structure for it. The first poem of the collection, “.38 Special,” captures his mixed emotions well when he tells about holding and shooting a pistol at a target:

I'm holding death's hand as killers
and suicides have done
and—I hate to tell you—
its weight feels good
like a sack of coins, a bag of blood,
a book of history, a pound of meat (9).

It's not just that violence is all around him, in his father's job where he is a bartender who must wear a bulletproof vest to work, or the fact that he is born to a world of nuclear threat during the Cuban missile crisis, or the violence chronicled every day in the news; it's that the violence has moved its way inside of him. Holding and shooting the gun feels good. It is natural. It is even familiar. He sees it in himself and in his parents and children.

Murrey's collection explores the pain of violence all the way until the last poem of the first section. Here, he gives us a poem in praise of the dead because they never complain about anything or give banal platitudes or make any of the annoying moves that the living do. This unconsciousness of violence in this part of the book makes the problem of it seem all-consuming and all-powerful, but

the second half of the collection develops his solution to it.

This part of the book begins with the poem, “First Song.” In it, the poet is awake before dawn and hears a bird:

That’s how I know
that it’s spring, that I should keep
writing, that the darkness
has not swallowed us,
and that there will be morning
and noon and evening (45).

In this section, I felt I was given a way of moving out of the violence that surrounds me, that I was given a way to deal with the violence that is a part of me, and that is to focus on those things that matter that are not violent. We experience with him a love for nature and art, and his experiences with his family that are not fueled by pain. By the final poem he is struggling to move past the violence that he at once seemed biologically predisposed to. Here he holds a slug, and thinks about how many he has killed in his life unconsciously. He writes:

And look at me, tender
for a slug, tender
to give myself forgiveness (75).

It is a beautiful poem as the whole collection is beautiful. But this is a poem that could come only after a reflection of a lifetime filled with the trauma of living in a culture of violence. It is the kind of collection that is born out of wisdom.

I highly recommend Matthew Murrey’s *Bulletproof*. It is an exceptionally human piece of writing.

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