

Heather Hartley's *Knock Knock*: A Review

Knock Knock. Heather Hartley. Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2010. 80pp. \$15.95

A thousand years ago I hitchhiked across France and heard about a place in Paris from another kid who was bumming cigarettes in a cafe. You can crash there as long as you read a book, he said, as I raised my eyebrows and mooched an espresso from somebody offering to pay. I showed up with my backpack and disbelief, but it was true. The rules of the owner, George, were not to be broken and I read *The Magic Mountain* (Thomas Mann) and a book of Leonard Cohen's poetry that I either bought or was given since I still own it. Small irony now to be reading the debut collection of poetry, *Knock Knock*, by a poet who co-directs the literary festival at the same Shakespeare and Company bookstore where I found a place to sleep in exchange for the pleasure of reading.

Heather Hartley is an American living in Paris, the Paris Editor for *Tin House*, and an assistant professor at the American University of Paris. Her poetry feels historic and modern, referencing the past in a geographic language that names cities and landmarks and breathes life into the places and things we thought we knew by upending them — not unlike the artists and their models that come to life in her poem, "Nudes in a New England Barn," where: "La Goulue picks straw bits from her hair" and "Mogdigliani's wife, with the wild and soft grey eyes, throws herself out the window to make more room". These are the poems of the traveler who has traveled so long that other languages have become part of her vernacular, the casual dip into another tongue as she catches the next train to Italy, Russia, America, Istanbul, France. She writes in "Partner, My Partner":

My spaghetti western love, I come to you ragged and leggy
from the spanky suburbs of the East Coast of America,
all bones and heat to meet you in the dark pushy
alleys of your native streets - *edicola*, *duchy*, *vicolo*.

Bookended with poems of family, the collection is divided into six sections. Part one opens with, "This is a Fugue for The Lost Art of Aching":

Mix the sweet and sour with jealousy.
Mix without hope, mix barbarically.
Because all the angels are out to lunch and send their regrets.
Because that's what the family recipe calls for
and you must follow it.

Like the best expat writing, the poems carry us through other countries with a photographic eye and an outsider's clarifying vision. The second section are poems of Italy, predominantly Naples; and she writes a wicked litany of luck in "New Year's in Napoli: Twenty-four Resolutions and Curses":

8
Is it bad luck to brush your teeth with the toothpaste of a dead man?
12
In the Grand Hotel Vesuvio, just about anything will bring you good luck.
In fact, if you stay there, you don't need any more luck at all.

13

Everyone here is named after a saint - it's supposed to bring good luck.

14

Even to the dead man.

Humor, sly asides, her poems are deceptively playful - like an amused *c'est la vie* shrug. "Full Pleather Moon," the prose poem of a man carrying a pleather toilet seat in the subway, displays winking puns mixed with the poet's curiosity. There are also witty word lists. Why I love the line, "A dictionary of cheese," so much in the title poem, "Knock Knock," is perhaps some issue I should pursue privately. While the misspellings and word confusion in "The *Prix-fixe* in Petersburg," a poem in section three (we are now in Russia), is the postcard home written in an affectionate voice: "Salmon in wall nats, with rise and greens." And in "Sleeping with *War and Peace*":

If I threw myself in front of the subway train in tulle and crinoline
holding my reticule and wearing a little lace veil,
would any, any, anyone imagine
that I was her spitting image - that I was the modern Karenina?
that I died beautifully in one fell swoop -
or would I have to write and write and write that too?

Part four brings us Paris, where one of my favorite poems, "Epilogue in a City Garden," finds the expat writer, grounded still, grounded in the "shuffling feet" that "raise cursives from the margin: of her book, causing her to look up and note how the old man "with a cane and a small hat" and his humpbacked wife are the stuff of the alphabet, all C's and R's and N's in a world of letters:

...then the man steadies her with
his crumpled hand, curved and rounded from so many cigarettes and
breasts, curved with love and with life, it curves a "c" around her frail
waist. Flowers fan behind them, a delicate wheel, folding out, in light
colors, towards a sky of printed pages.

The poem, "La Bête Humaine," alluding to Auden's *Musee de Beaux Arts* felt like it lost some of its strength in the directness of its homage. It follows the poem, "The Flying Machine, or Elegy for the Twentieth Century," where the poet's consistent eye for detail rewards as it describes how a modern man following da Vinci's dream of wings flies above Paris and London, bereft for what is no longer:

...when *I* was new, and Paris was ancient and the world had no curfew.
When women had little brown mice as pets and brought them to the *cafe*
terrasse on a leather leash. When a nude descending a staircase decomposed
crowds.

There are a number of elegiac poems in the collection besides this, one for the old Napoli, another for the old Paris, mourning what is already lost before the traveler has arrived.

The last poem, another elegy, is separated from the other sections by a blank sheet of paper, unnumbered as the others were (parts one through five), giving

a physical pause as one turns the page, already setting up an expectation. It does not disappoint, it is a stunning poem, but I would have preferred it as the final poem in the section five, the segregation of it from the others throws the physical balance of the book off, but in a minor way.

Based on an article in *The New York Times*, the poem, "Elegy in India Ink," tells how four sisters in India deliberately chose suicide, leaving a note saying, *We four sisters are fed up with our lives*. The poem first explains that their deaths resulted not from a Western despair of the mind, but from a more realistic, Eastern view of the limitations of caste and history, but then, still seeking, turns to language to try to decipher such an act of sorrow:

Perhaps our word *suicide* contains an answer to their death :
s, a thinly curved consonant escaping into air,
u, the you, the incriminating vowel,
the twins, i, that cancel one another out,
cancel out the self,
the sluice and wave of c,
d, the soft thud of tongue against the gums, penultimate
before the demise, the *coup de grace*, mum -
the final, silent e.

A strong, resonant debut.

—Susan Moorhead