

KASS FLEISHER

Murder, My Sweet

A review of *Murmur* by Laura Mullen (Futurepoem, 2007)

Laura Mullen vaulted onto the poetry scene in 1991 when her book, *The Surface*, was selected by the National Poetry Series. In 1999, the Contemporary Poetry Series of the University of Georgia Press chose *After I Was Dead*, and *The Tales of Horror* came out from Kelsey St. Press. In 2005, the University of California Press published *Subject*. Now Futurepoem publishes *Murmur*, the winner of its annual prize.

After fifteen years and five books, it seems high time to reconsider this fearless and funny writer, a writer for whom no preposition is too minor to implode, a writer who never hesitates to struggle with subjectivity, and the subjunctive. This is “a voice which came out of the silence,” and her chief determination seems to be the rescue of subjects from the *consensio* so often associated with *silentium*. This is an artist insisting upon her own palette, who evades easy, premixed codes. Oppositions turn upside down: “the threatened” is “part of the threat.” Whiteness is a nerve-wracking absence, while blackness is clarity—it’s where things really happen, where they go bump in the night. Syntax is not, as is thought, a means to understanding; it presents the greatest obstacle to communication: having found a voice, we marginalized can only clank our chains and moan. Persuasion is not possible; having built us, language can tear us down. Image is of little use; the mirror is a dangerously distorted site, veneer on veneer. The only thing we know for sure is that speechlessness is unforgivable, and error will recur.

The work never fails to surprise in its conjunction of something like thick description (see Clifford Geertz) and sheer symbolic verve. Clement Greenberg, Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Emily Dickinson all end up in the avalanche gasping for breath. Mullen is an artist-intellectual with a passion for life, specifically for life’s tongue, for the feel of words in the mouth, for their potential—freed from syntax—in the ear and on the page, and for the depth and breadth of any and every ordering. What she does

with the word HONEYDEW alone makes *The Tales of Horror* worth the price.

And now, this murmur. Whereas *The Surface*, *After I Was Dead*, and *Subject* have the feel of collections about them, *Tales* and *Murmur* are extended breaths, bated breaths even, and comprise the first two parts of an eventual trilogy. *Tales of Horror* “is about” (reconstructs, devastates, exposes) the genre we know as gothic horror; *Murmur*, similarly, “is about” the detective story. Soon the romance novel will go under the knife.

The detective story. Think *M*. Think *Dial M for Murder*. Think *Murder, My Sweet*. Think, for that matter, *Laura*. Think Poe, Hammett, Chandler, Angela Lansbury refusing to age. But Mullen’s primary concern in this trilogy-to-be—the thing she does so well, the thing that makes her, for me, one of the most fascinating writers among her peer poets, and novelists too—is her sensitivity to form and convention, in this case to the language of genre itself. So think also of books like *Writing Mysteries: A Handbook by the Mystery Writers of America*. I chose that title at random from an Amazon.com search that yielded hundreds of how-to hits. To draw our attention to the regimentation of the generic, Mullen cribs from, and corrects, such texts: “there are very definite laws—unwritten perhaps, but (‘if these walls could / speak’) nonetheless / or the color of the sky, at these angles, reflected back, interrupting what you might recognize / binding, and every self-respecting concocter of literary mysteries lives up to...” (93-94).

“Literary mysteries”? Very much a genre to flip on its back, and part of the underbelly is its production, the generic conventions, the “binding laws” that control the concocter, consumer, and, well—culture. The pulp iconography according to which we fashion many of our relations was and is fashioned with malice aforethought. For instance, shall we make of our readers (our meaning-makers) a stooge? Why not:

The truth of the problem must be at all times apparent—provided the reader is shrewd enough to see it. By this I mean that if the reader, after learning the explanation for the crime, should reread the book, he would see that the solution had, in a sense, been staring him in the face—that all the clues really pointed to the cul-

prit—and that, if he had been as clever as the detective, he could have solved the mystery himself. (99)

What may seem a banal sample from the genre-enforcers (when served to us, as Mullen serves it, benignly skewered) becomes ironic when juxtaposed with “Caught light in the wind-rippled surface of the water as though a green sequined dress.” The reader needs little more; she always could see the clues (generic rule: dress, not pants); and with little prompting, she can even provide the denouement (the body must wash up on shore). Meanwhile, the writer is the detective solving (according to the rules)—what? The crime?

Well, here Mullen slams on the breaks. The weapon turns out to be language: “A Noun’s Meant,” as the shrewd bard calls it. *Murmur* struggles for expression, insisting loudly on interruption, disruption, eruption—“Caught light...as though...dress” (line never finished). With all this missing noise, our reading glasses click into place, since we’ve scanned our Todorov and know that the instructions for reading any given artifact are contained within itself. If we reread, we begin to see that the perp is the insoluble mystery of mysterious genres.

Speaking of genre, said the bookseller, do I shelve this under prose or poetry? Which (corpse) have we on our hands? I’d be the last sequined woman to accuse an artifact of being hybrid, but we do suffer the odd line break:

In a dream I speak to my wife.
For? At? In my dream. In this
Dream. Someone makes the thing
Slow down, has time to worry
About word choice. I think
I cut her throat, though I couldn’t
Swear to it. (128)

What becomes obvious about the genre problem is this: the writer refuses to answer to it. “You are reading / broken into / What we see her seeing what she sees” (10). In *Tales of Horror*, Mullen saw, and we saw, that the *real* horror is not the thing you read or see on the screen; it’s the thing sharing your bed, and the rules that often fail to penalize those who, uhm, cut throats. For women, domestic-

ity is the most dangerous place on the planet. In *Murmur*, Mullen confirms this: Gene Tierney would be the stunningly-dressed stiff (costumes by Bonnie Cashin), her close dandy-friend, Clifton Webb, would be the perp. “They rape she breaks into she starts / sharp acute right removes / The struggle of the sexes is the motor of history” (133). As for Dana Andrews, a man in love with a sequined fantasy, “I saved you, I was there just in time...” (149)

What defines the battle of the sexes is the generic form that battle takes, in stories told according to the rules of our most cherished oppositional pairs: the genders, the genres, and that golden oldie, life and death. In truth, our mystery books are everyone’s mysteries, “blurred into letters and then strange markings, lines, squiggles, which only faintly resembled writing.” Eventually, “she got up... her empty hands held out as if she were reading her own palms.” Here the reader in/of the story goes to the edge of the sea and seeks the story *in her own hand*. And there the oppositions collapse. As readers, text in fist, we are top and bottom, sexed and sex, stiff and perp, “a text which changed at every instant, which never ceased moving, held open as if” (151).

As if. As if there were words, as if words were not themselves. A blur. As if it’s poetry, prose, both, and neither—genre as ever-changing dynamic—and who cares, so long as we grasp that we’re the ones who have to save...her. By seeing through the enforcement. Taking nothing, shrewdly, for granted. Since, finally, we consent to Mullen’s assertion that “*There’s no such thing as silence*” (151).