rejection. And yet we sign up again and again, because nothing exists by itself, and as the novel beautifully illustrates, life only flourishes in the context of our relations to others. *American Fork* is a moving and thought-provoking work that makes a significant contribution to not only Mormon literature, but the literature of ecology and place in the American West.

"Twisted Apples": Lance Larsen Takes on Prose Poetry

Lance Larsen. *What the Body Knows.* Tampa, Fla.: University of Tampa Press, 2018. 83 pp. Hardback: $25.00. ISBN: 9781597321594.

Reviewed by Darlene Young

What makes something a poem? How do you recognize one, even if it has no broken lines? For most of us who read and love poetry, the answer is, "I just know." There is the buzz of new vision from a surprising metaphor or imaginative framing, the sensual delight of rhythm and rhyme. But even more, there is the feeling. A good poem sends sparks through our synapses, makes us feel more alive. "I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off," says Emily Dickinson. It's visceral.

It seems appropriate, then, that poet Lance Larsen has titled his latest (fifth) collection, which consists entirely of prose poetry, *What the Body Knows.* What the reader "knows" after experiencing this collection is what poetry feels like, even when it's in paragraph form. Because Larsen, former Poet Laureate of Utah and winner of the Pushcart Prize (among others), is a master of poetic language—sound, imagination, image, and metaphor.

The title poem presents a microcosm of the collection as a whole, a gathering of disparate thoughts and images, unconnected but juxtaposed like compartments in a shadowbox so as to glance off each other, sparking and resonating. It begins,

> Until I was five I could only fall asleep holding my mother's earlobe. A single crocus can melt a snow bank. On my desk I keep the jawbone of a deer. When I rub its three bleached teeth, it tells me secrets. Funerals hum when they begin with a honeymoon story.

Four different topics in three lines, and the poem continues similarly to the end, image after image, a zigzag between personal and universal, specific and general. Paul Valéry argues that poetry is to prose as dancing is to walking,[1] and these pieces dance with their subjects just as they dance within language and image.

This disjunctive style, common in many poems in the collection, forces the reader's mind to make leaps the way electrons jump synapses. The effect is that each sentence or section reads like its own mini-poem. Prose poetry theorist James Longenbach says that in prose poetry, "the absence of the line would not be interesting if we did not feel the possibility of its presence."[2] Disjunction is one way that Larsen creates a feeling of lineation within its absence. Another is through recurrence of specific words or phrases. For example, in the opening poem, "Almanac," the objects in the poem sigh repeatedly:

> Arm chairs sighing, old cars and young mothers sighing, graves sighing both before they devour the dead and after, motes of dust sighing in twisted columns of light, broken crayons sighing to be held once again, sighs of rapture, sighs of never again in this life, the garden sighing for the spade, emergency rooms sighing over spilled blood, when will it end, sigh sigh sigh, . . .

1. Paul Valéry, "Poetry and Abstract Thought," *The American Poetry Review* vol. 36 no.2 (March/April 2007): 61–66.

2. James Longenbach, *The Art of the Poetic Line* (St. Paul: Graywolf, 2008), 88.

The collage of images in "Almanac" presents a perfect opening to a collection that is itself mosaic-like in its motley. Larsen's attention to the details of the world in their particularity, their mundanity and grit, makes them holy. This first poem's book-ending partner, "Curating a Mostly Forgettable Saturday in June," is another collage poem that makes use of a refrain, this time "not the/but":

> And not the parade downtown but the homeless woman strollering her baby through the crowds after. And upon closer glimpse not a baby at all but a doll—swaddled in aluminum cans, as if settling in for a lazy recyclable nap. . .

Here the speaker takes us by the chin, turning our heads to look away from the parade. "Don't get distracted by the shiny," he seems to be saying. "Real life is in the small details." The poem ends in a gesture of pointing:

> And not the limp flag at half mast, someone famous dying at flagpoles all over town, but the Barbie leg I found at the park hidden under a picnic table. A left leg, not scuffed or slashed, teal sandal still intact, so the struggle must have been minimal. And the way I planted it beside the teeter-totter, in soft mud, toes up, so it could talk straight to the sky without shadows trying to run the show.

Barbie's leg points us to the sky, the final image of the collection, pulling our attention up and away, the way a camera might pull back to a long shot before fade-out. Thus an insignificant broken toy directs us to the universal in the wide sky. And isn't that what poetry is for—to help us "see a world in a grain of sand" (William Blake)? With its tender fingering of quotidian details, this poem becomes a curation of suburban holinesses from a "forgettable Saturday in June."

While I enjoy the disjunctive surprise of the collage-like poems, my favorites are the more anecdotal pieces. Narrative is risky in a prose poem, where the sense of story, and the way sentences follow each other more logically than in non-narrative pieces, could make the paragraph too prosy or less poetic. But no worries here. With Larsen, no poem is ever simply an anecdote; each piece makes use of poetic strategies to make

the familiar strange. These strategies can include musicality, startling metaphors, surprising structure (such as in the four "Q and A" poems), and imaginative framing.

Take, for example, "Elegy, with Bra and Peppermints, 1969," in which the story is told from the point of view of a character twice removed from the story. Before leaving for a business trip, a man positions his wife's bra on the bed for her to find, complete with two peppermints to mimic nipples. The wife responds by bringing her daughter, "a novice to bras," to see what her father has done, "because a spectacle like that—satin meets sweet, brazen vs. shy—must be shared." But the poem's speaker wasn't there for that scene; he, the couple's son, hears about the whole thing from his sister only years later as they watch over their mother's deathbed. The windows that the poem creates—ours that looks onto the whole situation, the son's as he hears the story, and both children's window into their parents' marriage—are its greatest delight, though the language does dance, as do the images:

> Sunlight mottled her bed, tubes umbilically bright, morphine a warmish pool into which she floated towards the wavery deep. Her breaths came ragged then, serrated, stabs of air going in and out.

The sense of peering through windows permeates another narrative piece, "Driving the West Desert at Night." Here we watch through a windshield as a couple converses during a long drive. The use of the word "meaning" as refrain charges the language and intensifies the situation. The poem begins,

> Tell me a story, she said, meaning don't you dare drift off, I need a voice to help me keep my hands on the wheel, a little narrative to convert breaths into miles.
>
> Shall I add a deer, he said, meaning an iconic buck on a cliff.

"Meaning" enables the speaker to comment on the subtext, of course, freezing the action to create a lyric mood in each line despite the narrative propulsion, and signaling the loaded language of poetry. With

the accumulation of each character's unspoken "meanings," it becomes gradually apparent how these two people are failing to connect. It ends,

> Funny, she said. Look, she said, a little morning rain, meaning dribs and drabs hitting the windshield, meaning the darkness they had traveled through would soon be traveling through them.

They travel on into the dark, leaving unspoken their individual loneliness, though the image has spoken to us, making the loss felt.

Arresting images have always been the biggest reason I read Larsen. One of the most breathtaking comes in the end of "Q and A Decoy Boyfriend," in which the speaker himself, in the form of strips of his own dried skin, disappears into dust on the breath of his beloved. His disappearance is mirrored in the disappearance of writing—both within the poem, as the words written in aloe on his back evaporate, and outside of the poem, as the poem winds to an end. Other of Larsen's memorable images come in the form of stunning metaphors. Some of my favorites: "my newborn was pure mouth," "fermatas of longing," "a static of birds," "the sky makes a sound like it's gargling stars," and, about metaphor itself: "Metaphor is . . . our air guitar, our Big Gulp, our winning Lotto ticket, or piece of chewed gum stuck under a desk." Good metaphor enables us to see something in a new way—as does a good poem, of course.

If I had to create a metaphor for the collection itself, I couldn't do better than the images in the collection's epigraphs. Paul of Tarsus speaks of being instructed to be "both full and hungry," an apt description of how prose poetry plays with both what is present and what is absent, and how these poems in particular relish the joys of this world while yearning for somewhere and something else. And Sherwood Anderson's "sweetness of twisted apples" describes the promise of poetry's tang, its prickle and slant that jolts us into clearer vision, sweet, sharp, and beautifully twisted. This collection well fulfils that promise.