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## ***E Martin Nolan on Erina Harris: The Stag Head Spoke***

The Stag Head Spoke, Erina Harris. Buckrider Books, 2014

[The Stag Head Spoke](#) is a difficult book to grasp – perhaps it is ultimately ungraspable – but even on the first bewildering read, it's well worth the effort. The visceral power of the words, especially the musical effects, are obvious from the start. The Stag Head Spoke also comes with a generous portion of secondary material – unusually precise blurbs and extensive epigraphs – to help the reader navigate this difficult text.

There is, however, one misleading claim made on the [Buck Rider Books](#) website: that The Stag Head Spoke is “part Mother Goose, part Anne Carson.” The former is certainly true, but not the latter. Both Harris and Carson employ myth or legend in unusual contexts, but that's about the extent of the similarity. Carson has never produced verse like this, but as such she at least provides a useful contrast.

[Carson](#) generally employs a musically flat line, which she can somehow get music out of. Harris' poems, by contrast, pop off the page. That is not to say one approach is better than the other, but simply that they are divergent approaches. From the first line of The Staghead Spoke – “Denim brats tug squirmy bastards tugging” (5)– you know this is a poet with an eager musical drive. The complex, densely-stressed rhythm and rhyme-centric prosody apparent in that first line hardly relents throughout Book One, titled “Bestiary: The Infantesques.” Take the second section of “Table Song”:

At the table in time we are learning  
to play in a playtime of waiting  
by the creaking floor above time is kept.

Above us, the animal paces and paces.  
And, pacing, it breaks. And breaking, breaks pace  
climbing out the linoleum gullet its cry becomes

the pace our waiting makes. (25)

This section contains 51 words, 7 lines, and 30 (mostly quite strong) stresses. The repetition and closely-packed stresses give it a simultaneously sing-song and frantic feel. The pronounced, but mixed, rhythm defies easy analysis. Yet there are suggestions of symmetry: while the third and fifth could be called sprung, and the second, fourth and sixth lines ricochet between iambic, trochaic and spondaic, the early lines feature prominent iambs (“to play,” “in time,” “is kept”), which are echoed and resolved in the final line’s three clean iambs.

The final effect is a kind of bewildering precision unique to this book. On the one hand, we lack what might be called an accurate picture of the scene. On the other, we get a definite, if surreal, sense of the scene: children at a dinner table singing a playful song while some kind of presence, called “the animal,” hovers near by, threatening to intrude. It is difficult to know whether or not such an intrusion would be welcome. A pacing animal near children gives a distinct sense of danger. At the same time, the children seem undisturbed, first keeping time to the animal’s pacing and, later, letting its cry become “the pace our waiting makes,” as if they are comfortable with the animal’s presence. The iambic regularity of that last line adds to the sense of comfort.

Still, while it’s a joy to read, we do not leave this section with much logical clarity, and the rest of the poem doesn’t help much in that regard. “The Duchess of Dusts,” and “The Lady” join the brother and sister, but we learn little of these new characters. The poem, like much of the first book, is spoken by the sister, who proclaims herself as “The dirty princess,” while her brother is “the spectacled boy,” and later she calls her self “Princess of the House of Rats” (25). The poem ends with the brother and sister proclaiming a “Blood pact: singing we make her the Queen of our Waiting” (27). We cannot be quite sure who this “her” is, but as with the “animal,” the children have appropriated this figure into the imaginative architecture of their “waiting.”

Waiting for what? One can only guess. But one does know who waits: the girl-speaker and her brother, who accompanies her also in the operatic “March of the Keepers,” which in a similar manner to “Table Song” describes the two at play. So while we cannot usually place what exactly is happening in this collection’s first book, sibling kinship and wild and imaginative linguistic play allows the reader to experience the poems as the children do: enjoying the ride, without needing very exact bearings.

Furthermore, the missing bearings themselves suggest meaning, as do the book’s musical attributes. On the back of the book, Mark Levine suggests that Harris’ speaker “has suffered an elemental loss” and that the poetry of *The Stag Head Spoke* creates

“the potential for a work of restitution.” That makes most immediate sense for Book Two, which deals with loss, but it also describes Book One, in which the central drama is the messy and gapped creation of the world through children’s language-play. That act of creation leaves the reader in an in-between place, because something is missing. The poems are not quite logical, not quite non-sense, and vivid through and through. Harris quotes Nietzsche at length before Book One begins, presenting his claim, from *The Birth of Tragedy*, that art reconciles the antagonism between the Apollonian and Dionysian drives. The poems support that claim, as Harris creates a hectic, volatile environment (Dionysus) in the sense of her poems but demonstrates authorial control (Apollo) through their musical and visual effectiveness, as well as through the rough coherence that emerges when you take the book as a whole.

The multi-section poem, “Bestiary,” builds on the other three epigraphs that open Book One. The first draws the connection between the word, “Ecology,” and its etymological root in the Greek word for “house.” “Bestiary,” meanwhile, features the staghead promised by the collection’s title, speaking as “the wooden house/ From the head in the wall” and welcomes the children with “come in” (21). The staghead is like some surreal, but still wholesome, version of Mr. Rogers. This house/staghead “collects children” who “are beginning” (21).

Here we are given some hints at the geography of Book One. The “house” can be assumed to be the supernatural/imaginative setting for these poems, with the staghead serving as the master of ceremonies. However, it may be more appropriate to call him the stirrer of linguistic freedom, as this ceremony is more devoted to relishing chaotic energy than to reaffirming structures of order, as is so often the case in ceremonies.

The final two epigraphs of Book One focus on the preeminence of rhyme, which serves throughout the book to lend a sense of order (however nascent) to the proceedings. “Bestiary” focuses Book One’s general ambivalence toward clarity and order. The staghead says,

as such, it is  
Not disagreeable to bear

Myself toward order, not  
A lesser thing is ordering: a giving. From my antlers  
Bruiseless, children swing (24)

Given the movement “toward order” – meaning the poem exists within incompleteness – the staghead concludes, “Then, my duty:/I call the orderly to fill out all the forms/of glee”

(24). If nursery rhymes embody glee, then Book One possesses glee in abundance. But that glee has not yet been ordered. Musical effects are employed liberally in *The Staghead Spoke*, but never predictably. Thus, the book's semi-random but frequent use of musical devices embodies the process of creating order out of still-forming linguistic energy, or "glee." "Bestiary," like much of Book One, repeats words close together, as well as prefixes ("And lengthening, expertly/ presides, among, extending/Memories" (22)), and provides a few welcome rhyme runs ("The squinting siblings crowd and drip./From the stallion's twitching mane one rips//A strip. It spits" (23)).

While Book One demonstrates what is missing in the act of creation, Book Two, "For the Suicide of Vespertine; The Figures," expresses what is lost in death. The two halves of the collection are bridged in Book Two's "Invocation," which begins, "The Herald begins her, ending", before introducing "Three figures in the landscape: mourners" who are "In vigil kept company by the ribbon-tied girl/chasing her animal past the road" (41). The "her" we have followed in Book One thus prompts the Five Acts of Book Two, which is devoted to her death. "Invocation II" provides a location for Book Two. If the living house is the environment of Book One, memory-space is that for Book Two:

here

Where memory, earth, conjoining  
where cattails lean, and cracking, press their crumbled tops  
scrape exact note of the land,

Ring— (46)

In this space, the girl is mourned by three figures, referred to as "the man [who] turns," (53) "a woman walking," (58) and "the man who stands" (61). Each struggles against an oncoming darkness. The man who turns encounters "Muck-throttled reeds bent at the waist" that "return his motion//Where huge cheek of water glows the black/it borrows" (53); the woman who walks watches as "smokestack incinerates city's shadow into shadow" (59); while the man who stands sees that a sunset's "faceless dragging/went behind it darking, dark" (65). Sound grows distant in parallel to the light's fading: the walking woman's "drunk footstep begets an echo unfastens/from earth," (58) while the man who stands "Attempts to calculate her/unfinished voice" (61).

Act Three introduces "The woman in the moon," who from her "Dark room pinned with tinfoild stars," accepts the girl's arrival and observes that the mourned girl "seems/abstracted,/at the borders/where she lacks" (69). The girl asks, "could you – spare me/a body?" even though after death, as the woman knows, "one cannot use it" (71). Thus, the girl's passing is further marked by an abstracting of the body.

Act Four returns us to the mourners, who now speak of the girl as “daughter.” This parallels their difficult acceptance of her death, which is now confronted more directly. Before, they seemed to hold out hope that her echo would recreate her, that the light would not all fade away, but they now wonder “does my daughter from some pale station look on?” (76) and plead, “Unto me//claim back creation/from its time –//Unto mine” (81). The book closes with “Ceremony,” in which the three mourners finally gather in a circle. The animal, whose presence has haunted Book Two, returns now in full, “turned in the wound of the middle” of the circle. The girl also reappears:

Through the wound in the song of the fiddle shouted  
Through wound in the rhyme her likeness paced about  
Its cage, fled by the sodden animal the child follows, into without

Followed the animal. (87)

Much hinges on “into without.” The phrase is a mystery, and echoes the paradoxical opening lines of Book Two, when “The Herald begins her, ending.” And given that the animal itself is an enigma, we are left to wonder at something we can very strongly sense, but scarcely imagine the shape of, and in that it is like the tragic death of an innocent child. Harris has approximated, as close as is possible, what that is like. I don’t know what that is like – not at all. I have to be honest about that. Nevertheless, I am made profoundly somber by the depiction. I am convinced.

There is so much more to say about this book than there is room for here. There are simply too many mysteries, too many brilliant and bewildering passages, that deserve parsing – and I haven’t even mentioned the use of line breaks or syntax. But know this: that it took ten years to compose *The Staghead Spoke* is no coincidence, because within its covers, Harris has created poetry as sacred text, without pretension or reliance on existing forms of sacredness. Harris attends to the biggest questions of life and death, using original language appropriately elevated for those topics.

And in the process, she demonstrates excellent poetic skill. Every poet controls language, but few poets can create Harris’ energy level, and if they do, few are able to contain it with such deftness. This is world-class poetry of the highest order. Harris has upturned the tables of poetry, and reset them exquisitely, all while digging deep into the reader’s heart. Buy this book, but be ready for it.



**E Martin Nolan** writes poetry and essays. He received his MA in the Field of Creative Writing from the University of Toronto in 2009. He's a poetry editor and staff reviewer at *The Puritan Magazine*, where he also helps run the blog, *The Town Crier*. His essays have appeared in *Eminem and Rap, Poetry and Race* (from McFarland Press) and *The Toronto Review of Books*, among others, and his poems have appeared in *The Toronto Quarterly* and *Contemporary Verse 2*. He teaches and writes in Toronto. You might know him as Ted.

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