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Immaculate Fuel

Poetry by Mary Jane Nealon

Four Way Books, May 2004

ISBN: 1-884800-53-X

Paperback: 56 pp; \$14.95

It is harrowing to contemplate the hard luck that can befall the human body, yet Mary Jane Nealon steadfastly claims as her imaginative territory the hospital room and the ongoing search to make sense of the suffering the body endures. She writes of an eleven-year-old rape victim who gives birth to “a stillborn with two heads— / one tiny undeveloped head arising from the neck of the true baby.” She tells of a boy on a gurney, “stunningly / handsome, the back of his head [. . .] shot away,” her job “to keep it packed with gauze / while [waiting] for his family to say *yes* / to his heart, his kidneys, his skin.” She reports how sometimes, even in moments of bliss, “I remember the girl with the baby, / I remember the handsome boy.”

Joy, on Nealon’s earth, is complicated by a firsthand knowledge of human affliction (“I am a keeper of things that don’t belong to me”) and changed forever by a deep connection with others, whose stories (often the endings are all she sees) stay with her always. Happiness is moderated by survivor’s guilt and the uncertain position of the self in a world that can, on any given day, take away forever the person you love—in Nealon’s case, her brother, both parents, a lover, and patients she did her best to save.

Ironically, though Nealon focuses obsessively on the body’s infirmities and malfunctions (her brother’s tumor: “*Grapefruit*/ they said. As though a tangy comparison could calm us”), and her grief at its inability to last forever (“Imagine the world when he is taken from me”), her preoccupation leads the reader to a profound respect for the physical self, its incredible strength, its will to continue. Nealon’s fixation on the corporeal is also intensely spiritual (each page of this book reminds us that in every failing body dwells an irreplaceable soul). And it is wrenchingly personal (“my sin is this: / I use the dying to understand where my brother has gone.”)

As a nurse to those especially at risk, Nealon has shepherded homeless patients through a sometimes overwhelmingly indifferent system, asking difficult questions to determine what they need to survive. In much the same way, she helps the reader cut through the red tape of daily distractions to reach essential facts: living in a physical body that perishes, on a planet we must eventually leave, everyone on earth will someday be homeless. But the cumulative effect of Nealon’s message is not despair, but wonder at the fact that we are here together for a while, and the knowledge that hope, at all times, “is a third person in the room.” Though Nealon’s work shows us bodies in extremis, moving quietly through these poems of unbearable sorrow and remarkable courage is another human body intent on its daily rounds, trying unflinchingly, despite grief and loss, to save

whatever it can. And there is (always) the “immaculate fuel” of love that makes it possible for us to go on living—sometimes, if even one person on earth still loves us, long after we are dead.

— Ann Stapleton