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*Farewell to the Body* by Barbara Moore

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Farewell to the Body
Barbara Moore
Paper.
Reviewed by Christine Vance

The poems in Farewell to the Body, the 1990 Word Works Washington prize winner, detail losses personal and planetary: isolation, poverty, aging, death, extinction. And Barbara Moore keeps an eye to minute daily corrosions like salt on spoons. Throughout the book, she employs natural and domestic images that are at once familiar and striking. In the title poem, she records the rotting of a peach:

. . . the way it
teemed, sank, soaked toward center—grew a blue powder all over, then a black, dense, velvety—then collapsed into a kind of bud
or navel turned inside out. Then leaked all its juice
forever, in a sticky trail on the formica.

In another, a senile woman tries to “make out her face in the smoky spoon of the world.”

Just as Moore sees loss in the small details of life, she also recognizes that it is often small details that change a day or a life, as in the poem “Starling,” in which the speaker is at the point of despair.

Then it happened. A starling
flopped down on the porch right in front of me,
split its yellow beak, said what a starling always does—
Creak, like a rusty hinge,
said it again. . . .

After that, I threw this morning after all the others,
a pebble mistook for a boulder.
Let my words sink back into the ground.
Moore’s poetry is deeply grounded in nature and in the body, “this / tough stuff we tell ourselves / we are not made of.” And just as they are her inroads to pain, they are also sources of her pleasure, as in the poem “Such Afternoons”:

What is there to talk about, except the earth, its ancient freshness, grass sputtering with children and new graves. Also beetles so top-heavy, so drugged with thought, they tip over trying to navigate the simplest distance. Though it’s only one day after another, never the day we’re after, though we walk the pear-shaped earth in gravely wounded lives, such afternoons arrive. A fine languor of cicada, my neighbor peering into his hedges like an earnest bird. What does he see there? Something good, I think.

It’s possible to stop worrying the dark for a while, following the chirp of an old lawnmower chewing its ragged way around the lawn. Our feet moving without effort, their depressions filling with quiet water.

Overall, the book is dark, but luminously so. Moore scrutinizes the “inviolable griefs” and the “peculiar happiness” of the human experience with clarity, courage, and generosity. The reader of Farewell to the Body is left confident that indeed the “Sun stokes their hearts to the end / who pick up each moment as it falls.”