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Book Reviews: Linda Smukler's *Home in three days. Don't wash.*

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Linda Smukler. *Home in three days. Don't wash.* West Stockbridge, MA: Hard Press, 1996. 93 pp. $12.95.

Home in three days. Don't wash, is a book of fiercely erotic prose poems by Linda Smukler that chronicles the physical and emotional extremes of a failed lesbian love affair. For all its graphic detail—and the poems are often unsettlingly graphic—the book is not voyeuristic. Smukler is careful to place her readers within the action, not alongside it. This is a risky move given the book's homosexual content, but Smukler's intention is unmistakable. Watching isn't sufficient; we must *inhabit* these poems if we are to understand them.

Throughout *Home in three days. Don't wash,* we overhear a first-person narrator who plunges us headlong into Smukler's undeviating form and (to some) deviant content. In these poems, you'll cheat on your partner with someone who's cheating on *her* partner, and you won't fall but rather hurl yourself in love the way suicides hurl themselves off bridges—wholly and desperately, no turning back. And when loneliness comes you'll think about dying, but you'll resist it. Because lovers are here, on earth, and not in heaven or hell. And since love is your obsession, your grail, your state of grace, you'll be doomed to live.

These are a few of the experiences that await the reader, but we quickly learn that Smukler's no-holds-barred subject matter belies a highly regimented formal structure, creating a dichotomy that is part of these poems' appeal. Though Smukler breaks many of the rules of proper written English, she invents her own rules and follows them as strictly as any schoolmarm. In fact, the entire volume abides by certain stylistic formulae: no commas to indicate pauses; no periods to end sentences (or initial capitals to begin them); no exclamation points (even for words clearly meant to be shouted); no quotation marks (though plenty of dialogue); no indentions; and most interestingly, the use of *spaces* to control breath, time and meaning.

Because Smukler is so consistent in the application of her idiosyncratic punctuation and syntax, it does not take long for an attentive reader to catch on to her pattern. A few poems into the book, Smukler trusts us enough to occasionally omit the spaces (especially when a poem's sexual and/or emotional intensity increases), leaving us with only momentum, repetition and the rhythm of unpunctuated words to guide us. Here, for example, is the ending of "How Does It Sound?":

> you scratch my face apart strain at your ties and pull your legs up
> and tight and you claw the sheets you clench and begin to moan
> tighter around me send five shudders you no longer have a choice
> your moans turn higher your nails pulled out lips nipples clamped
> you scream now you fight you thrash you shatter you find boy
> find girl you call you weep my name

Of course, what many readers may find interesting about Smukler's work

is not its form but its content. We Americans, whether in spite or because of our Puritanical roots, are easily titillated by any sort of bedroom gossip (national interest in TV talk shows and Presidential sexcapades being two cases in point). Smukler tries to avoid the titillation factor by making her poems unflinchingly graphic. She strips away the artifice and the euphemisms that, like garden gloves worn to keep our hands clean, we commonly use to shield ourselves from the complexity and rawness of our own sexuality. Opting to leave her readers unshielded and unseparated from the narrator, who has no inhibitions about getting dirt under her fingernails, Smukler places us directly in the narrator's mind and body. Where she goes, we go.

Readers prone to using the word "filthy" when discussing sexual content in the arts will probably dismiss *Home in three days. Don't wash*, as pornography. Smukler does offer candid descriptions of masturbation, phone sex, anal and oral sex, bondage and role-playing sex, and violent/rapelike sex. But for those who take a more broad-minded view, Smukler's book provides ample rewards. It's a chance to read about human relationships from a refreshingly earthy, multi-sensual, and multi-gendered point of view. The book's title, our first clue to its earthiness, is taken from a message Napoleon sent to Josephine as he headed home from battle, asking her to retain all of her musky feminine odors for his arrival. Such a desire seems shocking to our current American mores, which maintain that women may smell of perfumes, powders, soaps, and fragrant deodorants, but not of their own natural secretions, which are deemed undesirable if not downright disgusting.

Many other mainstream notions are turned topsy-turvy in Smukler's book. She forces us to confront the fact that sex is a bodily act, involving not only the seen and touched body, but the tasted, heard and smelled body as well. The body itself is admired for being a body—and not a machine or a doll or an image on a TV screen—with various orifices and fluids, each possessing its own particular flavor, texture and aroma. What's *intimate* about sex, Smukler suggests, is not merely "intercourse" (the simple insertion of part A into part B). Rather, intimacy comes from direct sensual contact and knowledge. Smukler's narrator revels in the times she has sex with her lover because it's then, and only then, that she can intimately taste and touch and lick and smell that person, and know her not merely by sight but by all her human senses.

Finally, Smukler challenges our stereotypes about gender. Her narrator, who clearly enjoys being a woman, nonetheless has sexual characteristics that are typically viewed as "masculine." She is unabashedly lusty, even crude, comparing her libido to things wild and huge, like "a hundred trains" and "the rush of buffalo stomped up [her lover's] groin"; she tries to impress her lover with a display of her physical strength; she relates to Napoleon, calling herself a "small wiry man" in "battle" with the highway police who would catch her speeding; and she speaks in terms of sexual conquest and dominance, saying to her lover, "I will force open your legs" and "I will take you any moment I want." But lest we begin to oversimplify matters, Smukler shows us other sides of the narrator, too. We learn that she cries, bakes lasagna, teaches chil-

dren, attends poetry readings, worries about the lines on her face. Refusing to succumb to sexual pigeon-holing, Smukler accepts and celebrates sexual complexity and variety, and invites us to do the same. It's heady stuff, and certainly a worthy subject for poetry.

With so much to like in this book, I regret having to mention any disappointment—especially since I realize the inherent unfairness in criticizing a work for failing to be something it doesn't intend to be. (You don't disparage a blues singer for not sounding operatic.) Still, I wish Smukler had more directly addressed some of the issues she alludes to in this book. There are references to alcoholism ("the wrestling with strong booze") and suicidal tendencies ("the insistent wish to see myself dead") that seem to be part of a greater problem of social prejudice and marginalization, and this deeply interests me. There are references to a terrible tug-of-war between living a "whispered life" and one more bold and open. And lines like "losing ray home for the sake of freedom" suggests there's much more ground to be worked. It would be exciting to see Smukler move from the personal to the political/social realm in her writing (not that the dividing line is a clear one). Adrienne Rich, for whom one of Smukler's poem is titled, has written of the "inescapable and illuminating connections between our sexual lives and our political institutions." I would be interested in seeing what would result if Smukler applied her talents and aesthetic to these other areas of life. I'm sure the fruits of such a labor would be worth the wait.

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