FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

**A Protocol for Touch (Vassar Miller Prize in Poetry, 7)**
Constance Merritt
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"It's a coarse and naked thing, the voice; / And silence a swaddling blanket," Merritt writes in a book whose major images have to do with the senses and their denial. It is not only the voice that is silenced ("hard to say whether hers is the silence of before speaking or after") but sight as well that is taken away, and touch elaborately reined. A first book (and a prize winner), Protocol for Touch displays Merritt's facility with meter as perhaps her strongest tendency as the poems riffle through an array of forms: sonnet, villanelle, pantoum, ghazal, sestina and blank verse narrative. Even poems ostensibly in free verse find themselves falling into a familiar iambic cadence, as if it were the poet's natural breath.

Although poems hint at other definitions of self-"Woman of Color," one of two overtures to the volume; "Etude for Memory and Guitar," a long and complex piece apparently set in a school for the blind; many poems in which the speaker is an awkward or unrequited lover-Merritt seems most eager to be recognized in these poems as their poet. In some cases, as with the book's concluding "Ars Poetica," the result is astonishing; elsewhere (as with the insertion of an awkward reminder that the speaker is a poet in the otherwise fine "A Study in Perspective") the insistent identification mars the work. She acknowledges her poetic influences outright: in one poem she even "christens" Emily Dickinson as her mother. Elizabeth Bishop, another clear influence, is invoked both specifically and, with a nod to the proem to Geography III, implicitly with "Cradle Song: A Found Poem."

Protocol for Touch is strongest, oddly, in its more freely structured poems; it's there that the voice of the poet-perhaps at its most coarse and naked, but certainly at its most intimate-most connects with the audience.

*Janet Holmes*