

On Shaving Off His Face

Shane Neilson

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There's an ominous-looking skull on the cover of Shane Neilson's *On Shaving Off His Face*, and it's a clear indicator that what lies within is not for the fainthearted. The collection is divided into three "books," each capable of being read as a stand-alone or as part of a whole.

Neilson's dense lines are held together by his expert use of rhyme, repetition, and alliteration. The result is a unique signature style: "Summer and the wave. Summer and the grave, grace of grim / stones washed blank from salt water off the coast of Maine / and its nested coastlines of eyes."

The title poem of Book Three, "Out of the Mouth of Babes and Sucklings Hast Thou Ordained Strength," pushes the limits of what might be strictly considered poetry, with its four pages dominated not by verses, but by footnotes to verses. In "The Barn," Neilson gracefully mixes in unusual vocabulary, with a nod to his medical background as a family physician—"idioglossing," "opisthotonic," "violaceous," "rolandic"—aiding his intent by offering a different way of looking at the familiar. These are not words chosen or used as strictly diagnostic terms—they serve the poem in their mouth-feel and in their strange, obscure beauty.

Though the collection is strong throughout, the standout is Book Two, which bears the disarming title "Able Physiologists Discuss Grief Musculatures." Based on a fictional conference of students of Darwin's Theory of Fervourism, Neilson introduces a series of diverse characters in fourteen parts, among them such notable figures as Al Capone and Edvard Munch. A few medical photographs illustrate Neilson's topics, but nothing can prepare readers for the modern-day mug shots and raw, resonant poetic profiles of three all-too-real perpetrators of recent mass killings. Carrying the theme of the body, and particularly the face, as a literal window into the psyche, this section, along with the first and third, probes deeply into mental, physical, and emotional illnesses.

This collection could be regarded as an extension of the medical or scientific approach to knowledge, with its subject the innermost workings of the human mind and body—those that don't necessarily show up on an x-ray or MRI. Imaginative, inventive, and dynamic, *On Shaving Off His Face* is meaty poetry, a substantial work that rewards immediate rereading, and deserves a place on the bookshelf for further reflection.

PETER DABBENE (August 18, 2015)

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