



Poetry

### **The Rigid Body**

Gabriel Spera

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*The Rigid Body*, Gabriel Spera's second poetry collection, is a knockout fight against physical rigidity. While the rigid body signifies death in this collection, the poet does not limit his scope to only skin and bone, carrying readers into the intersections of physical and mental hardness that harm more than ourselves. Despite the presence in these poems of the shadows of death, torture, and the human need for control, Spera favors a natural view of the world where, like the moth drawn to pheromones, "life baits / its killing jar with what we most desire" (from "The Pantry Moths in the Pheromone Trap").

The book is divided into four parts that plunge readers into different aspects of the physical. The first section, "A Blind, Irresistible Urge," surrounds readers in the natural world's abundance, from a windfall of apricots to the work of opossums and cabbageworms. Echoing the abundance are Spera's spellbinding sounds and eye-opening word choices. The "sweet glut" of apricots "flump to the ground with its zither of meddling flies" ("Apricots"). In "Opossum," the creature roots through "melon scalps" with "her coffee filter nose" and reveals "the zipper of her smile." Throughout this section, Spera lays bare how we are no different than color-changing cabbageworms: "What we hunger after / can't help but change us, stain us from within" ("Cabbageworm").

The poems in “Like Ghostly Apparitions” and “The Most Impossible of Conclusions,” the middle parts, reveal the inner landscape of our physical hungers and implore readers to reflect on their own thoughts and actions. From personal poems that explore the last day as an altar boy (with lust in his heart for a girl) and lost love, to the underworld of torture and rape, Spera shows us how humanity, hungry for self-preservation, easily and naturally perpetuates cruelty. In the poem “Body Worlds,” the speaker looks on the bodies of the traveling exposition like Hamlet reflecting on Yorick’s skull. And what he unveils is hard to face: “the body, with its threads of memories, / simply dissolved, like stacks of newsprint erased / by rain.”

In “Hostages of Fortune,” the final section, readers arrive into a bright light—of rebirth, of second chances, and the abundance, now slightly tempered, explored at the start of the book. Centered on pregnancy, miscarriage, and fatherhood, these poems are filled with the mystery of miracle, such as the two fetal heartbeats on the monitor like “flawless / calligraphy ... declaring / in endlessly knotted arabesques: / there is no god but god in his name” (“Twins”). The final poem wrestles with the loss of control one feels when children enter the picture, like Atlas trying desperately to hold up the world, knowing “I can’t hold on. And I can’t let go” (“Atlas”).

Gabriel Spera’s mastery of form is exhibited throughout the collection—from blank verse to sonnets—in the natural, almost conversational way that the poems read. Selected by Natasha Trethewey, the nineteenth Poet Laureate of the United States, for the Richard Snyder Publication Series Prize, *The Rigid Body* perfectly marries content and form, calling readers back to the page for more.

*Jennifer Fandel*