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Uncoded Woman

Anne-Marie Oomen
Milkweed Editions (Nov 29, 2006)
Unknown $14.95 (88pp)
978-1-57131-425-3

Begin reading with *The International Code of Signals*, published by the Defense Mapping Agency Hydrographic/Topographic Center. Start with symbol titles, “I Have Taken the Line,” “I am Going Ahead,” “I Do Not See Any Light.” Then imagine the long escape that might accompany those titles. This author gives readers a woman running from a violent home. The symbols then become markers for her journey, and unlike cheesy reality television, Oomen’s speaker truly journeys—physically, emotionally, intellectually.

Oomen, an award-winning memoirist, playwright, and poet, is the founding editor of *The Dunes Review* and the recipient of a 2005 Michigan Notable Book for her memoir, *Pulling Down the Barn*. This volume, like Kim Addonizio’s *Jimmy & Rita*, collects poems into a linked narrative volume with a plot similar to that of a novel. Beanie, a woman abused and molested by her father, speeds down the highway, then stops to pick up a hitchhiker, a half-Native American man named Barn. Together they head north where Beanie slowly acclimates both to the climate and the man with whom she’s chosen to live. Underlying every poem is Beanie’s former life as a sexually and physically abused daughter. The agony surrounding her decision to marry Barn stems from this terror, and her new life resolves with a revelation about the old one.

The greatest gift in this volume is Oomen’s creation of voice. From the very beginning, Beanie is distinct: “How it all kicked off—I’m on the run.” The same voice can utter, “I drive like a flood busting open sluice / gates, like my whole past wants me / drowned but I’m not going down.” The movement between the factual and the metaphorical is effortless and sensible for this voice. Beginning writers can make the mistake of picking characters who do not have the capacity to reveal themselves, not so Oomen. In “I am Continuing to Search,” Beanie steals *The International Code of Symbols*, and begins to imagine what she might say, what she might want, in a language separate from her life.

> *I’d like to see across that lake. / Learn how to say I’m sorry. / Book falls open. // Show me how things might mean. / Forgiveness is not one of the letters. / But there are others that look like kin.*

Beanie figures out a language for herself, through cypher, through metaphor. Oomen, through the language with which she gifts Beanie, shows the ways language creates identity just as her character learns it. The poetry enacts the revelation in really exciting ways. For readers scared of the lexical gymnastics often at play in poetry, Oomen’s strong character, iconoclastic language, and suspenseful plotting will satisfy dual desires for the grace of poetry and the immersion of the novel.
(August 18, 2009)

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