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about the wide, wide world—a world in which the future is now.

—Jim Cocola

Inventory at the All-Night Drugstore

By Erica Meitner
Anhinga Press, 2003

Erika Meitner's first book of poetry, *Inventory at the All-Night Drugstore*, is primarily concerned with the body—the way we use it, deny it, enjoy it, and the way it cooperates or rebels. To Meitner, the body may be mechanical, as when menstrual cramps make the body into “a manual egg-beater with a handle,” or the body electric, as when a Home Economics quiz on the parts of a sewing machine evokes the constant underlying hum of adolescent lust. The reader moves with Meitner among and within those humming bodies of adolescence, through narratives of school and lifeguarding in Queens, to the reckless and regretless sexual encounters of adulthood, ensconced in latex with the joyful song, “*I am stupid. / I am blessed.*”

Although the speaker is the main character of this collection of poems, Meitner avoids solipsism by the attention she gives to the multitude of other people who occupy the book. As the speaker and her body go about their business of living and working, they are deeply engaged with other ordinary, interesting people going about their own lives. By the last section of the book, “Bind,” when the speaker faces her Jewish heritage in the person of her grandmother who survived the concentration camps of the Holocaust,

survival itself is inextricably tied to the bodies of others.

The settings of Meitner's poems reflect what the speaker values. Her poems take place wherever people come together, from schools and subways to the supermarket, the airport, and the Blue Ridge AIDS clinic. They venture to the interesting terrain of county fairs and tattoo parlors.

Schoolchildren in Queens are depicted on a field trip to the Museum of Natural History, but, characteristically, Meitner describes their ride on the school bus, not their reaction to the museum itself. The title poem, “They Are Always Doing Inventory at the All-Night Drugstore,” reveals that Meitner is counting her fellow shoppers—“the guy rushing in for condoms on the fly” and “the red-eyed man / reading antacid bottles”—as the employees count the merchandise: “the red-smocked employee / stickering gauze with a vengeance, rocking / back and forth on her knees in First Aid.”

Meitner writes in a style all her own, with a lively, smart voice—making associative leaps, quick to see humor in life and language itself. Generally her use of humor and word play is quite successful, as in “Go Cart, Go,” when she writes, “At intervals, we have shopping-cart- / in-parking-lot sex, bumping noisily along, / parts clattering into one another. You come / like the grown man in the Food Lion lot / riding a full, brown-bagged wagon toward his car, / all reckless momentum.” The humor fails when it is harder to see what might be funny in a situation. The metaphors in “Rubber,” for example, where a condom breaking is metaphorically aligned with the speaker's car getting a flat, seem forced. Similarly, the

associative leaps do not always have an obvious purpose within the context of the poem. Meitner's poems function more authentically when she explores adolescence through the eyes of a young teacher dealing with her sixth-grade students in Brooklyn than when the poems have an adolescent speaker. In fact, her strongest poems, "Lavender Lake," "Homeroom," and "Necessities," take place within the realm of the teacher's introduction to the world in which her students live.

In sum, this is a very strong first book: well-written, compelling, and emotionally honest.

—*Marie Kaczorek*

*Sifting through the Madness
for the Word, the Line, the Way*
By Charles Bukowski
Ecco Press, 2003

Ah, yet another posthumous book from everybody's favorite dirty old man. Since Bukowski's death in 1994, he has published four volumes of new poems, rivaling Hemingway in prolificacy from beyond the grave. *Sifting through the Madness* is not for the casual Bukowski fan, as it requires a great deal of sifting through the poet's own madness for the word or the line. However, for every dozen poems that are merely mediocre, there is one that hits you in the gut.

One such poem, "So you want to be a writer?" opens the book with an immediate challenge. "if it doesn't come bursting out of you / in spite of everything, / don't do it," he warns. The rest of the poem admonishes the

legions of would-be poets who write to him asking for advice. He sneers at the "so many thousands of / people who call themselves writers," dismissing them as "dull and boring / and pretentious." Bukowski, who worked at the post office for many years before becoming a writer, seems to be taking a shot at the tortured mediocrities sitting around at Starbucks all day with their laptops. The advice he gives is:

when it is truly time
and if you have been chosen,
it will do it by
itself and it will keep on doing it
until you die or it dies in
you.

The book takes its title from a line in the poem "neither Shakespeare nor Mickey Spillane," a bitter recollection of his early literary career. He criticizes literary magazines, referring to them as "those cold / fuckers who kept sending it all back while printing only / clever careful crap." Existing in the haze of alcoholic insanity, all the young writer wants is acceptance: "sifting through the madness for the Word, the line / the way, / hoping for a check from somewhere. / dreaming of a letter from a great editor: 'Chinaski, you don't know how long we've been / waiting for you!'" The only thing he wants is to be a writer, but no one will let him.

In "what can I do?" Bukowski shows how his attitude has changed with age and success. Now that he has been accepted as a writer, he views all of the pain he has suffered as a necessary prerequisite for success. He revisits the theme of an artist