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Inventory at the All-Night Drugstore. By Erika Meitner. Tallahassee, FL: Anhinga, 2003. \$12 (paper).

Erika Meitner is as urban as can be. Titles such as “All the Pools in Queens,” “Gateway Drug,” “DWI,” “Latex Empire,” and “Metrocard” reveal a life lived within the city. Allen Ginsberg would have approved of Meitner’s seedy settings replete with condoms and their wrappers, tattoo artists, beer cans, “magazine pages and mirrors, straight-edge skaters, / drama queens, hair gods and punk princesses / smoking in the back row” (“Gateway Drug”). Her invocations give her away: “O morning of blessed insomniacs,” and “O morning of wasted lovers, morning / of naked sunrise” (“Gospel of Lust”). She’s a city poet, to be sure, urban yet never urbane.

Inventory at the All-Night Drugstore is dedicated to insomniacs everywhere. She may not say that outright, but we understand why she finds herself, in the title poem, “talking about chocolate and shampoo, / glazed aisles easy with fluorescence, / q-tips, crazy glues.” She describes the “glide in flip-flops / and frayed shorts, in yesterday’s underwear, in wrinkled restaurant shirts” past the “red-smocked employee / sticking gauze with a vengeance.” In fact, the book is so rich in observation we might be tricked into thinking Meitner is merely a poet of shiny surfaces and fluorescent lighting: all show.

Not so.

Meitner possesses the uncanny ability to recycle a metaphor, to keep stringing its tattered vestige behind the momentum of the poem, like something dragged behind the bus that hit it. Yes, she can be that brutal, the best example of which is the exceptional poem “Rubber.” A broken condom necessitates the speaker’s trip to the gynecologist for the “morning after” pill whose name, the speaker tells us, is “like the wreckage / of an overnight bombing.” Here, the excruciating scene of the speaker’s “feet spread / in stirrups sheathed with paper booties / like small shower caps” replays later when she gets a flat tire (another broken rubber) and is forced to repeat the embarrassing procedure:

. . . my car jacked high in the air
while the mechanic in blue coveralls
pointed to a tear on the tire’s side, then the rip
in the boot cover, the axle problem.
Clueless about the inner mechanics
of cars, all I knew to ask was *How much?*

That wonderful enjambment in the penultimate line: this is how to end a poem, the gorgeously wrought metaphor coming to its haunting and earned conclusion.

Meitner has other gifts, though, including an ear for terseness—the stiff laconic stuff that

sticks in our throats. “Gateway Drug” ends with the surreal image of a high school siren song of eschatological proportions culminating in the last line where “we all get a good, fluorescent look at each other.” She can as easily begin a poem with the same flat willfulness:

If sex with you is propinquity and pounding
while everyone sleeps in their sorry beds
then supermarket is the language
for solitude late at night. (“Go Cart, Go”)

The same poem ends “I dream of kissing you / in airports,” and it is this type of leap that betrays her tough, urban armature. For this is the stuff of poetry, not shoddy replicas of O’Hara’s I-do-this-I-do-that poems. Meitner makes poems that glisten as artifacts well-made, sculpture pieces themselves indebted to history and tradition even as they defy most prosodic notions of normalcy (though she can even surprise on a formal level, ending the book with a villanelle). In “Expedition Record,” for example, Meitner seamlessly combines the idea of a list women keep to record the people with whom they sleep, alongside Magellan’s first crossing of the Pacific in 1521. In Meitner’s hands, there is little doubt as to how the two elements resonate against one another: “these guides and conquerors / who find their way toward us, crawling / across blank sheets, signing their names / in the guest-books.” And just as suddenly, she ends with an excerpt from Clark’s travel journal: “*A woman with a party of men / is a token of peace.*”

Ultimately, the ease with which Meitner travels through New York City and the surroundings—tangled streets and subways, dark schoolrooms, dark bedrooms of half-strangers—is mirrored in her manipulation of poetic lines and the poems they create. Like the steel girders and electrical ducts behind the most florid wallpaper, we can’t help but feel the architectural rigor behind the carefully crafted surfaces of her poems, tokens themselves worth reading and rereading.

-Chad Davidson, University of West Georgia