

Tinderbox Lawn, by Carol Guess
Rose Metal Press, 2008
reviewed by Steven Wingate

Not many prose poem collections can match *Tinderbox Lawn* for movement—both the suggestion of narrative movement between its component parts and the visceral evidence of physical movement within them. In its fifty-one pieces, ranging in length from one line to nearly thirty, Carol Guess pulls us into the lives of her protagonists, who are predominantly based in Seattle and (although this is not always stated) lesbian. I don't use the word protagonists lightly here; Guess creates fragmented but coherent arcs, particularly in the first and fourth sections of the book, with the narrative skills of a fiction writer, though she never lets go of the poet's tight control of language.

A few tricks of both trades—all intrinsic to the work rather than applied to it—help Guess achieve this effect. She titles only the four sections into which the poems fall, though not the poems themselves, and this encourages the reader to consider each section as being of a single piece. Her use of short sentences and internal rhyme echoes the texture of the poetic line and gives the book an integrated, consistent voice that is only occasion-

ally broken. Those short sentences also work to emphasize the unsaid, giving the impression of much larger stories that we encounter only in their most salient, resonant aspects. Often these are moments in which danger—physical, emotional, or both—can burst forth. Toward the end, for instance:

We're driving toward the train tracks under the West Seattle Bridge. We're driving toward the dangerous part, the place where the train comes fast without warning. Listen for the whistle. The whistle. Where. The train speeds forward as the best trains do and you drive your truck like the devil I wished for.

There is a sense in much of *Tinderbox Lawn* of rushing forward toward the irrevocable, of following decisions of the heart and loins that the mind doesn't (and might not wish to) understand. This comes across at all levels of the book: *in toto*, in the poems considered individually, and at the sentence level in such lines as:

You whisper goodbye and Nebraska is gone.

The gun lay on the floor between us and I knew what you were thinking.

She leads small ruined lives into the midst of this.

Two other authorial choices Guess makes—not identifying characters by name and using pronouns ambiguously—also assist her in creating a relatively seamless collection. Though the narrator appears unified throughout, the alteration in her desires and concerns gives her a sense of growing older as the pages turn. It's impossible to discern whether her friends and lovers, the *we*, *she*, and *you* of the book, are the same people in different phases of life or discrete individuals to whom she is attracted. These lovers are often drawn to thrills and the taste of violence, like the narrator herself, and the fact that Guess does not give them definitive identities serves a twofold purpose. It reflects on the narrator's emotional proclivities and needs, as we would expect a novel to do, and it helps the reader envision the

relationships portrayed by stripping them to their barest bones. Although I'm at the opposite end of the sexual identity spectrum from the characters in *Tinderbox Lawn*, I found myself being drawn into the narrator's relationships because they are so elemental; they expand into the world, not limited by their sexuality. Guess lets her characters think about the life beyond their grasp, and she catches them in the act:

How quiet the world before the word *belief*.

I reached for her in the language of understanding . . . not knowing skin wasn't the place to enter.

You love the idea of privacy in a city of windows, the idea of light in a city of shadows.

The characters who appear in *Tinderbox Lawn* tend toward internal flux and toward hightailing when trouble comes along—two kinds of motion, one more obvious than the other. That we are unclear about whether a scene that appears to be a breakup is a temporary stalemate in a couple's life or a permanent rupture only adds to the tension of the book's prose. Everything is always moving, and not always toward brightness; sometimes people move toward the same mistakes, the same temptations, the same promises.

I must confess that I first read this collection late at night, waiting for the sound of my one-year-old's cry through the baby monitor in my office. Initially, I thought that this was responsible for the sense of impending dread I felt from Guess's pages—the sense that something dangerous is always about to happen. But rereading it in the light of day revealed the same world that I found at night: one perpetually about to fall apart and regather itself, perhaps as it has regathered many times before or perhaps in some new, tenuous ambiguous, way. In exploring this world, Guess has created that rarest of beasts: a book of prose poems that feels whole and intact, held together by its themes and not just its binding.