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The Sharp Edges of Intimacy

***Dust or Fire* by ALYDA FABER**

Icehouse Poetry, 2016 \$19.95

Reviewed by **BRANDI ESTEY-BURTT**

Alyda Faber's debut collection *Dust or Fire* explores the searing questions, wounds, memories, and reflections that accrue over years of family relationships. The very first poem "Jealousy" plunges the reader in the taut dynamics of being raised in a "snake family" (2) where the father-figure is "all jaws and stomach" (3). This "father-enigma" (11) tries to consume everything and "drops / *la jalousie* on my soul again" (11-12). Many of the poems demonstrate the strain of relationships with this complicated, difficult man, as well as a kind of struggle to understand the woman—her mother—who stayed with him until her death.

The collection is structured in four parts: "Unsayings Poems," "Leeuwarden Train Station," "Still Life, Animal," and "Saying Poems." The poems themselves range in form and structure, showcasing Faber's adeptness with imagery and her experimentation with forms like the ghazal and nonce.

Perhaps most striking for me was Faber's layering of understated affect in each carefully-shaped image and gorgeous turn of phrase. Memory surges like a wet spring seeping through the house: "Remembering this is like opening the cellar door in spring / beneath the kitchen tiles dark water rises to the third step" ("Cactus Essay" 17-18). Home is a place where "we assail each other / home the anxious nest" ("Mole-Sick" 9-10).

The poems give a significant amount of description, of children going on an inner tube run or of a painting in the

Rijksmuseum. They observe, carefully and deeply attending to the details that often pass by so quickly in a relationship—a fleeting gesture from her mother, "that reaching look" ("Leeuwarden Train Station" 61) of her aunt and uncle who lost their daughter when she was only five years old.

Frequent references to film and painting flow throughout a number of the poems. Art provokes intense responses in the body, as at the Berlin Film Festival, where

The films massage your waiting
body,
take you into a stupor of rest
or press fingers so deep that nerves
diagram red hot[.]
("Berlinale Erotik" 122-125)

But art also communicates meaning that cannot be captured semantically, that is rather expressed through image and resonance. This tension pervades the collection—a friction between what goes unsaid, be it in family relationships or in art, and what must be said to heal, or at least acknowledge the resonances that continually affect one. It ultimately requires a willingness to listen: "Hear what she's not-saying. / Hear what's in her, but not for telling" ("Flesh-Ear" 9-10).

The unsaying often flashes in transitory moments. It emerges in a glimpse of the cactus Faber's mother nurtured from seed, a gesture by her uncle at the train station. Where relatives all too often retreated into silence and glances in the past—"detecting by feel not ask" ("Mole-Sick" 3)—Faber peels back the skin suturing them together. This undertaking is partially a desire to highlight the intimacy she had with her mother, but also partially an attempt to understand her mother's

relationship with her often jealous, hard-edged father. There are not necessarily any answers to this endeavour, but there remains a sense that it is important work, that perhaps it needs to be re-done, re-thought, every few years.

While Faber explores the sharpness of intimacy among family members, she also considers it beyond the familial. Instead, there are other intimacies that enfold the more-than-human, such as with her cat—"I hold her close and kiss her. / I do not do this instinctively with family" ("Leeuwarden Train Station" 76-77)—or a tree—

The trees have fingers
and their touch
lays you
bare[.] ("Hoarfrost" 12-15)

Similarly, she highlights the intimacy of strangers, as with how an audience watching a film is linked together by their mutual, hushed engagement: "An intimate dark with strangers. / All those exposed necks looking up" ("Berlinale Erotik" 102-103).

The cat, the tree, the audience—all "la[y] you bare" in new ways, asking for a giving up of oneself, an exposure, to their claims of intimacy. Art makes this claim, as well—it, too, initiates a relationship if we are willing to listen.

Faber's supple debut ponders the "everyday graceless cuts" (79) inflicted by family from which "[t]here is no release" ("Suture" 79). The poems act as both a memorializing and a complicated kind of work, a labour of re-membering and re-writing fraught relations. As a whole, the collection's deep swells of reflection and feeling are both challenging and satisfying to read.

BRANDI ESTEY-BURTT is a PhD candidate at Dalhousie University. She works on religion in contemporary literature as well as critical animal studies, and she has published in *Literature and Theology*, *The Bull Calf*, and *Narrative Works*.