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Anatomic by Adam Dickinson

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Anatomic by ADAM DICKINSON

Coach House Books, 2018 \$20.95

Reviewed by HEATHER HOUSER

Peer inside the twenty-first-century data-body. This is a corpus formed from millennia of evolution with microscopic others and from decades of contamination from anthropogenic chemical innovation. *Anatomic*, Adam Dickinson's fourth collection, plays throughout on the meanings of *corpus*—fleshy body and textual body. How microbial species and chemical substances write our bodies is the impetus behind this project in which conceptual art, bioart, and ecopoetics meet. A paratextual endnote explains that Dickinson sent off his feces, urine, blood, and tissue to be tested for a range of naturally occurring microbes and recently invented chemicals. “PCBs are messages in the fat of our humanity,” the speaker announces, and the objective of *Anatomic* is to read these messages “as edits” to our bodily code and to write the resulting chemical self—rendered as numerical data in epigraphs and as color visualizations at book's end—as an artifact of the Anthropocene (31).

What makes up humans, what have humans made, and what is the traffic between these forms of creation? Answering these questions requires poetics as well as biological and data-based methods. The collection mimics the crowded composition of the human body; the notes explain, “a long poem in sections, called 'Hormone,' runs throughout, with the chemical and microbial poems floating in amongst these streaming sections” (145). While scientific compositional methods aren't entirely new to poetry (one thinks of Christian Bök's work, among others), they are more profoundly intimate and emotional here. This is true even though these methods lead to poetic forms that might seem distancing: for example, incorporating puns such as using *vagus* for Vegas in “Gut-Brain Axis,” sprinkling in species and chemical names, and enumerating words containing four Ds in “Vitamin D.”

Shuttling between intimacy and distance is one of *Anatomic's* key moves, and this shuttling corresponds to the need to think across the scales of the Anthropocene. The collection emphasizes throughout that this epoch has a Janus-faced aspect. The Anthropocene is a hubristic concept declaring humans' outsized influence on the planet's geophysical forces, but it also asserts humans' vulnerability to the other-than-human. Vulnerability and anxiety, its constant companion, arises in the speaker's realization in “Circulation” (epigraph: *Staphylococcus*) that, “[i]f they worked together, the microbes could eat us in a few days” (54), and in “Heterotrophies” (epigraph: *Streptococcus mutans*) that “[i]t makes sense that the germs would want to kill and mount us” (97). What makes less sense, and what *Anatomic* explores, is how an emotion like anxiety not only results from worry about the microbiome and contamination, but also is a less scrutable symptom of being a multispecies body, “taxidermy animated by the insides of something else's guts” (60).

Anxiety can shade into warmer feelings as the collection explores the odd ontology of both *being* and *containing* otherness. The opening prose-poem, “Anatomic,” expresses this duality in the series of verbs that cling to the subject “I”: “am,” “wear,” “resemble,” “house” (9-10). Are

we the PCBs of Monsanto's manufacture (31)? Are we temporary carriers of, or containers for them?

These questions capture the collection's struggle over kinship and separation, a struggle the poems approach as the central dynamic of embodiment in an age of toxicity:

One part of you,

as an act of survival,
starts eating another part.
This is a membranous
decision

in which the crowd,
having mistaken
its periphery, resembles
its prey. (22)

If the Anthropocene is Janus-faced, separation is a boomerang. Acts of aggression, expressed above as eating and, elsewhere in the language of invasion, infection and insurrection, circle around to become acts of integration. "It's easy to feel detached" (67), "A Minor Excretory Organ" begins, but relation and even equivalence are the ultimate destinations for detachment. As this poem reminds us, "the companies are counting on us to love that part of ourselves that is them" (67). Even if we try to cleanse, starve, inoculate, or otherwise neutralize those parts, "There is no escaping / the free world" (19).

Any attempts at deprivation, including the speaker's ultra-low-calorie diet and obsessive walking, turn into proliferation. This perhaps helps answer the question that someone less familiar with bioart or conceptual art might ask about *Anatomic*: why art at all? Why poetry? Dickinson's project demonstrates that, because poetry both *is* and *contains* the world, it well suits the effects of our biotechnological present. This is especially true of the information- and science-dense poems here. Poetry is akin to the lipid, which is the focus of a seven-section poem of the same name: "Fat is a slowly oscillating wave. It embodies the constancy of transition . . . Fat is an archive of this historical moment" (31). What enters poetry, like what bioaccumulates in layers of adipose, doesn't just rest in a stable state, but activates unpredictable generative potential. Microbes and toxins invite the genre of *poiesis*, of bringing into being. Poetry catalyzes novel relations and reactions through the proximities it creates, just as the sugars and fats that supercharge food flavor and texture bring strange abilities along with vulnerabilities:

Without hurting
the taste, a young child

can stand

to keep a hand
in cold water

longer
with a sweet mouth. (25)

Anatomic certainly wonders about how much we will stand with a sweet mouth and at what point the saccharine becomes acerbic. However, the collection primarily probes the unwitting kinships, identities, and aversions of our biotechnological moment and composes the multispecies body in all its emotional and aesthetic—not to mention microbial and chemical—complexity.

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