BOOKS

THE CHILD IN TIME

Brenda Shaughnessy's "Our Andromeda."

BY DAN CHIASSON

American poets often seem prone to a kind of New World bad mood, a booby-trapped candor that draws us in to rip us up. Open Walt Whitman to any page and you will find traces in his camaraderie of this inexplicable testiness ("Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?/Look in my face while I nuff the sidle of evening"), as though somehow, somewhere, you'd done him wrong. Emily Dickinson is flirty but barbed, torn between her "Playfellow Heart" and a "Heart that goes in, and loses the Door." Marianne Moore's armored creatures use their beauty as a defense against predators; Wallace Stevens's "Harmonium" keeps us off balance with its comic tantrums. And then there is Sylvia Plath, whose mingled curses and seductions can make other poets seem like Velveeta. Plath's readers suffer the same sadistic glee that she describes in "Daddy," that "love of the rack and the screw." Her sublime unfairness to everyone and everything, herself first of all, makes her at once impossible company and impossible to resist.

"Our Andromeda" is the third book of poems by Brenda Shaughnessy, an heir to Plath's exuberant contempt. Shaughnessy, who is forty-two, lives in Brooklyn with her family (her husband is the poet Craig Morgan Teicher), and teaches at the Newark campus of Rutgers University, but she goes, as the best poets usually do, pretty much wherever language leads. In previous books, it has led her to perplexing boasts ("I've won the tourniquet, I've devastated toddlers") and queen-beeish threats ("I will kill you with the blistering foods of a Crimean War"). Equally self-mocking is her Plath-inspired prickly amorousness, which courts us by calling us names:

> I wanted nothing. I am not a stray mule
> & gaudy caravan pulling a big skirt,
> open legs, a head of wire.
>
> I want singers to shear your eye from the flocking
> of my city of superior grammar & wincing.
> To keep you blind, my alabaster scourge.
>
> It must be a Love, this crackpot of heart,
> My sterling & cashmere & no money.
> You my fat bad fricassee, cough of a candle.

These lines are from "Letter to the Crevice Novice," the second poem in Shaughnessy's first book, "Interior with Sudden Joy." It is typical of Shaughnessy to sexualize our passing attention (readers of her poems are here equated with new lovers), then shame us for having such dirty minds. The poems in her first two books often come close to erotic slapstick, a comedy of raunchy slips and puns. Plath compares love to a "fat gold watch"; Shaughnessy calls her lover a "fat bad fricassee." Singer-brand shears are made into "singers" who "shear"; "flocking" and "fricassee" suggest familiar names for well-known sexual acts.

A poet's style embodies her vision of the world: Shaughnessy's, full of flares and surges, suggests that everything on earth is saturated with what she once called "swampy sexual promise." For her, arousal and inspiration feed, and feed on, one another: like many poets, she feels that she is simultaneously the ravenous appetite driving her work and the food that fuels it. Often, this makes for delectable farce, with Shaughnessy presenting herself as a helpless pipsqueak facing the howling gale of her desires. Her second book, "Human Dark with Sugar," opens with "I'm Over the Moon," a breakup poem to that fickle, indifferent suitor of all poets:

> I don't like what the moon is supposed to do.
> Confuse me, ovulate me,
>
> spoon-feed me longing. A kind of ancient
> date-rape drug. So I'll howl at you, moon,
>
> I'm angry. I'll take back the night. Using me to
> swoon at your questionable light,
>
> you had me chasing you,
> the world's worst lover, over and over
>
> hoping for a mirror, a whisper, insight.

This doesn't sound at all like the writing of someone "over" (in the sense of "finished with") the moon; playing with the ambiguity of her title, Shaughnessy risks succumbing to the rapture it usually suggests. She can't quit the moon; who can quit the moon? To be hooked on this glamorous cad, she decides, is "like having a bad boyfriend in a good band."

"Our Andromeda" is a book about family life, a hard subject for a poet who seems to thrive on sexual brinkmanship. If

you crave the incessant newness of erotic adventure you may find yourself stumped when life starts to become a set of routines. The conundrum seems to have forced Shaughnessy into an uncommon poetic discovery: a new subject. "Our Andromeda" is full of poems about the rigors and joys of caring for a young child born with severe disabilities: "hardly alive, hardly you/horribly slim-chanced." The superabundance of Shaughnessy's old style here dwindles to a few elemental words, some primal rhymes, stanzas that peter out or give in. This is the opening of "Artless," the book's first poem (the title runs into the first line):

> is my heart. A stranger
> berry there never was,
> tartless.
>
> Gone sour in the sun,
> in the sunroom or moonroof,
> roofless.
>
> No poetry. Plain. No
> fresh, special recipe
> to bless.

"Less" keeps finding the light here, popping up even in "bless." Lacking art's "recipe," the untransformed "meat stub" of ongoing life becomes gristle, "rim and trim":

> All I've ever made
> with these hands
> and life, less
>
> substance, more rind.
> Mostly rim and trim,
> meatless
>
> but making much smoke
> in the old smokehouse,
> no less.

A rationed vocabulary, an imagination thinned by worry and obligation, a new consciousness of death (the "smoke/in the old smokehouse"), and, most of all, this strangely antique music, like a dreamed stanza of Robert Herrick: these elements create the subsistence beauty of "Artless" and of much of Shaughnessy's new work.

Shaughnessy once went to Plath for her swagger and for her spooky special effects. Here she picks up on a feature of "Ariel" that few readers seem to notice: its often hair-raising honesty about living in a house with young children. "Liquid Flesh," Shaughnessy's garrulous waking-baby poem, bears comparison with Plath's "Morning Song" or "Nick and the Candlestick." What does the word "mother" mean when the baby "howls and claws/like a wrongly minor red wolf/who doesn't know his mother":

> Whatever meaning the word itself
> is covering, like underwear,
> that meaning is so mere and meager
>
> this morning. Mother. Baby.
> Chicken and egg. It's so obnoxious
> of me: I was an egg
>
> who had an egg
> and now I'm chicken,
> as usual scooping up
>
> both possibilities,
> or what I used to call
> possibilities.

"Mother" and "baby" form a broken binary: neither party here recognizes the other. Something has gone wrong: maybe the logic was screwy (how can an egg have an egg?); maybe a kind of barnyard hubris, "scooping up / both possibilities," has brought them, mother and baby, to this unimaginable impasse. Like many of these new poems, "Liquid Flesh" quotes back, with snarl added, the aggravating counsel of experts and well-meaning outsiders. "The baby comes first," some jackass must have said:

> Do I like us? Can I love us?
> If anyone comes
> first it's him, but how can that be?
>
> I was here way, way first.
> I have the breasts, godawful, and he
> the lungs and we share the despair.

"I was here way, way first": Shaughnessy's bleakly funny assertion is the kind of thing you might say to someone who cuts in line at the movies.

The word "godawful" suggests, by profane photonegative, the striving toward some plausible image of the divine that saturates this book. Shaughnessy sometimes sounds like Job, but more often sounds like George Herbert in her frustration—by turns feisty and devastated—with a God who won't answer when called. Later in the book, Shaughnessy's "Milky Way God" is "always busy offline":

> jetskiing
> on our waterbodies, our handsqueezed
>
> oceans of salt water, competing in dressage
> though he always spooks the horses.

We know this guy, the plutocrat at his lake house, his power expressed through extravagant leisure. This can't-come-to-the-phone-right-now God makes every petitioner feel impotent. Herbert so lamented his own apparent uselessness that he wished, unforgettably, to be "a tree" so that "some bird would trust/Her household to me"—the total loss of sentience being preferable to the pain that sentience entails. Shaughnessy calls herself a "utilized vessel" and a "cracked hull," the fruit of some demented "divine / design . . . Deform/following the function." In "Glass-bottomed," she writes:

> If only the plain brown splotch—
> my home, my head—had a place,
> a say, the way rancid meat still
>
> has protein.

"Our Andromeda" crests with the book's twenty-two-page title poem, addressed to Shaughnessy's son, Cal (Cal was Robert Lowell's nickname, and Lowell's scary candor inflects the poem). The poem describes an alternate galaxy, Andromeda, where all the mundane sources of pain in which our own galaxy abounds have been removed. In Andromeda,

> There are no misdiagnoses
> or cursory dismissals as if the patient
>
> were a whiny dog who demands another
> biscuit. Or shooting in the dark like good
> Dr. Shtep in the NICU, when you were
>
> trying to begin living, who asked me
> whether I had taken street drugs.

"Our Andromeda" verges, at times, on a kind of vigilantism, evening the score with inattentive friends, an "absent obstetrician," insurance companies, and the Brooklyn parents of "normal" babies Shaughnessy must endure at every crosswalk. The anger is excessive and scattershot. If it were more tidily deployed, the heartbreak would not come across so clearly.

Shaughnessy has always been a poet of the accosting address, even in poems nominally pitched to lovers or rivals. But "Our Andromeda" is a poem we overhear, often uncomfortably. There is something illicit about eavesdropping. Some readers will find it deficient in music; certainly, it dynamites the idea that poems must find some symbolic relation to lived life. It keeps score; it loathes the fit and finish of "Poetry," capital "P"; it is mean; it is vengeful. You wonder, at times, whether it is poetry at all, but this thought tends to crop up at moments when the art takes a certain thrilling turn. For now, what I thought was mainly this: this boy Cal, he was wise when he chose his mother. ♦