

FRONT PORCH

The Stripping Point

Brian Henry, *The Stripping Point*
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The serial poem is a form often put aside by contemporary poetics in favor of shorter, single-page lyrics. One philosophy of this new poetics is to make poems, not books. As a result, poetry collections can feel somewhat incomplete or fragmented.

Brian Henry's recent work, however, straddles the divide between fragmentation and wholeness.

Quarantine, Henry's 2006 effort, garnered the Alice Fay di Castagnola Award as well as nominations for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. In it, Henry charts the life of a man from the seventeenth century who is infected with the plague. The work is comprised of two long serial poems, "Quarantine" and "Contagion," the latter of which incorporates lines from the former, but in reverse order. And unlike many contemporary books of poetics, it feels whole.

The Stripping Point, Henry's fifth and most recent book, is again serial, but in a different way than *Quarantine*. It's comprised of two long, serial poems, "More Dangerous than Dying" and "The Stripping Point." But these two poems don't overlap in context, at least on the surface, as the two serial poems in *Quarantine* do—which results in a more fragmented book, which calls for the reader to overcome the distance. Both poems abandon punctuation, risking further fragmentation for the reader who, in turn, must depend on stanzas, formatting, and spatial caesuras for instruction and guidance through each piece.

Language is never static. Henry adamantly explores this notion by showing its manipulation through time and social class. Suffering from neither an elitist bias toward "poetic" language nor an inability to manipulate the always-changing idioms, Henry, in *The Stripping Point*, gives the current language of corporate-collared America a place in his poetry. In so doing, he allows contemporary discourse into the world of contemporary poetics, which is a seldom-held correspondence.

Take the first poem of the work, "More Dangerous Than Dying," which is set at a contemporary paper-mill workplace and filled with the expected language of such an environment: "The long and short of it / transferred / to another department" and "A thing is delivered / to your In-basket" are both stanzas that commence the opening two sections of the poem and give context to the office relationship being explored. Language such as this risks alienating some biased or poetic language-loving poets, but it also risks recruiting new readers of poetry—those who may have felt alienated from poetry in the past. Throughout the poem, stanza lengths and formatting run rampant, and both devices serve as formal techniques that try to find superlative forms of expression in a world of constriction.

Deeper into "More Dangerous Than Dying," the same language proudly used in corporate culture is used in devaluing the narrator's corporate existence:

A top-down directive
requires a shuffling of cubicles

Farewell faithful smokestack!
Farewell tower of the freshly cut!
Air redolent of pulp and death!
Farewell farewell farewell!

Some of the serial poem's only punctuation is included in these four exclamation points of odium. Henry explores, through fitting diction, the compromise of self and company in this capitalist culture. The most gratifying moments of this series occur in moments such as this, when the narrator exhibits emotion—something that often can't be done under the company's watch.

The second poem, "The Stripping Point," is composed of one short piece after another, each one progressively being "stripped." The opening poem instructs us:

Decide on deciduous or remain ever green
My love for envy is not your color
Today un dieu des mauvais cheveux
Medusa could use a snaky excuse
Hotwired straight to the stripping point
Vanishment in ravishment will produce a

Immediately, language and its abilities (or disabilities) are at the reader's attention. The corporate speak has been abandoned. In this series, each line may or may not be related to what comes next; often lines seem autonomous. This opening poem immediately reveals itself as being stripped, in terms of the fragmented context of the lines that comprise it and because of its ending with an anticlimactic article. The pieces recede in line length as the serial poem progresses, from six lines to five, four, three, and finally two. While in the first series the reader had the recurring speech patterns to clasp onto, here each poem is a brand-new reconstruction.

Lines already established in previous sections of the longer poem are regurgitated and juxtaposed differently as the whole advances. Later, we see:

Who succumbs to coming twice in an evening
A nod and whisper carry the day into sweat
Surrender to dim and be done with darkness
Medusa could use a snaky excuse

Not only has the position of a line initially seen in the series' first poem changed position from mid-poem to the poem's end, but the use of language is questioned, as these short sections seem to point to its arbitrariness and, at times, its precision.

The barest piece of "The Stripping Point," also the book's closing poem, advises us, by couplet, to vacate the "darkness" and accept the barely recognizable:

A nod and whisper carry the day into sweat
Surrender to dim and be done with darkness

At this point, each of Henry's lines has accumulated vast associations due to the lines' purposefully "indiscriminate" placement in each piece. The words become divergent by the end of the poem, just as language is something different for the contemporary wordsmith paper-pusher than it was for the seventeenth-century Englishman. The reader Henry may have recruited in the first series with his "un-poetic" language could be turned off in the second, due to its fragmented nature; or, the reader may feel closer to poetry than ever, exploring each new piece intently. Henry, because he dares to inject new language into poetry and "strip" it to reveal the poetic, invites the reader to decide.

Here in postmodern literature, a genre in which the reader already questions the artifice of language, Brian Henry's *The Stripping Point* asks us not only to question what is behind each word but to look where each word may be going. And for Henry, his poems (and language) avoids poetry's elite biases, a risk so great it may be rewarding.

—Trey Moody