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**DEAD SHARK ON THE N TRAIN**

Susana H. Case

Broadstone Books

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*Margot Farrington*

"I know / that to be my own salvation / I have to get down from the mountain / before dark." Within this line, will and wisdom commingle. Whatever impediments lie in wait, whatever the threats of oncoming darkness, the assertion both haunts and comforts. The speaker grasps her dilemma, steels herself to survive. She's a tourist, encountered in the poem "No Direction Home." Her declaration is key. The poems of this book pursue Hamlet's "To be or not to be," in quiet asides or in full cry. Susana Case reveals women and men scuffling and striving—all the ways they get on, or how they suddenly don't. Her speakers hail from every corner to confront themselves and others. Case depicts teenagers waiting out adolescence, women braving medical tests, students frantically trying to shelter from gunmen. In ample display, we also find people felled by their own poor choices. She writes of marginalized populations, and at times of incarcerated artists—including some who pace the prisons that societal pressures have thrust upon them. Her view is global, her sensibility attuned to justice's derailments and restorations. The poems swing through decades smoothly to reveal our wayward progress. Some stringently remind us we've only turned in circles.

"Women have less / the higher I go" remarks that same tourist—hiking, as it were, the jewelry trail, noting that wealthier women living lower down are

adorned with gold, while poorer women on the mountain heights wear single jewels of glass. We're given economic insight of Pokhara, Nepal, and a clever link with the following poem, in which Maria Callas reviews her love life. She too, has less, even though she has ascended: diva undone by a romantic rival even more famous. What women suffer and transcend resounds throughout this book.

Three sections unite *Dead Shark on the N Train*. The first opens with "Living Dolls," where women, objectified, rebel against divisions wrought by gender and other causes. At times, humor provides the heart with refuge, as it does in "Monongahela, 1980." Two women, one man, and three sleeping bags (twice rearranged) leave us to speculate. The speaker resents the theft of her man by the second woman, but intuits his plan to enjoy them both. She rescues herself, then, with plucky philosophical response: "They say not to travel / with anything too showy / if you don't want it taken from you." Despite her decision to reject him, she must still extricate herself. It may not be over, not yet, in this wood reached by photocopied map, its destination marked with a heart, where dulcimer music drifts from the teepee camp. She may waver with this man with whom she has "evolved." Case evokes an experience of youthful folly—the ways women feel their way forward when expectations collapse. In "Radiance" this collapse brings on surrender—painful consequences be damned. The poem begins musingly, with the baring of a breast, and with thoughts adrift in the sciences (thermodynamics, geography) before dissolving from passion's rush, "the brushing of surface / that makes heat possible / pleasure, a million tears." It concludes with a plea and a fierce imperative: "Lie with me, lie to me / until your tongue burns." Betrayal, denial, and persistence don boxing gloves, while "a million tears" seems exactly the right number. "Radiance" strongly suggests a woman's forties, when beginnings new and potentially disastrous ensue. The poem extends celebration and warning simultaneously, pouring out thrill and chance taking.

Frances Glessner Lee became an artist through her crime scene dioramas, so accurate they gained use as forensic teaching tools. "Crime Scenes," the second section, offers an ekphrastic sequence of poems, inspired by this woman who broke boundaries in police work, where Lee's mode of reconstructing murders to solve them made her the equal of male detectives. Fourteen poems, augmented with photos of the dioramas, guide us through the

murders, but readers may find their senses blunted by the amount, and this section threatens to overburden. It feels as though Lee's boxes constricted the poet, for though descriptive, they limit Case, who freely enlightens us elsewhere. All we might know of murder surfaces more inventively in "Bolt," for instance, where a woman in a car flees—rabbit to her husband's ferret (Case presents them as such). Cinematic, the poem streaks and veers, holds abundant hint of Hitchcock, tantalizes with its ambiguous finish. Did she get away, or didn't she? We get a glimpse of the husband in a rear-view mirror, but is he inside the car or out? "Dead Shark on the N Train" examines the "joke" of death, where a shark becomes photo op plus dead mascot for the masses, gaining a Metro Card, a cigarette, and a drink of Red Bull. Ha! We humans have triumphed with our callous send-off, even as one of our kind died on the #1, and rode the circuit twice before discovery. Indifference often begets death, breeds its own sort of violence, as does disrespect of our species and fellow creatures. "Herds" presents refugees held on an island, their lot no better than the goats corralled and carted off to slaughter. A bomber stalks a city in Belgium in "Tier Four." Verbal violence, put on hold, secures respite for a troubled couple in the beautifully incisive "A Small Hotel in Monterosso." Thus do we kill or refrain from killing, since words too, make us die.

Case's robust and savvy voice clears us a path; her wit and humor bestow balm. "I need," she states in "Is Your Book Ready For Hollywood?," "an alien or superhero or shark / in my poetry book to make it more exciting. Here I am—you people / you whom I don't even write for," comes her riposte for the conceit she writes of—and rips! Luckily, all three exist within the pages of this book. Are we not aliens when displaced? Superheroes imagined and actual? And yes, are we not those imperiled and circling sharks? Case proves we are, in all our confounding variety.

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