

READING GUIDE:

Jessi MacEachern's *A Number of Stunning Attacks*

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Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up *A Number of Stunning Attacks*. These poems take place at the intersection of Dream and Gender. These two strange figures are the guiding forces of the poetry collection. They are personifications of the concepts they name, so imagine them filing their nails or applying fake tattoos at the periphery of every page.

I aspire to write, in the words of Lyn Hejinian, “an open text”—one that opens up multiple and even contradictory responses. In this, I am inspired by other examples of innovative writing by women in Canada: Lisa Robertson’s theoretically-inflected explorations into fashion and weather, Erin Moure’s translative experiments with the material of language, and Nicole Brossard’s lyric-conceptual feminist inquiries.

In the first pages of the book, we are introduced to a female subject, the unnamed “She,” who is bound up in “a notebook labelled dreams to have”—not yet daring to dream, nor to leave the walls of the home. The lines of the poem are splintered across the page, populated with as much white space as words, in order to represent the staccato and paranoid rhythm of her thoughts.

As readers, we become voyeurs to intimate exchanges between lovers. The images are simultaneously erotic and violent. The book presents a dizzying catalogue of dangerous and glamorous figures. One might try rotating the images on the page again and again until they make sense, as in a spatial cognition test. Here, however, the non-sense of the page persists, so that we confuse “bookshops” for “butcher shops.”

The voices of the poem approach trauma according to the directive of Emily Dickinson: “Tell all the truth but tell it slant.” The unnamed “She” has been involved in a serious incident, assault, or number of such things. The multiple and contradictory voices in this book work to form a community in which the “She” (and the reader!) can envision herself whole again. Violence remains in the urban spaces delineated by the poems, but so too does beauty, glamour, and dream.

I sincerely hope your responses to the open text of *A Number of Stunning Attacks* challenge some of the ideas above. Ultimately, the lines of the poem—and their strange experiments in language, theory, and desire—are meant to bring you somewhere new. What sort of place is the “Dream’s sphere” to which you aspire?

Yours,
Jessi MacEachern

