

From *Poetry Niederngasse*
Book Reviews

Various Modes of Departure
By Deborah Fries

Transplant, Transport, Transubstantiation
By Marjorie Maddox

Reviewed by Lynn Levin

Prize-winning collections by two American women delight with lyric poems rich in imagery and natural science.

Various Modes of Departure
Winner of the Kore Press First Book Award
by Deborah Fries
Tucson, Arizona: Kore Press, 2004
55 pages

Transplant, Transport, Transubstantiation
Winner of the Yellowglenn Prize
by Marjorie Maddox
Cincinnati, Ohio: WordTech Editions, 2004
110 pages

Reviewed by Lynn Levin

How does one achieve book publication in the extremely competitive American poetry scene? Often by submitting a manuscript to the hard-to-win book contests held by journals, small presses, university presses, and other literary organizations. Two very fine collections from a recent harvest of winners include Deborah Fries's *Various Modes of Departure* and Marjorie Maddox's *Transplant, Transport, Transubstantiation*.

Deborah Fries's marvelous debut collection, *Various Modes of Departure*, was chosen by Carolyn Forché as the winner of the Kore Press First Book Award. Kore is a feminist press, and Fries's poems are mostly about women and the many good-byes they say -- to a marriage, a long-lived in home and beloved locale, an elderly father, a threatened landscape. Fries's lines are mother lodes of sensory images that incorporate regional descriptions, pop cultural images, brand names, references to singing stars, and expert

knowledge of earth science and botany. Encyclopedic and smart, Fries's poems both teach and delight.

Fries poems fall into subject categories – poems of social concern, of family, history, and environment. A harrowing and unforgettable poem “Like Field Mice,” is about kidnapped girls who are “stolen while we are watching HBO,” some of whom are “[w]aiting/ to be found in a wetlands near I-95.” Most probably drawn from news accounts of real abductions, this poem seizes the reader with real-life desperate situations and juxtaposes the girls' terror and suffering with the everyday safety and comfort that of the rest of us take for granted. Among Fries's historical poems “Más a Tierra,” is especially poignant, a Robinson Crusoe-like narrative about a sailor abandoned on an island off the coast of Chile.

One can open the book to any place and find poems filled with tenderness and understanding. “The Empress Tree,” for one, weaves facts about the flowering empress tree, said to be an unwanted and invasive species in the Eastern U.S., with keen observations about the poet's college-student daughter who is experiencing her own sense of foreignness and distancing from “her lost love at Princeton...buddy at Minnesota” and who, to get closer to what she misses, takes in “bags of cookies, sweet shards of joy.”

What fascinates me most are Deborah Fries's poems that craft an expert understanding of geology, civil engineering, and environmental protection into emotionally intense and serious poetry. Fries can write of a landscape scarred by ill-planned highways and mourn the loss of old brewery buildings in Milwaukee, Wisconsin that must give way to gentrification. Fries looks compassionately at the people and places who are the casualties of human design and records it all with expert and vivid detail. In “Plume,” a poem about the way in which a gasoline additive leaches out into the groundwater, she describes the contaminant's various components “an almost fresh, mentholated green,” “ooze from some dark time after the Triassic,” and “wispy *ether*, invisible carbonate.” Fries then imagines the pollutant's underground journey as it decides to stop:

...briefly to pulse and shine
and appear unannounced: entering the house one rainy afternoon
through a familiar spigot – this displaced additive,
caught in solution in a vase of white peonies;
disguised by rosemary in shampoo lather...

That's the chemical invasion dramatized by Fries in her own mixture of technical and poetic diction. The resulting mood is gothic. The reader shivers. While many poets write laments for lost natural beauty and decry environmental destruction, Fries has the science and the poetics to write spectacular poems of lasting value on the subject. A poet of loss and leave-taking, Deborah Fries nevertheless presences the people and places that ebb away in her accomplished, vividly descriptive, and compassionate voice.

Marjorie Maddox's rapturous collection, *Transplant, Transport, Transubstantiation* is the winner of the Yellowglen Prize awarded by WordTech Editions, a small literary press specializing in poetry. This is Maddox's fourth full-length collection. Her previous collections include *Perpendicular As I, Body Parts*, and *Ecclesia*. She is also the author of a number of chapbooks, including a spirited gathering of poems about America's favorite pastime, *When the Wood Clacks Out Your Name: Baseball Poems*, and is a co-editor of an anthology, *Common Wealth: Contemporary Poets on Pennsylvania*.

A close and expert observer of nature, Marjorie Maddox is – as her book titles often denote -- both a poet of the earthly and the transcendent. Her descriptions of medical and biological phenomena -- surgery, the organs of the human body, a courier on an airplane carrying organs for transplantation -- are often lenses through which she glimpses the eternal. The poems in the book visit childhood, motherhood, the religious sacraments of her deeply held Catholic faith, even backyard nature, but the centerpiece of the collection is the story of her father's heart transplant, which did not "take," resulting, soon after surgery, in his death. While many of today's family poems are filled with pain and bitterness, Maddox's celebrate her family's love, devotion, and mutual support.

As with Fries's poems, the science in Maddox's poems fascinates. In "Disconnected," one of the transplant poems, she writes of a priest turned physician who explains to the worried family, "the transubstantiation of transplants,/what others' hearts were, are, continue to become/inside our opened hollows." This language of science and spirit, ever the two-sided coin of this poet's realm, treats the reader to insights into what few will ever experience, the hope and pain of knowing that the chance for more life will depend on an organ donor's death. Fittingly, Maddox dedicates her book in part to the donor of her father's heart, and, in the poem "Traucherous Driving," includes an imaginative description of the auto accident that claimed the donor's life.

One of those most outstanding features of *Transplant, Transport, Transubstantiation* is a series of poems about the organs of the human body. Not only has Maddox clearly studied the anatomy, but her metaphors are spiritual acts that link the body to things beyond itself. Take, for example, "The Lung":

A miniature stingray, it glides
only inside its bone cage,
slate-gray and shiny,
sliding about its domain, inhaling
anything within breath: the wind,
whispers, wild weeping, the way
a man walks through the winter air
toward a frozen pond,
a pole, a cigarette.

The breathy alliteration of the "w" sounds, the imaginative leaps of the marine imagery, the threat inherent in the stingray! And there are some two dozen or so of these body part

poems, including “Closet Skeleton,” which “just hangs there, its dead centipede of a spine/inclined to nothing.”

I cannot close this review of Maddox’s book without praising her religious poems. My favorites include “Ash Wednesday,” the haunting “Magnificat,” in which the believer is cast as both tormentor and lover of the sacred, and “Eucharist,” with its description of the host as “the sliver of why/that bends the bones/begs “Come!” Readers of any faith can appreciate these spiritual lyrics.

Deborah Fries and Marjorie Maddox are accomplished poets whose descriptive gifts and generous, compassionate voices make them well worth reading and well deserving of their book prizes.

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