

When Walmart says Time Theft what they mean is Rumpus.

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SHIPBREAKING BY ROBIN BETH SCHAER

REVIEWED BY JULIE MARIE WADE
August 1st, 2015



At any given moment, there is a poetry book in my bag. There is another on my desk, under my nightstand, wedged inside the glove box of my car. Because you never know when you might end up stranded somewhere—a waiting room, a traffic jam, a day when the work isn't flowing, or a night when the sleep won't come—and the only thing that could worsen your situation would be to find yourself stranded without poems.

So it is for me, anyway.

I recently stopped in at Jiffy Lube for a routine tune-up and oil change. I left three hours later convinced my life had been saved by Robin Beth Schaer's debut collection, *Shipbreaking*. What can I say? The lobby reeked of motor oil, and the Keurig was out of coffee. There were too few chairs, or too many people, or both. *Good Morning, America* was blaring like a fog horn, but it still couldn't drown out the whoosh and roar of the customers' rising complaints. So I slouched against a wall, and I reached inside my bag, and soon I found myself reclining in the hammock of Schaer's smooth, taut lines, her prosody of absolute precision. Some poets play the spoons, but Schaer plays the knives. Her words are not so much written as carved, her lines not so much offerings as incisions. As a consequence, whatever this speaker tells me—"Even coral must dream of cobwebs," "Without grief, the gun is artifact," "A javelin anchors the air/ between us"—I'll believe.

Hammocks are hard to hang and harder still to secure. They look pleasant and jaunty while unoccupied, rocking in the ocean breeze, but how does something twined and porous safely support the weight of a grown body? Perhaps this is the paradox of the poem as well. What combination of exact language and elegant arrangement will bear the weight of the consciousness that weaves it? What strange union of the substantive and spare will bear the weight of the consciousness that combs it? And why does Schaer's *Shipbreaking* pass the poetry test of Ultimate Tensile Strength with flying colors?

One reason: the colors.

The central intelligence of this book is keen and wisely "silver-eyed." Her synesthetic tides criss-and-cross until you can hear "a gray sentence spoken over a green one." Schaer's diction is "heavy and black as your hair," yet light and translucent as "blue glass." Her "red mangroves" gleam with mythic splendor. Her "hope is a yellow shore."

Of course a hammock is only as sturdy as the material it is made from. A poem, I reason, is only as sturdy as its verbs. A citizen of Schaer's "shoaled world" may be "savaged by sky," "marooned in the forest," "married to darkness." After all, "history [is] only revealed in ruin." There, bodies "smolder," a "toaster//accepts the bread by design," and "the future clock of disappointment chimes." So many kinds of longing comprise us. In this furtive narrative, someone doesn't just waste away; someone "macerates, waiting to overthrow." I can hear the difference. In this spectral lyric, contusions don't merely mark and darken the skin; they "stipple [it] with soot." I can feel the difference. Here, "snakes may cling to trees, and men//tear at bread, but the sky stays hinged." It will not fall. It is like the sea, which "is the opposite of falling."

Let's remember the trees.

A hammock—like a ship, like a life, like a poem—requires ballasts. Often, it is ballasted by trees. In Schaer's *Shipbreaking*, these symbolic trees are everywhere juxtaposed: "the argot of twins," "a shelter// of speculation and tin." This poet bears the gift of naming unlikely pairings that illuminate the space between them—which is also a hammock. Put another way, Schaer's is the gift of seeing the hammock for the trees.

Look here:

Current

*is the cure for both a stopped heart
and one that beats too much.*

[Stopped heart.] Hammock [Heart that beats too much.]

*And if it must be shocked twice,
the surgeons call it a reluctant heart.
Love is haywire. Hold fast,
between us, [hammock], pass subtle particles
that singe and seize [trees]. We are electric.*

Notice our "silver-eyed" speaker's noticing:

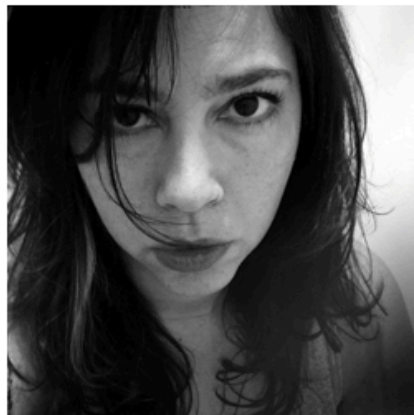
*My love, remember, the polestar
is not alone, but twinned,
a pair of suns, guiding you North.*

Now see how she turns hammock herself, the way another woman in another world turned salt. Both are evidenced by pillars:

*waiting. I am tethered here, while you chart home,
north through narrow clemency, spared between sharp
Carolina coast and Atlantic beaten
barrier islands.*

A freighted symmetry impels this collection forward. The book does not *move* so much as it glides and sluices, heavy but light. Schaer's speaker, heady with momentum, becomes the "sweet locomotive" she describes. Her linguistic "impact sh[akes] loose sequins/ and concealed keys," which I decipher as images (that dazzle) and insights (that unlock). The ship of this book, both literal and metaphorical, splits open with every deft parsing of Schaer's lines. Piñata-like, these poems scatter their treasures of sound and sense.

I find an exemplar here of what I've been trying to articulate in the poetry classroom for so long. The poet walks a tightrope (or perhaps she rocks a hammock) between what is seen and what is said. All showing is no insight. All telling is no image. Art seeks the fulcrum between them.



"Show me something," I urge my students. "Show me something I have seen before in a way I have never seen it before." I want the luminous clarity of astute noticing. I want the vision of a silver eye:

*wheat-paste posters peeling off walls,
and drifts of newspapers and boxed tied
with bakery twine*

Can you see this?

*a starving dog,
a misaligned fence, the children swimming naked.*

What about this?

*We lie stiff together, a pair
of matchsticks.*

And this? Tell me you can see this, too:

*Someday, someone
will find our ribs in a midden of oyster shells,
ship hulls, and wooden doors.*

"Now tell me something you have learned from your showing," I say. "What has your seeing led you to believe?"

What about this?

*Even swooning
is a kind of fainting, overwhelmed
by bliss, instead of pain. We cross
our breaking capacity: too much
current in the wires and a strip
of metal melts in sublimation.
but without the blown fuse or insulated
mica, the charge could stop a heart.*

I read the abstract nouns—"bliss," "pain," "sublimation"—but they are connected now, *insulated* even, by the intricate image system Schaer has knit. Where there is swooning and fainting, where there are currents and wires and strips of metal, these abstractions hunker down and build a concrete home.

And here? What about this?

History

is full of flightless falls: metal wings

and bird machines built without destination,

just to be loose of the anchor. [...]

The sky utters reasons,

lies told to other lives.

The theme of breaking recurs; now the theme of falling recurs. The poet circles back again to *flight* and *anchor*, *reasons* and *lies*. Culmination is close. The reader watches the sky of these poems, the fog across it burning away.

Near the end comes the insight Schaer seems to have been writing her way toward. The speaker climbs it, in fact, like a starboard ladder, image-rung by image-rung, until she pronounces something we might more rightly call epiphany. (A student, some years ago: "Is it fair to say epiphany is insight squared?" *Exactly.*)

I want to promise you

permanence, my constant orbit, but even continents

are revisions.

Think of that rupture. That split. That ultimate breaking. Imagine Pangaea anew, the world as we know it a second draft. Now, imagine the in-between, the wild blue hammocks of ocean.

Schaer has given us the world in this debut: the sea and the sky and the many islands of desire spread between them. She has plumbed our dual human yearnings for escape and return, love as liberation and love as captivity. In her lexical and historical wanderlust, she has grappled with what it means to name and what it means to leave unnamed. No matter what we choose, we will lose. To be human is to "harness ourselves over and over."

I've ridden these poems to the end of the line, to the place where "the sky stays hinged." I'm ready for the next installment, Schaer. Take me onward and upward, as only you can. The earth is all hammocks strung between trees. But let it be as you have promised: "Only heaven is full of furniture."

Born in Seattle in 1979, Julie Marie Wade completed a Master of Arts in English at Western Washington University in 2003, a Master of Fine Arts in Poetry at the University of Pittsburgh in 2006, and a PhD in Interdisciplinary Humanities at the University of Louisville in 2012. She is the author of three collections of poetry--*Without* (Finishing Line Press, 2010), *Postage Due* (White Pine Press, 2013) *When I Was Straight* (A Midsummer Night's Press, 2014)--and three collections of lyric nonfiction--*Wishbone: A Memoir in Fractures* (Colgate University Press, 2010; Bywater Books, 2014), *Small Fires* (Sarabande Books, 2011), and *Tremolo: An Essay* (Bloom Books, 2013). She teaches in the creative writing program at Florida International University. [More from this author →](#)