

ASKEW

Maria Terrone, *A Secret Room in Fall*, Ashland, The Ashland Poetry Press, 2006.

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Co-winner of the 2005 McGovern Prize, *A Secret Room in Fall*, Maria Terrone's second volume of poems, fulfills the promise of her first, *The Bodies We Were Loaned* (2002). Because she works outside the classroom—she is assistant vice president for communications at Queens College—her life recalls that of other poets, like Wallace Stevens, who were employed in professions other than teaching. Indeed, her photograph on the cover of this book shows a well-coiffed and made-up woman in a dark suit, the model of a corporate executive. All the more refreshing, then, to find that her poems reveal a mind with a strangely original take on life.

A Secret Room in Fall is divided into four parts of from 12 to 21 pages, each part thematically distinct. The first, "Distant Signals," mostly contains poems in the voice of a woman, often a persona. Thus the initial poem in the book, "The Egyptian Queen Gives Death the Slip," allows the queen to address those who have "seen my 'death mask' in the museum's Nile / wing," attesting to her strong will and keeping her alive in the present: "Let Death play solitaire, / . . . I'm everywhere / and nowhere, which is why you found my casket bare." As the terminal alexandrine and those rhymes, internal and terminal, suggest, Terrone can exploit formal prosody, and this poem is one of two sonnets in the book. But she uses slant rhyme and runover lines so that her rhymes will delight those who recognize them and won't dismay those readers partial to free verse, in which most of these poems are written.

Among the other women's stories riffed on in *A Secret Room in Fall* are those of Alice (Wonderland), a slain lighthouse-keeper's wife, and Rapunzel, but the most memorable poems reflect the poet's own curious point of view. "Seaside Stonehenge" offers an example of the way Terrone sees the facts of the world and gives ironical voice to them. Written in her usual spare style, this poem shows a rare imagination at work. The poet speaks to herself as "you," as she does often in this collection, while she considers a newspaper photograph of "t.v. sets that washed ashore," given the "clever headline" of the title. "Compelled / to take them seriously," unlike the reader who smiles at the allusion or blanks on it and moves on, "you see yourself alone at dusk / walking through" signs of the shipwreck that brought this television Stone-

henge ashore:

The screens face one another
 or stare east across the ocean
 from where they came,
 antenna folded—as if betrayed
 by evolution, encased
 in a plastic carapace
 like bugs too big to crawl away
 that once held the world
 in a single glassy eye.

The cascading imagery here calls up the stone figures on Easter Island, Darwin, large sea turtles, and then incapacitated beetles. At her best Terrone revises the detritus of our material culture and transforms it into something rich and strange.

“Seaside Stonehenge” appears near the end of “Part Three: Eyes Sealed Open,” the strongest, and longest, section of the book. The section begins with a shaped poem, “String Theory,” in which she discounts “the String Theorists” and offers “My theory: the world’s a giant spool of string / unraveling since Day One.” The poem’s layout on the page suggests a spool, another example of Terrone’s wit, both formal and contextual. In “Resurrection in an Initial ‘R,’” Terrone bases her poem on an illuminated manuscript from fifteenth-century Venice depicting the Resurrection of Easter. The poem itself resembles a Renaissance emblem poem, though the text lacks a reproduction of the illuminated “R”; nevertheless, the poem elaborates on the idea of resurrection as it pertains to the speaker: “I rise daily, a miracle,” it begins. The speaker then recounts dreaming of her own death, awaking to “unwind myself / from a tourniquet of sheets,” a troubling image that conveys both her struggle with that dream and its sanguinary subject, “that bloody resurrection,” as the last line calls it.

A related poem in Part Three, “The Hunger of the Dead,” depicts “their eternal hunger / for all that’s left behind.” They are the ones with eyes sealed open, leaving them restive in death. In the previous poem, “Crisscrossed Shadows,” Terrone speaks of her “oblique / rendering of nightly dreams / from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.” This poem, addressed to her love, makes a request that he won’t “try to straighten // what’s askew // in me. . . .” Setting “what’s askew” apart in the middle of the poem as its only one-line stanza underscores her desire for freedom from “craving for symmetry” and “prizing, above all, / the balanced exchange”; rather, like G. M. Hopkins in “Pied Beauty,” she prizes what’s crisscrossed, oblique, and askew. To the de-

gree that these words describe her idiosyncratic view of the world, this poem is her *ars poetica*. Grateful readers wouldn't have her exceptional poems any other way.