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I Failed to Swoon

Nadia de Vries. 2021, Manchester: Dostoyevsky Wannabe Originals, ISBN:
9798516193279

Anna-Rose Shack

Short, sharp vignettes unleash a poetic voice as uninhibited as it is laconic: ‘I keep my options and curtains open / because I have nothing to lose.’ Someone with nothing to lose is the most dangerous person of all, so they say. But despite this implicit threat, de Vries compels us to peek inside those curtainless windows: ‘All the windows in this room / are going to betray me’.

Published by the independent, Manchester-based press, Dostoyevsky Wannabe Originals, *I Failed to Swoon* (2021) is the second English-language poetry collection by Dutch writer Nadia de Vries. Her first, *Dark Hour*, was published by the same press in 2018. De Vries also has a number of Dutch-language publications to her name and holds a PhD from the University of

Amsterdam, having completed a thesis entitled 'Digital Corpses' in 2020.

Dogs, stones, T-shirts, moths, garbage, and Natalie Portman are a handful of the bizarre images that swirl in surreal orbit through this volume. In 'I love New York', a poem composed of a single line, de Vries states, simply, 'Everyone who wears that T-shirt is a liar.' In 'Penance Dress' she discloses, confessionally, 'I wear a 'Brunettes Have More Fun' T-shirt / but I'm a blonde.' In *I Failed to Swoon*, de Vries insistently usurps trite aphorisms (and corny T-shirts) with self-consciously performative irony.

Her acerbic tone keeps her reader at arm's length: 'If you can't handle my sickness, / don't trigger my gag reflex.' Is this epigraph a challenge, a provocation, a statement of fact, a warning? It is precisely this kind of emotional and narratorial ambiguity that colours de Vries' writing. She informs her reader with characteristic nonchalance, 'I keep you at a safe distance - / a stone's throw away from harm' ('Penance Dress').

One could be forgiven for thinking that a stone's throw is not a particularly safe distance considering

that death is a figure with whom de Vries cultivates intimacy: 'There's cadaver in everything I write' ('My Sisters Are My Pallbearers'). Yet, in 'I Sucked Down Death' she seems more perturbed that Death, a curious kind of house-guest, has used her best towel than by the fact she has erotically consumed him and 'kept him inside / He stayed for breakfast'.

De Vries wryly exposes her own 'poor subjectivity', 'full of / Darkness and pain' ('Everything Goth is Perverse'). Although she declares that this subject matter is 'unwieldy and ugly / and financially unviable', it is undeniable that darkness, pain, and death are poetic currency. In 'Gag on the Dead and Call It Breathing' she empties her 'lungs on the dead' so that she can 'inhale again' and remind us that her 'existence is loud'. Her poems play with the liminal space between life and death, sleep and waking, present and past but de Vries challenges the critic to re-think this easy assessment of her work: 'Liminality sounds like a cop-out to me' ('Come to My Cremation').

For de Vries, sentimentality is equally distasteful. With her penchant for meta-poeticism, she declares 'Every

day will be garbage day / and none of my poems will be sentimental' ('In the New Year I Will Be Stone Cold'). Sentimentality, exes, garbage: de Vries chucks them out with stone cold precision. In 'I Am My Own Lapidary' we learn that 'Everything about me is stone', even her dog: 'He's cute for a stone / I'm going to take care of him / It will be so brutal'. The implications are sinister. Is the dog in for some mysteriously savage fate or is it the act of loving itself that threatens to destroy?

Shards of broken relationships pierce this volume leading to spurts of sardonic philosophising: 'I found a man capable of great tenderness / and, by association, great deceit' ('Aggression Quest'). In 'Haptic Sin' the violence of love is depicted as a contagion for 'One by one we infect each other anew'. With all this violence, it is unsurprising that the collection is suffused with broken and bruised bodies.

In 'In Each Nightmare I Survive' de Vries asks, 'Is the beach ready for my body?' Challenging a world in which women have been taught to worry whether their bodies are ready for the beach, she instead wonders whether the beach can handle 'Multiple

fleshes / Chained and whipped'. This poem disconcertingly connects abuse with love, asking: 'What are the conditions / for unconditional love'.

De Vries does not answer this question. Her *métier* is the depiction of spectacularly discomfiting failures of intimacy. In 'Puppy Season' her love-interest ignores a text message containing pictures of her breasts: that night 'there were garbage bags / hanging in the trees.' One assumes these garbage bags are the belongings of the disinterested lover, thrown out the window thanks to a combination of wounded pride, disappointment, anger and defiance. But are the garbage bags perhaps also a surrealist distortion of loose and wild breasts hanging in the trees for everyone to see? The volume is punctuated with de Vries' particular brand of feminism: elusive, irony-laden, unapologetic.

People are messy, as the rivulets of bodily fluids that seep through this volume remind us: wetting herself in public, shit turning black, eating vomit and 'Oh, the things I'd do / for a blood-stained dress' ('All These Psychoses Are Driving Me Crazy'). Despite the plethora of truly disquieting (and often

disgusting) imagery in this collection, de Vries manages to steer away from gratuitous provocation. Her competence as a poet lies in her ability to translate visceral vulnerability into compelling subject matter.

The brevity of some poems occasionally leaves de Vries' pithy observations underdeveloped. Yet, this collection will appeal to the reader who relishes succinct writing and a dose of contrariness. Perhaps most enticing of all is de Vries' own usurpation of the reader-cum-critic response. Do you find her voice refreshingly raw? 'If you leave this book feeling exfoliated, / you are wrong', she informs us in 'Forgot the Attachment'. Or did you fail to swoon? She beat you to it.