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Body Language (review)

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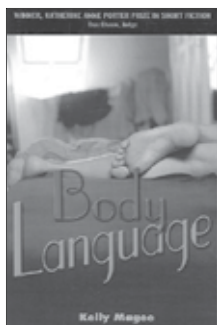


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Joseph is able to render authentic moments of spiritual reflection, rambling, self-loathing tirades, and the fear inherent in self-deception just as easily as intimate moments between lovers, whether they're gay, straight, young and virile or old and dying. Throughout the novel, characters are unable to commit to their choices or to believe that the world they've created through their decisions is the same as the one they currently inhabit. "This comes from wanting the wrong things," Kent tells himself after a murder has led Paul to seek refuge—at Maggie's urging—in the couple's home. "Too much of him had wanted Paul asleep in the house, and now it had come." Kent loves his wife, but he has been unable to stop imagining his lover being part of his married life. Later, after Maggie has become Paul's lawyer, she brings him to the graveside of the murder victim. "The sun's slanted beam may have caused the heat and flush in her face," but she kisses his hair, and his response is to kiss "her neck, a soft, searching brush of lips that lingered enough to suggest possibility, not much, only an unhardened question in her mind. . . ." She loves Kent, her husband, but is attracted to this third person, Paul, knowing the boy is gay but not that he is her husband's lover.

In *Stray*, Joseph exposes the layering of friendship, love and devotion through her subject matter and characters and makes an unflinching assertion that relationships aren't discrete but rather messy and often slightly beyond our control. (LK)



Body Language

By Kelly Magee

University of North Texas Press, 2006, 197 pp., \$12.95

The stories in Kelly Magee's debut collection explore the compass of female sexuality, including among their protagonists Em, a half-Cuban lesbian in South Tampa; Gyp, a queer-identified woman in love with a MTF transvestite; Lucha, a ten-year-old migrant worker, instructed in kissing by an older girl; and Dana, a thirty-something actress who expects her good looks to get her places with the male executives of Orlando's nascent film community. Set mainly in Ohio and the Deep South, these eleven stories depict characters who are often stifled, either by their circumstances or by their own temperaments. When they finally act on their desires, they do so wildly, amid terrains whose racial and class complexities Magee renders skillfully.

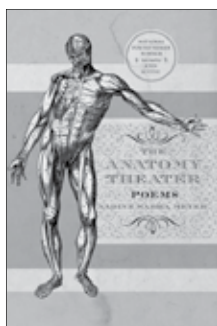
Contests of space are critical to a number of the stories in this collection. "All the America You Want" opens with an overview of the effects of the Urban Renewal Act on a South Tampa neighborhood. A year after the act has passed, the mostly Latino residents have become savvy to its gentrifying aims, as one by one the apartment buildings in which they live have given way to more expensive, smaller units. The most elaborate of these new homes is built by a wealthy Puerto Rican woman named Mandy. With her mother's prodding, Em, the story's protagonist, leaves her job at Merry Maids to clean for Mandy, and the two quickly become lovers. But when Mandy reveals that she owns Em's building, ideological differences surface between them, leaving Em conspicuously absent on the night that teenaged vandals sack Mandy's house.

Graffiti recurs throughout the collection as a means of staking claim: the walls of Em's apartment are spray-painted with a map of the United States, left behind by a former tenant. She leaves her own mark on the inside of the closet—the only blank surface remaining (another of Magee's characters writes on her bathroom walls). In "Vertical Mile," the Grand Canyon serves as a proving ground for both hikers and a teenaged gang that spray-paints its walls. One hiker plans to commit suicide by overexerting himself; another seeks to realize her dream of being the oldest woman to hike rim to rim; both are simultaneously coping with crises of sexual identity. The teenagers, meanwhile, come to the canyon by night to rappel inexpertly down its sides "for the chance to paint places no one had ever touched." Each character is knowingly risking life for notoriety. And with such high stakes, it is perhaps inevitable that they clash violently, even in this vast arena.

That the body is also a contested space is suggested by a number of the stories in the collection. "As Human as You Are Standing There" describes the cut-rate modifications that Leo, a drag queen, has made to his body; worse than these are the wounds he's courted in street fights. Like many of Magee's characters, Leo invites violence through his inflammatory behavior: watching him, Gyp, the story's narrator, fears that "this time, he wasn't going to let them let him get away." Gyp is uncertain of her feelings for Leo but fights desperately for him and against the forces in the story that would push them both toward neater identifications. In other stories, Magee mines those moments in childhood that mark "the start of your body parts getting the better of you." Lucha, the ten-year-old protagonist of the collection's title story, eludes her parents' attempts to treat her like a child, slipping away from them at a carnival in order to ride faster rides with older adolescents. She

receives her first kiss not from the boy who gropes her in the roller coaster line but from a girl who shepherds her past the ticket-taker's measuring stick. Lucha's sexual awakening is accompanied by increased desire rather than self-consciousness: at the top of a stilled roller coaster, in view of the rest of the carnival-goers, she wants more.

Lucha's lack of self-consciousness is indicative of Magee's assured tone throughout the collection. *Body Language* is never dogmatic in its treatments of race, class or sexuality; the stories work to complicate rather than simplify their subject matters, as evidenced by their consistently ambivalent endings. These are eleven stories written of liminal moments, concerned not so much with change as with the forces that impel it. (SC)



The Anatomy Theater

By Nadine Meyer

Harper Perennial, 2006, 96 pp., \$13.95

In her poem "Dissection Prayers," which arrives near the beginning of *The Anatomy Theater*, Nadine Meyer invokes Andreas Vesalius—a sixteenth-century physician, considered the founder of modern anatomy, famous for his extensive studies dissecting human cadavers (a practice, as Meyer notes in "The Flayed Man," that had not been in use "for over a thousand/years, for fear that to dissect the body impedes/the soul's chrysalis"). Meyer hones in on this pivotal historical moment and restores the Renaissance sense of wonder at discovering the inner workings of the body. She reminds us, via Vesalius, that "the living would give anything . . . to know what the dead know,/to lift the pall/of flesh and find more than a charnel house,/a strung charm/of bone." Meyer's sustained focus is remarkable for a first book; from first to last the poems resonate with each other to expand and reinform the subject matter: What are the natures of body and soul? What happens to us after death, and how is the "strung charm" of art both a necessary and a flawed approach to understanding?

Choosing as her primary source material medical drawings from Renaissance anatomy texts and paintings by such artists as Toulouse-Lautrec, Egon Schiele and Marc Chagall, Meyers embarks on a series of ekphrastic poems, and the genre proves well suited for her project. She plumbs the visual text-as-body to investigate the nature of the body itself, and how we interpret it. In the title poem, Meyer meditates on a woodblock print from Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica*, and she herself becomes an anatomist twice removed,