

Jessica Goodfellow
Mendeleev's Mandala
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In many ways, Jessica Goodfellow is as playful and devastating as John Donne. Playful in the sense that she artfully constructs an inventive conceit, and devastating in that she hounds and harries it until we're not quite sure if it works, doesn't work, or works only when we view the universe from a reality several removes from where we are curled up on the couch holding *Mendeleev's Mandala*. In the final analysis, the book succeeds admirably because her humor and linguistic richness encourage readers to trace the supple and ingenious trajectory of her thought.

In "Ode to the Hourglass," Goodfellow plays on the shape of the hourglass as a metaphor for sexiness: "The hourglass is the glamour puss in the world of timekeeping. / Even standing on her head she's all business and sex appeal" (38). Like Donne's compass, Goodfellow's timepiece has physical properties upon which human desires can be mapped with lively and instructive results. The poem is structured as carefully as the hourglass: two fourteen-line stanzas centered and slendered in the middle to look like an hourglass. The sexiness of the object is translated into sexiness on the page, and the reader must take part in the erotics she considers. But the beauty of the poem is that Goodfellow eclipses her first metaphor, based on the hourglass of the female form, and overlays desire with *time*, the natural use for the hourglass:

[. . .] She is a power lass, the hourglass,
 a favorite among sailors, and not for what you think. It was
 her equanimity they loved, her constancy across inconstant
 weather and tempestuous seas.

The figure of time is unconcerned with the actions or events she measures; the hourglass merely measures constantly an abstract amount of time, stormy or calm. Through the poem, this fact develops a certain darkness that belies the playfulness throughout. What passes with each grain through the hourglass are the tiny measures of our lives. The eros of the hourglass is tied inextricably to mortality. And though the hourglass can be turned over to recover all that was lost in the abstract play of sand, we are nevertheless losing our lives without hope of recovery. Goodfellow ends the poem with the subject's uncertainty about the hourglass's relation to their lives: "That's why, when she

grants you the dainty twist of her wrist, / you never ever know if she's waving good-bye to you or waving hello." The passing of time is the only means by which it is possible to receive anything – but this greeting is a goodbye as well as a hello.

This strategy of lacing the playful with the desperate is Goodfellow's special triumph. There are moments to laugh out loud, but then the gravity hits you upon further reflection. For instance, her speaker in "Self-Improvement Project #5" closes by saying, "Did I tell you / how repetition soothes me? I did, yes, of course I did" (74). The surprising pleasure of recognizing that the content (re: repetition) is manifested in the form (i.e. repetitive) is followed by the moving and empathetic realization that the speaker *needs* soothing. Humor *exposes* rather than *buries* anxiety and regret.

In "Landlocked," Goodfellow builds a linguistic distinction between the words *landscape* and *escape*. The former derives from beingness and the latter comes from shedding a cape to get away from a pursuer. In this latter is the notion of insubstantiality or non-being. Through the poem, Goodfellow contrasts hypotheticals in which one is caught or free, embodied or abandoned. But through these distinctions, she ultimately brings them together at the end of the poem when the cape that is shed (escape) is the body that must be buried in the earth (landscape) when one dies:

[. . .] Even when I die, dirt is where they'll bury me—land
is where I'll rest, or be said to rest, shrouded in its surface, my last-
grasped cape my body,
the sin-bound scapegoat I am tethered to, as space moves cleanly
and facelessly away. (48)

In death, the landlocked body achieves the sublime moment in which landscape and escape intersect. Whatever might exist of us outside the body is finally released, and we transcend the distinction between the two. So the poem that begins with the lighthearted error concerning the roots of these words blossoms into a metaphysical representation as serious as any we might consider. Though we might not be able to escape death, death is its own sort of inevitable escape.

Goodfellow's collection is equal parts fun and provocation, linguistic play and metaphysical risk. A book that works on so many levels is endlessly generous, and we should be thankful that such enriching experiences are still out there for us.

-Reviewed by Joshua Hjalmer Lind