

Not just in content does Foust order the contrary world, as her poems take sonnet form. Inside of fourteen rhymed lines, the poet manages contemporary diction, even slang, abbreviations, and acronyms, alongside French and German, historical and cultural references, and poetic sound bites. Her use of enjambment, internal rhyme, and anaphora allow form to release, rather than control, content and meaning. She demonstrates the malleable nature of the fixed sonnet form, paring out words with lyric precision. Her adept writing relieves the reader of needing extensive notes or background as a roadmap: Foust proves an excellent driver for the entire ride.

—Leah Miranda Hughes

Rebecca Kaiser Gibson. *Opinel*. Bauhan Publishing, 2015.

Opinel, Rebecca Kaiser Gibson’s debut full-length collection of poetry, begins with an epigraph by Alexandra Teague: “Open the crown of your head to the sky.” It is fitting, then, that in the title poem that immediately follows we learn that an opinel is a small wooden folding knife used by farmers to “scrape leather, / carve cheese, untangle vine, / release trapped lambs, hack / out ice, slice flesh.” With a skilled knock upon a table, the blade of this knife will spring out of its wooden holster to engage in “prying, savoring.”

In an interview with Kristin Livingston of *Tufts Now*, Gibson explains that an opinel has three components—the handle, the hinge, and the blade—just like her book. The first section of *Opinel* concerns Gibson’s childhood, which is contained within the insular and stifling casing, or handle, of the home. Several poems are narrated by a girl hiding from her mother, who is practicing scales on the piano. “No One Threw Anything Except Sound,” begins one such poem, “down to me...”

in the basement shudder

crunch of the square Saltine slow
dense peanut butter
the halls of my mouth flickered with salt, even
underground...

In this poem, time is as precisely measured as the “unerring” strike of the musical notes. In the anxious empty space after the word “basement”—before the word “shudder” finally appears at the end of the line—Gibson enacts an all-too-familiar childhood terror of the unknown (even in one’s own house). The terror embodied by this “shudder” is further suspended, awaiting the “crunch” that begins the next stanza; suddenly the word “shudder” is given a new meaning (the shatter of a cracker in her mouth), and as we proceed rhythmically and methodically across the next two lines with the “crunch of the square Saltine slow / dense peanut butter” we are also chewing the thickness of the snack, feeling it in our mouths, and we cannot help but relish sharing in this dialectic of tension and pleasure, the moments measured as precisely as jewels of salt on the tongue.

“Was there somewhere an Africa? polio?” Gibson continues. “The house would not admit it.” Just as the girl must hide her appetite for the physical pleasures of the world (in another poem, for example, she secretly shoves *After Eight Mints* into her mouth during the exact intervals of music when she knows she may avoid detection) so are admissions of unsavoriness stifled. The mother’s armpits, we are informed elsewhere, do not even sweat. Even worse is her reaction, in later years, when she is told her daughter has cancer: “How could you do this to me?” she cries.

In the middle section of the book—the hinge—Gibson pivots open, gazing at the world around her with keen eyes. Here are odes to rhododendrons

and rocks, as well as spare lyrics addressing deer, a rare orchid, feather moss. The poet actually finds herself able to “admit” that she has “stopped in the midday / raiment, and seen the lichen sparkle.” And in “Calfskin Was Calf’s Skin,” the poet inspects the Book of Kells in person and discovers that “Stray hairs erupt from the text.” It turns out that the fur of squirrels, muskrats, and other creatures were fashioned into paintbrushes; she learns, too, that the color brown was concocted from “crushed oak and apples,” while “Kermes red / is from vermilion pregnant bugs.” The vividness of this sacred text is achieved not despite of, but because of, its direct engagement with the world.

In the third and final section, Gibson becomes the blade for which the book is named, an instrument “doing,” as she tells Livingston, “what it’s supposed to do in the world.” Many of these poems come from Gibson’s travels, especially her experience in Hyderabad, India, teaching poetry on a Fulbright Fellowship. In particular, the poet returns again and again to Meenakshi, “the fish-eyed goddess” whose devotees “slather her with ghee” as if “rehearsing / some embodied if...” One of Gibson’s desires, we discover in another poem, is to smash a coconut at the goddess’s feet: “my own façade to crack.” She cannot stop thinking of Meenakshi when she’s home, even glimpsing the goddess looking back at her from the Starbucks’ mermaid logo: “all / touch // with attention is love,” the goddess exhorts. And Gibson fully permits the materials of the world to enter—from the gleaming “ruby headsets” worn by each barista to the boy who “scuttles his cap along the chair rails” to the age spots on her own arm like “sprinkled cinnamon, a sweet touch, // received.” Whereas the house in the first section of *Opinel* is clogged with the detritus of bourgeois fifties life—Chesterfield tobacco flakes, canasta, and cocktail napkins—the mature poet freely enters the messy ordinariness of all the coffee shops, supermarkets, and diners of the world.

Yet even as this last section grows more expansive, the poems are still assiduously executed; many poems forgo left-justified margins, the lines surrounded by white space like jagged but glittering geodic shards. The final poem, “The String That Is,” describes the unidentifiable meats of a street market, and Gibson, fully ready to eat, watches as the vendor, “[i]rreconcilable with love,” “dances the length of his cart / with a twirling blade.” In *Opinel*, Gibson’s deft hands strip away the peripherals of existence, opening up new ways of seeing and savoring the world.

—Katharine Rauk

Jeffery Renard Allen. *Rails Under My Back*. Graywolf Press, 2015.

Originally published in 2000, Jeffery Renard Allen’s *Rails Under My Back* has recently been re-released by Graywolf. A big (563 pages) and dense book, the novel drew comparisons in the initial reviews to Joyce, Faulkner and Ellison, and it doesn’t take long reading it to see why. Allen’s prose favors a long line. Here is a passage from relatively early in the book, this from the point of view of one of the central characters, Gracie:

A small room in a small apartment made smaller by the city’s crowded sounds and Beulah’s listening ears. Made louder by the train that thundered by, yes, thundered, the train one long stream of torrential weather, shaking you in your bed at night—ah, the El trains were in touching distance, just reach your hands out the back window—shaking the ancient bones and aching muscles, flaking plaster from the ceiling. There was the single white sheet before the sink and clawfoot tub, and it was here that Sheila first revealed the burns spotting her arms and legs, light-colored scars, sand on dark skin. Gracie never learned why Sheila came out of the bathroom nude,