

## *Edging*

By Michelle Noteboom

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1151 E. 56th #2, Chicago, Illinois

Juan Gris once wrote that “truth is beyond any realism, and the appearance of things should not be confused with their essence.” Michelle Noteboom, who attained her Master’s degree at the Sorbonne in Paris, obsessively explores the idea of the body and the skin as concrete boundaries between things, but also as the site of personal experience. Her first book, *Edging*, winner of the 2006 Heartland Poetry Prize, is an example of where Cubism meets perceptive psychology and where the idea of skin meets science and experience. Noteboom examines skin close up and from every angle, whether internal or external. Where Juan Gris, the Cubist painter, could paint a bottle from a cylinder to get closer to the reality he perceived, Michelle Noteboom approaches the skin as space and transforms it into poetry.

Noteboom allows the skin and the body to be the structure and basis for each poem, while constantly attempting to restructure preconceived ideas about them. She explores the boundary of skin against the world through its vulnerability, its composition in the human form, and the psychological in-between spaces of experience.

Four sections comprise *Edging* with an introductory poem, “Lost,” in which Noteboom introduces the ideas that she will explore throughout the book with statements such as “there are words and knocking,” “words crush the promise of looking,” and “a tiny man with metallic flesh walks by the road,” and a final poem, “Epilogue.” Through the weaving and unweaving of looking and not looking, of men with flesh and without flesh, of being somewhere and not being anywhere, Noteboom layers the meaning of boundaries and balances the reader on the periphery of any inclusion in these seemingly fragmented moments, promoting a certain impulse to read further.

Each of the four sections includes a part of the sequence poem titled, “The Edge,” in which she explores the problem of boundaries. The narrator addresses the reader directly with statements such as “this is my body” and “this is ritual, you think,” while reiterating seemingly personal occurrences through an ambiguous “she” and “he.” In “The Edge III,” she writes that the only place left where self meets the senses is in the mind, which “can sense the body/ through the skin, both a canvas/ on which our personal & cultural/ identity is drawn, and a battleground/ where we struggle to define/ boundaries of ourselves.”

Noteboom not only defines the skin as a place of identity and something that one can touch, but also as something that can be cut, filled, and stretched. The book is wrought with words such as “razor,” “scalpel,” and “blade.” In “The Edge IV,” she contemplates the idea that a woman looking into a mirror can hold skin in her hands as form. Then, she moves to personal observation and scientific fact: “One of the most remarkable things/ about skin is its ability to stretch/ & increase surface area. Dr. Hilton/ Becker invented the Becker Expander-/ a silicone gel balloon surgically/ implanted under muscle, inflated/ by injection of saline. A pocket for artificial tissue.” This is quite interesting in a day and age when men and women are changing the appearance of their skin from surgeries involving for example calf implants and breast implants. These surgeries inevitably leave some type of scar, which Noteboom describes as “the mute symbols of an inner wound.”

The most satisfying moments for the reader are the sensual moments in the work when Noteboom brushes the surface of skin. For example, in “The Edge III,” the movement and the surface are explored in a language that is so clear-cut that the reader can almost touch it: “his upper arms – a latticework/ of faint thin lines, razor-fine/ interspersed with circular/ purple spots where cigarettes/ have pressed, singed, melted,/ flesh drawing forth pain/ like poison sucked/ from a snakebite.” In “Cinture,” the most pleasant poem on the sensory level, Noteboom writes, “He too/ charts and tears at the map, keeps/ eclipsing through physical pull.” In this poem, the simple diction, unusual sound patterning, and syntax leave the reader wanting to be sweating and pulling under covers. Whether those covers are blankets on a bed or represent the struggle each person has under one’s own skin is up for interpretation. I wish that she had more of these tactile moments in the book.

Poems such as “Cement,” “Waterbourne,” and “Chamber,” have a different spatial arrangement on the page and don’t seem to belong in the book. They leave the reader longing for more tactile language and for stranger moments in statements such as “abdominal skin ‘sees’ better than that of the back” in “The Edge V.”

Overall, this book is worth reading, especially for the passionate and obsessive types who want to read about the strangeness and unmeasured nature of the world and the skin in which we live.

*Kelly Anzulavich*