

BOOK REVIEW

Meghan Greeley. *Jawbone*. Regina: Radiant Press, 2023.
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*“It’s amazing how much living you can do
without opening your mouth at all” (5).*

Jawbone, Meghan Greeley’s debut novel, begins with a striking comparison that sets the tone for the piece: vocal cords to vagina. What follows is a deeply introspective exploration of one woman’s struggles, fears, and desires, an artful exposition of the complex intersections of love, friendship, and sexuality, social expectations, self-expression, and self-discovery. Vacillating between the tender sentimentality of a love letter and the painful honesty of a confession, *Jawbone* is about women’s voices, speaking truth or not speaking at all; about power and agency, intimacy, autonomy, exposure and shame; and the distant possibility of freedom, of happiness.

It tells the story of a young woman — sometimes called “Velvet,” though that’s not her name (14) — who wishes to escape the life she believes she has ruined by winning a one-way trip to Mars. Preferring self-imposed exile in the interim, she has retreated to a remote cabin, “the loneliest place in the world” (4), where she isolates herself in a red-planet-like simulation and struggles to film a one-minute audition video while recalling the events, people, and emotions that have led her to this place. Her circumstance is further complicated by her inability to speak. The protagonist’s jaw has been wired shut for some time and now that the wires have been removed, “the ghosts of the wires wire [her] shut” (2).

Despite the invisible wires, or perhaps because of them, *Jawbone* is written from a first-person perspective that skillfully incorporates epistolary and memoir alongside descriptive prose. At 102 pages and comprised of 76 short chapters, some as short as a single paragraph, it's easily mistaken for a traditional novella. It's as lean and fast-paced as you would expect, infused with symbolism and bursts of witty dialogue. *Jawbone*, however — like Greeley herself — is no slave to convention.

A poet, playwright, and performer, as well as a novelist, Greeley writes with a unique style that is lyrical and direct: equal parts Kate Chopin and Annie Ernaux but mixed with her own brand of unflinching emotional honesty. The author knows her main character inside-out. She demands that her readers think deeply, pulls her audience in with vivid imagery and visceral language, but gently, one tug at a time, until the reader is fully immersed and invested in the protagonist's intimate life, her innermost thoughts. *Jawbone* is reminiscent of French visionary H el ene Cixous's * criture f eminine*¹ in its fluidity and poetic nature; commentary on difference, the struggle for identity, and sexuality; and its rejection of patriarchal structures. It embodies a *freeing of self*. The result is a more liberated and intimate form of storytelling that exists beyond the confines of patriarchal discourse. Greeley has broken free of Gilbert and Gubar's attic.²

She interrogates gender roles, exposes their limitations, and explores the power of voice and silence as Velvet tries to make sense of her own experiences within two conflicting contexts — the one she has been provided by society and the one that feels authentic. As the story unfolds, the young woman reflects on her life, including a dramatic break-up with her boyfriend "D," a mansplaining and paternalistic epistolarian studying engineering (16), and the evolution of her relationship with her best friend, an enigmatic woman with "perfect

1 The term was coined in Cixous's 1975 essay, "Le Rire de la M duse" (The Laugh of the Medusa).

2 A reference to *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1984).

skin” (63) and hair so red that it becomes the standard for all other *redness*. The red-haired woman, a costumer — giver of the pet name, Velvet — and the protagonist’s would-be lover, evokes the image of Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus,” whose flaming hair allies her with what Judith Kroll³ imagines as a “type of dying and reviving divinity” (154). The costumer is mythological, sacred; D is one of the “dumb men” (28), a deserving subject of ridicule, a “Dick” (58). Greeley continuously demonstrates a Plathesque willingness to confront and explore female emotions with incredible authenticity. D’s “Baby” (16) and the costumer’s “Babe” (40), for example, land very differently.

Jawbone is imbued with the colour red. It begins with a recording indicator light (3) and a pair of lists: “Things that we say are red but are not truly red” and “Things that are truly red” (6–7). Red is not just the colour of blood (67), flowers and wine (39), of love and passion, or even a lover’s crown; it’s the colour of Mars (58) and Wadi Rum (9), maraschino cherries (29), newly tattooed skin (32), a nearly lost journal (69), skin scrubbed raw (5), and a feverish woman in a bath (59). Like Plath in *Ariel* (1966),⁴ Greeley associates the colour with female bodies, constructions of femininity, and the beauty and brutality of existence. It represents escape and salvation; danger, sacrifice, and mortality; vitality, and destruction; also, rebirth.

Velvet continues to make lists as she summons her recent past into focus. There are lists of “things you can hear beneath a midday sun” (3), “Tasks that take roughly one minute to perform” (11), things you can never do again if you go to Mars (46), “things that made me ache...” (60–61), and “Things where they don’t belong,” like a “penis in a vagina” (30–31). There is also a list from a long-ago past, “One Hundred Reasons Why Life is Beautiful” (65), that provides an interesting contrast between who the protagonist is today and who she used to be, implicit acknowledgement that there is no stasis in the human condition. Identities are not fixed, but fluid.

3 Judith Kroll is a poet and essayist, as well as a seminal Sylvia Plath scholar.

4 There are 19 poems in *Ariel* (1966) that feature the colour red, including “Lady Lazarus,” “Tulips,” “Lesbos,” and “Poppies in October.”

Jawbone is, perhaps most fundamentally, about boundaries: imaginary and real; those we impose on ourselves and those we demand others respect; boundaries that blur and shift, sometimes without warning. It's also about the possibility of transcendence, which is different from escape. Like the ancestors of the coywolves she imagines (7), Velvet must evolve and adapt. She must become resilient, transcend the most recent version of herself and the environment she believes damaged beyond repair. Her self-imposed exile, then, becomes a rebirth ritual, a simulation but also an opportunity to purge her personal history and be reborn "where the interstellar winds mean no more boundaries" (18). Greeley demonstrates how the female identity, a construct of patriarchy, must be broken down, disassembled, before it can be authentically reconstructed — reborn — in a body with agency. She underscores this notion of spiritual and emotional growth, the possibility of salvation, with a symbolic communion, an offering of "the body of Christ" (98) from one woman to another, a final subversion and reclamation of traditionally male power (98).

Much like the mandible — the strongest bone in the human body, relative to its size — *Jawbone* wields unexpected impact: an excellent first novel(la!), an extraordinarily satisfying read.

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References

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