

Erika Sánchez's *Lessons On Expulsion*: Learning to Taste Dirt

Erika Sánchez explores the body in authentic and stripped-down ways. Her poems bare their teeth at the brutality of humanity and sink into the ways in which the body “fucked/ holiness” (“Quinceañera,” 28-29). Through statement, place, obscure metaphors, and direct address, Sánchez creates a meditative yet challenging tone that unhinges the reader's jaws and allows them to swallow her specific outlook on life. Her poetry reminds us that in our simplest form we are ungodly animals that will unforgivingly taint the world's beauty. She includes first and second-person narration to engage in personal and general themes such as her experience as a Mexican American, the hardships of immigration, the body as a sexual being, and humans' relationship with God. Although Sánchez morally challenges the reader, through direct and shocking commands, she maintains a strong voice and tone that creeps toward existential questions and then pulls back to remind us of both poetry and life's limitations. She honestly asks: “What is life but a cross/ over rotten water?” (“On the Eve of the Tepehuán Revolt,” 33-34).

In the poem “Letter from New York,” Sánchez invades our mouths as she presents sensory details that expose the dirty and rotten putridities of humans. She hyperbolizes street scenes and creates fresh metaphors that result in a daring tone in which garbage, excrement, and flesh take away our agency and reminds us of our bodies. However, the tone shifts as she addresses the reader and writes about the unattainable search for purity in the world: “In your flamboyant despair,/ you fail to suck the sweetness/ from all that is good and holy” (38-40). She gives us the option to be good and holy, yet we end the poem as a dog “licking the filth/ from his wounded feet” (46-47). Sánchez illuminates the way women are viewed as sex objects or as something men can purchase and penetrate. As she grapples with bodily shame in a straightforward way, she doesn't hide behind

images; instead, she creates a dynamic and intimate relationship with the “you” of the poems and invites them to “Go on---/ carve up your favorite parts [of the body]” (“Circles 22-23). While she admits that humanity is a puzzle, she boldly contorts the body into its simplest forms as she tries to understand her place in her family and in the world.

Works Cited

Sánchez Erika L. *Lessons on Expulsion: Poems*. Graywolf Press, 2017.