

Review of CM Burroughs' *The Vital System*, Tupelo Press, 2012. 63 pages.
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Cutting a Swath for the Soul: CM Burroughs' *The Vital System*

Structuralism was a transposition of signifying systems substituting “systems” for voices and identities, leading us from hegemony to an almost-complete deconstruction of literary or rhetorical meaning, to say nothing of the body: *The Vital System* proudly repurposes “systems-theories” to invoke the system of a female body not reducible to reproduction, commodification, or a cyborg, whose logic, like that of the unconscious, contains rather than is contained by “civilization” and form.

This text's body *is* the inscribed surface of events, and its genealogy exposes a body totally imprinted by history, as well as the event of life: surviving being born, and ensouled (made).

In a delicious punning between the matrixes of weaving (“*texere*,” to weave) and natality: “A black kaleidoscope. Turn. Turn. The dangerous loom of the loom of you. Patterns pressing/ upon—me inside. Nothing luminous as my mother's womb. This second attempt at formation; a turn.”

The memory of the “initial cut” from the mother (*langue maternal*) and subsequent entry into symbolic discourse (*lingua franca*) is presented, in the opening poem, “Dear Incubator,” as a trauma:

“I have scars on my belly in shapes of fish . . . Where sensors tore thin skin.
What a tragedy to
be powerless. And yet, I controlled the choreography of everyone around me . . .

I am trying to tell you something important. About after they opened you and
took me out . . .

The surgeons, thin blades shining into nothing. Imagine the cuts—blood spread
along the lip of
each, spilling as my skin parts . . .

Is it your fault? I don't know . . .

So much has happened. I'm black. I have a dead sister. I love you, but, and
believe this,
I mostly want to talk.”

The inscribed body of Burroughs' debut collection, while implicated in modes of self-production and self-observation, as well as networks of power, is never passive or compliant: the body and its zones of sensation, sympathy, and memory is mobile, erotic, and fully awake to the splendor and violence of becoming human, in a body marked by difference (race, gender) in the world.

The vital system of the body is laid bare in a surgical theater whose surgeons are a pair of lovers, and two sisters, in turns, subjects who suture meaning onto each other's bodies, profiting mutually, but not before deconstructing of multiple attempts at meaning-making (alone):

"Never admit that the poet in you might use it. Wait, as you are cut into, long enough to draw the body's pre-break, the red core's praxis. Drafts of self and self. Deleting."

Withstanding the force of erasure by the speaker's own will-to-power ("I wore red paint, salvaging neither plated breast,/ nor firm mouth. Not once was I tender./ I wanted them wasted"), the dead sister of the collection haunts each liminal page, as a figure with whom the speaker is indivisible and yet separate, as a nameless "tributary on flame": "Ten years ago, when my bones were growing, she crept into my bones./ A paring knife taken to me . . . The veins then, one by one, threaded from my body . . . How to love a sister . . . I called her—never mind. She is changed. Now ends./ Now begins."

The apology given to the sister in "Room" is not for an event or transgression that occurred, but rather the shape that the speaker's vision took: "Sister, speak/ to me after this I'm sorry/ I dreamt it like this." The sacrificial logic of *The Vital System* is fueled by a willed suffering on behalf of the other:

"I went insane, in the dream.
You returned home.

No. I wandered and bled.
For what?

For whom.
For whom."

The body's incorporation in poetry as meaning and intentional form is not essentialist but a process of self-authorization (the primary task of becoming a subject) that "represents" poetry's materialization as palimpsest (writing-in-process), whose naming of and cuts into the female body (making it "significant") are foreign, at first:

"Called a litany of graceful names—strove to embody them. Tasted herself. Tasted feminine.

choked.”

Labrinthian rather than linear, heteroglossal rather than univocal, affective and cognitive rather than purely language-based (a-significatory or glossolaliac) this form of poetic language sails through the syntactic, metrical, and, lastly, temporal gates that keep the “otherworldliness” of the gendered body’s at bay, to arrive at the pulsional incident of (re)birth itself:

“The late prism of the
metamorphic world; I trans-
formed: across canvas stretched
white, a black bone bi-continental
collage, a put-upon pace.
Belligerent incubator steaming the
New World’s afterbirth. But alive.”