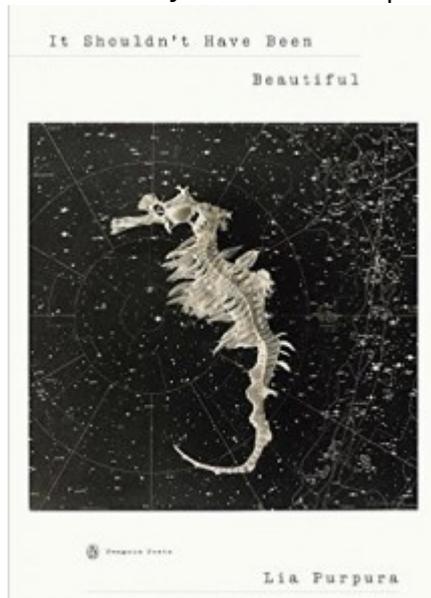


[It Shouldn't Have Been Beautiful by Lia Purpura](#)

written by John Yohe | February 23, 2016



It Shouldn't Have Been Beautiful by Lia Purpura

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What is the 'it' in Lia Purpura's *It Shouldn't Have Been Beautiful*? I don't normally think of a collection of poems as a riddle, but this one is, leading me to wonder if every collection of poems really is in some way. In any case, instead of starting randomly somewhere in the middle (which I usually like to do books of poetry), you might, I'd suggest, benefit from reading at least the first few poems linearly, to get started on Purpura's riddle path.

The first is called "Belief," which *begins* to tell us how to read the rest of the collection:

Light being
wavy and particulate
at once
is instructive—
who wouldn't
other things or states
present as
both/and?
For instance
I both believe and can't.
Holding these together produces
a wobble, I think
it's time

to take seriously
as a stance.

I say "Belief" *begins* to tell us how to read the book, because Purpura has now sent us wobbling. Two pages later we have "Uncertainty," seemingly the opposite of belief (versus, say, doubt, a stronger word) making me feel that Purpura wants to wobble more to belief. And she does, though with a qualification, as "Uncertainty" hints at. Because if "Belief" tells us what this series of poems might be about, "Uncertainty" tells us how the poems should be read. Uncertainty being

...not a place at all.
I just practice there, assemble
some beliefs, disturb
others and put the extras
into a pile for mosaics,
one of my big projects
for the future.

It Shouldn't Have Been Beautiful is in fact the assemblage (and/or the mosaic) she mentions—a collection of beliefs, disturbed ones perhaps, but more importantly, small ones. As Purpura herself would say, is saying, a bunch of small beliefs does not necessarily add up to One Big Profound Belief, in anything. Thus, uncertainty. Thus, wobbling.

Thus, too, my uncertainty about the book. Purpura's poems are on the shorter side, with heavy enjambment, which might lead one (like me) to at first assume she's going for that uncertainty in, perhaps, Robert Creeley's poems. But they're not. At the smaller level, Purpura very much goes for a certain wisdom in her poems, and so is more like Kay Ryan. I say a 'certain' wisdom because, well, here's a later poem titled "Gone":

It's that, when I'm gone
(and right off this is tricky),
I won't be worried
about being gone.
I won't be here
to miss anything.
I want now, sure,
all I've been gathering
since I was born,
but later,
when I no longer have it,
being gone (perhaps
a state of everlasting,
who knows), this moment
(stand closer, love,
you can't be too close),
is not a thing I'll know to miss.
I doubt I'll miss it.

I can't get over this.

I'm wobbled about this poem. On the one hand, I think it's well written, nice tight language that allows for some necessary meandering. And it's clever, even with a little humor. On the other hand, I don't think it's that profound. Or, that is, I've read and thought before about death and existence and what happens after, and though this is a new way to talk about it, it's not a new idea.

Which *might* be Purpura's point. Remember these are smaller beliefs that are part of a larger Uncertainty. And if you do think "Gone" is profound and new territory, then add *It Shouldn't Have Been Beautiful* to your cart and proceed to directly to checkout. But there were enough poems, enough smaller beliefs about things not-so-profound, like cellphones and media descriptions of trainwrecks, that I found myself...uncertain. Which, again, might be Purpura's point? But especially since I didn't read the book linearly at first, without the possible clues from the beginning poems, I found myself feeling at least at first that more than a few poems don't stand on their own.

Though, of course, I find myself uncertain about my uncertainty. And I still wonder about the 'it.' *What* shouldn't have been beautiful? Life? Death? No. Belief? No, I'd say we all agree belief, in whatever, if it really exists, is beautiful. I think perhaps Purpura means *uncertainty* shouldn't have been beautiful. That is, none of us thinks we want to be uncertain about anything (or especially everything). But perhaps the process of uncertainty is worth itself, worth the effort. The wrestling, I mean, with wanting to believe (in anything, in something) and the necessity of (logical?) proof in/of that belief. To wobble, after all, can be kind of beautiful, like part of a dance.