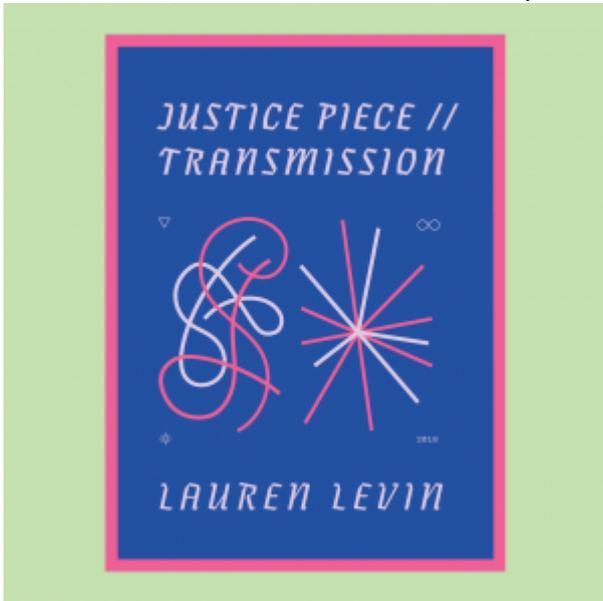


Review: JUSTICE PIECE // TRANSMISSION by Lauren Levin

written by Guest Contributor | June 15, 2018



Justice Piece // Transmission by Lauren Levin
[Timeless Infinite Light](#), forthcoming 2018

There is a nearly physical strand, like a connective tissue, joining Lauren Levin's newest collection of poetry, *Justice Piece // Transmission* (Timeless Infinite Light, 2018), to her previous book, which was her excellent (and first full-length) collection, *The Braid* (Krupskaya, 2016). They share a cast of characters—the familial unit of mother, father and child—named only by single letters (A, T, and the narrating I) then Mom and Dad, and, as the circle widens, friends, whose names are single first names: Stephanie, Alli, Cynthia, and Jared, among others. Finally there are the constellations of names which may be familiar to readers as single names (Wittgenstein, Cassils) or are spelled entirely out: Shulamith Firestone, Alice Neel, Uyen Hua. Family, and its transmissions—of love, lyric wisdom, and touch, among others—are clearly and graciously spelled out.

In a peculiar way, this book picks up chronologically where the last one left off. It picks up a narrative thread, the story of becoming a mother in the twenty-first century: a mom reading the news, the polis in crisis, and the violence capital deploys in asserting its hegemony over human bodies. But that too easy sense of narrative continuity belies the book's radical form. As in Notley's *Culture of One* or Mayer's *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*, a rough topography of narrative range is marked out only to stand as a point of departure from linear time and into poetic time, with its kairos, verticalities, and subduction zones.

The book begins with an ancient question: what is justice? If justice is a

kind of transmission, the formal condition of possibility for all transmission is embodied here as the internal conduit between mother and child, the placenta. Justice embodied as placenta is a relational organ developed in maturity—anticipated, then intuited, and finally “disposed of as trash.” It grows in the dark, and so is both absolutely private and yet totally contingent upon mutual use. Indeed, if justice is figured as this filament (a braid?), it is formed out of its very mutuality: “The placenta I grew” (21) also “grew from her cells, not mine” (21). It is both the mother’s and her baby’s organ. This *both / and* rather than *either / or* indicates the paradoxes out of which, for Levin, justice might reveal itself. Although its occlusion, its very resistance to revelation, also seems crucial. She quotes the art historian Linda Nochlin: “One studies what prevents representation” (52).

To think justice as placental is to chart a course not only politically revolutionary, but also lyrical. Cell by cell, an organ is formed by virtue of two, for the benefit of both, in advance of an unknown future. Teleological causality (what is this for?) is already out of the picture, a moot question. In a way, justice as placenta figures as faith in an unknown other, plain and simple. This is posited against a number of brain-dead albeit sadly quite familiar alternative formulations of justice—“to have the world live inside my indifference instead of the other way around” (23); or the Kol Nidre, which is “not actually a prayer but a legal formula” (30). There are some almost accurate descriptions of justice: “Justice as the form in which / each group is served its portion” (26) is not quite true, it seems. Against these Levin asserts “the refusal to hide that justice is made of rotting parts.” The word *parts* here feels at once totally vague and utterly precise. Lyric poetry finds fledgling form in the relation of minute parts each to one another, and it is our body parts that finally make up justice. Entropy—rot, rust, mold—emphatically applies to these relationships, contravening the fictive ideologies about justice advanced by those who wish to remain in power. Parts situate themselves against the others in their orbit, catch one another’s light, grow and dazzle in some series, and die. Real justice, in the span of this long poem, is formed out of relationality, has a life (and a death), and is an end in itself.

It is our wrong definitions of justice, the generalizing names we put on a dynamic or complex, that suffocate the lyric along with any possibility of revolutionary action. The usage of the verb “to serve” along with “justice” crops up several times. Can justice be served? By and upon whom? When the verb is used intransitively we more easily elide the “objects” upon whom justice is served. Levin plays out what happens when generalized, static terms hone in to the level of human bodies. She writes:

A male was shoving someone’s face into the ground

A cop was shoving a girl’s face into the ground

A cop was shoving a black person’s face into the ground

A white cop was shoving a young black girl’s face into the ground

Officer Eric Casebolt was shoving a young black girl's face into the ground

Officer Eric Casebolt was shoving Dajerria's face into the ground

Eric was shoving Dajerria Becton's face into the ground (11)

Injustice, enacted by the police-state on the bodies of minorities, casts itself as an intransitive verb, passively enacted upon humans stripped of agency. It thereby creates for itself a categorical exception from the (lyrical) particulars of real life: afternoons, bodies, dirt. It metastasizes into a fiction, an ideology. This implicates parenthood also, with its inevitable hierarchies: A has no agency, or reduced agency, and so the narrator feels guilt surrounding the relation of justice between parent and child. "What does justice mean to you / If you would give up your mastery" (45). Real justice, formed out of relationality for no 'reason' at all, in lightless womblife, remains as such incomprehensible and unassimilable to the hierarchies of the police-state and even the traditional family. Quoting the *New York Times*, Levin writes: "The placenta has typically been given such little respect in the medical community that wanting to study it was considered equivalent to someone in the Navy wanting to scrub ships' toilets with a toothbrush" (16). Justice of the sort Levin envisions erases hierarchy, defies reason, exults in lyric particularity, and manifests organically by virtue of, and in deferral to, the other.

Jargon, of both the medical variety, as well as the technical and cultural, crackles at the edges of *Justice Piece // Transmission*. These bits operate as indicators of patriarchy at work—a sort of patriarchy (it seems important to note) that is more a totalizing and totalized mindset than the particular words and actions of particular men. Although it is also that. "Of course everything is about patriarchy" (41): it is an all pervasive milieu that reveals itself often in jargon (I learned what "vocal fry" is), medicalese and legalese, and in tech-speak. "Never have I wanted to turn the comments off more than I do right now" (53) implies that the "comments" are, and will remain, on. For women, privacy is rendered impossible. "Comments," even when they are not the sort of internet troll misogyny literally reduplicating in a thread, have become perhaps more emphatically internalized and normalized among women.

"When a problem touches every point / seeing it everywhere should require no art" (41). Patriarchy, and the totalizing injustice it engenders, do catch Levin's eye everywhere. But the particularity of physical touch offers resistance to it, as a conduit for transmission. When mutual aid (to borrow from Kropotkin) and mutual need are embodied in touch, as in the placental form, the condition of possibility for real justice opens. The narrator quotes Uyen Hua: "The body is touching / the body is being touched" (98). Much earlier on, in thinking through justice, she writes, "Why does justice make me think so much about touching / failures of touch" (14).

Justice (real justice, as opposed to the violent administration of the police-state) is figured throughout the first section of the book as what is

anticipated, what is to come. And in certain ways this figuration is left unresolved. For Levin, justice is a felt thing: in its nearness, it is familial. It must originate in darkness and in a familiarity with the unknown as deeply intuitive and organic as the link between mother and baby. This is a meditative, brilliant book that manages to pack in so much of what lived life feels like—the touch of it and of its resistances at being grazed by an injustice deploying itself everywhere. Levin’s justice resists neatness, and deals forthrightly in the mess of its own form. Toward the end of the book, she writes, “Dehiscence is a surgical term. When a wound splits along the surgical seam and everything falls out” (78).

Dehiscence, an unfamiliar word to me, comes to Levin from that patriarchal (immediately so—her father is a surgeon) and most invasive form of Western medicine, surgery. But she has reappropriated it. I think she uses this image to think through work’s form: the work of mothers, and of poets, and of activists. Dehiscence is a figure for the book’s refusal to elide messiness, vulgarity, and rot. The careful seams and sutures writers use to contain or cut their work (here the Janus word ‘cleave’ is especially apt) split sometimes, and what falls from the sites of these repairs is then the work. This is literally viscera: glistening guts and organs, blood. Levin shows us this viscera. Justice for her is in its particulars, and is intuited lyrically out from them: “If justice could become possible at the points where it ends / before it appears” (52).



Jason Morris grew up in Vermont and now lives in San Francisco. He is the author of six books of poetry and other writing, including, most recently, *Late to Practice* (Dirty Swan Projects, 2017) and *Levon Helm* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018). His essays, including essays on Clark Coolidge’s *Crystal Text* and Bernadette Mayer’s interest in Hawthorne, have appeared in *Jacket2*, *Eleven Eleven*, and elsewhere.