The End of the Alphabet by Claudia Rankine. Grove Press, $20.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL THEUNE

In *Eros, the Bittersweet,* Anne Carson writes, "In any act of thinking, the mind must reach across [the] space between known and unknown, linking one to the other but also keeping visible their difference. It is an erotic space. To reach across it is tricky; a kind of stereoscopy seems to be required." With *The End of the Alphabet*—a collection which dares not only to think but also to think about the erotic—Claudia Rankine writes a difficult and seductively stereoscopic work.

Although *The End of the Alphabet* contains poems grouped in sections that seem to suggest some type of arc, beginning with "Overview is a place" and "Elsewhere, things tend" and ending with "In this sense, beyond" and "The quotidian," Rankine's second book is mercurial. Individual poems are untitled, separated only by asterisks, and are constructed from sometimes obsessive, sometimes managerial parataxis, open-ended parentheticals, and eccentric typographical devices. Characters and situations often are raised as possibilities only to go unpursued. Action and speech arise in and through occasions which shift quickly from simple exoticism— "door opening to green bowl of narcissus"—to abhorrent waste—"feces is stuffed in the mouth," "the skull was covered in rubber and used / as a ball."

For all the book's digressions and discontinuities, a narrative—or at least a narrative tension—gradually emerges. *The End of the Alphabet* chronicles a survivor's reflections on a failed, perhaps even abusive or sadistic, relationship. The survivor witnesses to disasters, as images of storms, flooding and shipwrecks recur. The incommunicability of her love's little deaths leads to a grotesque afterlife of abortions, suicide attempts, regrets over acts permitted the lover, lovers's spats, and pouting—the monumental and the petty often existing side by side in mutual magnification: "We live through, survive // without regard for the self. Forgiving / each day insisting it be forgiven, thinking // our lives umbilical, tied up with living with how far / we can enter into hell and still sit down for Sunday dinner."

This work is expressly anti-Romantic. While for some Romantics tranquillity exists after strong emotion, and though Rankine's work even argues that all speech is somehow tranquil—she states, "[*O*]*nce upon a time*, our addiction to telling, / is all effort to shape what surfaces within the sane"—after trauma, that tranquillity becomes forever suspect: "*The day I am at peace I will have achieved / a kind of peace even I know suggests I am crazy. / But, as it will be how I survive, I will not feel so.*" For Rankine, even understanding is fearful, even nowhere is not safe, and even the haven of solid ground gives way: "Gnaw. Zigzag. The end of the alphabet buckling floors." Her formal feeling *folds.*

Rankine's poems resonate with the work of Jorie Graham and Michael Palmer but are more than mere imitation. Whereas Graham and Palmer are noted, respectively, for a fragmented golden style and for an engagement with the romance of the fading echo, Rankine's work confronts the distortions of feedback, both suffering and employing it. However, never does this seem like mannerism, for within Rankine's enactment of the catastrophes following love sound the strains of argument. According to Rankine, feedback is to be expected when you "open your mouth / close to your ear,"

> And to speak
> is to listen
>
> out in the open, to tell all
> to the whole as it happens
> and be understandably ambivalent and stripped
>
> down and booed off ...

As they allow no escape—"*There must be an uninvolved and there, outrageous calm*"—Rankine's poems eschew the ecstatic, that "struggle to exuberance." Their emotional content is often curbed and partial, seeming, instead, rational and elusive. Yet the words grope and surge, and sometimes their particles and waves clasp and intersect in strange, beautiful coincidence: "How he holds her holds him down," "just as the lips open open the eyes," "alone / and not. afraid / with no more room. falling / into nowhere else—" In *The End of the Alphabet*, Rankine creates an open, tensed text which approximates—by keeping it obscure and alive, by complicating it—the uncanny, erotic space between known and unknown. Each new contact with this book, each new immersion, reveals new contours and orientations and promises new insight and devastation.