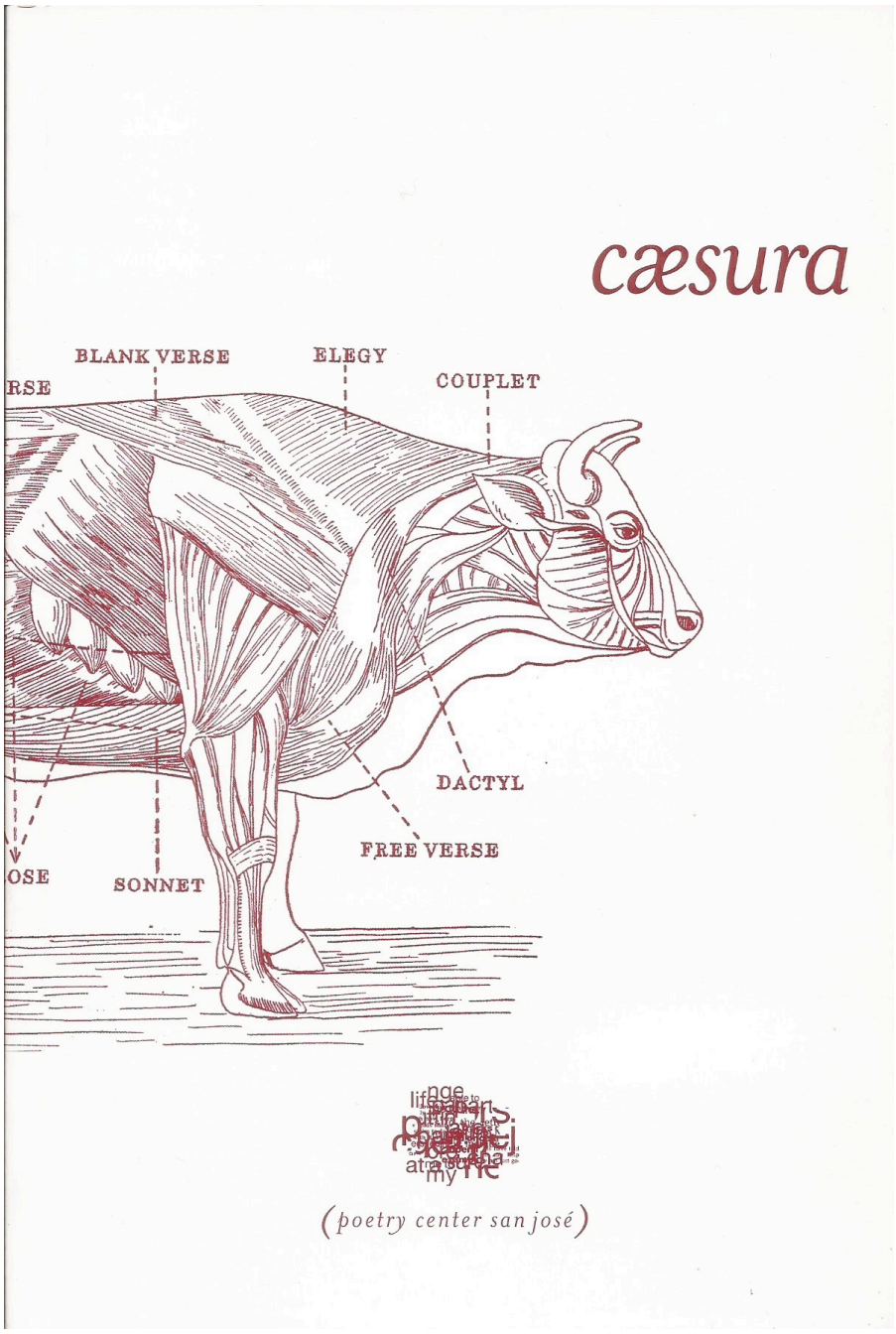
REVIEW: *Savage Machinery*, by Karen Rigby, Finishing Line Press, 2008



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Of the four food-themed poems in Karen Rigby's chapbook, *Savage Machinery*, "Song for the Onion" and "Borscht" explore the cultural roots of humble, everyday ingredients. When these poems are read together, the onion emerges as universal; a

world-traveler compared with the beet, kept to its status as the main component in borscht. In exploring the histories and uses of these common, lowly root vegetables, Rigby elevates both them and humanity, using her careful eye for detail and skillful use of image.

Rigby gives the onion – ubiquitous, taken for granted, heaped in every grocery store's produce section – new dignity, revealing its powerful properties: "sulfur and sugar a scent Egyptians believed / could ferry the dead home / from their sleep." So many dishes start with the onion. In a quick survey of the cookbooks in my kitchen, I found hundreds of recipes that demanded it: chopped, sliced, quartered, sautéed, stir-fried in peanut oil or simmered in butter. Like no other vegetable, its flavor permeates our lives. "Let me taste the pure, explosive signature," Rigby writes, bringing to mind the bite of raw onion, sliced on top of a juicy hamburger, its aftereffects lingering on the breath for hours to come. "Let the lioness outshine her sisters, / the shallot and the leek." Those timid, milder-flavored cousins stand back as the onion takes its rightful place, the most sought-after, recognizable ingredient in virtually all styles of cooking.

There is more to the onion than its use as a vegetable, however. Later in the poem, Rigby writes "Let the onion telescope / multiple selves." How often do we compare careful, slow work to peeling an onion? Layers of flesh, the invisible vapor that stings the eye: "Let nothing else weep on behalf of the blade." Lessons exist in these deceptively simple rituals: "Let the roots drive the green hands skyward / in spite of the earth."

"Song for the Onion" is an incantation, each sentence beginning with "Let." Through the use of the repeated word, the magical significance of the onion, its imaginative power as well as its taste and aroma, emerge as the center of the poem. The pungent onion is also a member of the lily family, its "doppelganger;" from this earthbound bulb, a delicate flower emerges – a fitting end to a poem that calls forth the meaning within multiple layers.

"Borscht," unlike "Song," deals with specifics. It begins with a recipe:

> Throw a bone in the crock.
> Cut onions, bon-voyage streamers,
> rub tendons with marjoram.

Here the onion has returned to its familiar role as an ingredient in another dish, this time borscht, that staple of central and eastern Europe. The word "borscht" conjures up visions of faraway republics: Russia, Poland, Ukraine – where the dark red stew appears daily. A dish heavy with meaning, Rigby compares the "white night" of these harsh climates to "soup so crimson / I could paint the walls: / blood from the mink farms" and "Public beatings in Yevtushenko's *Babi Yar*," invoking one of the most brutal acts of violence in World War II. It is nearly impossible to look at a bowl of borscht without thinking of blood, and absolutely impossible to slice a beet without having it bleed red juice.

The second part of "Borscht" describes an event, the kind of occurrence that lodges in the memory in spite of, or perhaps because of, its commonplace nature. As Rigby writes,

Once, on a tour of the Orthodox domes,
a bicyclist rode past balancing
his green gardener's pail

between the handlebars.
Potatoes and a newborn dog
bedded on newsprint.

The man could hardly steer
with the weight of his gifts.

The juxtaposition of "potatoes and a newborn dog" seems to give each the same weight. Are they both destined for the same place, or did they both come from the same place? That Rigby doesn't call the dog a puppy indicates a subtle cultural preference. In the land of Babi Yar and blood red soup, perhaps puppyhood, like childhood, is a luxury few can afford.

These gifts – the potatoes and the dog – weigh the man down so much he almost crashes; Rigby continues with "Country of exiles, bath houses, // blood of the czars-- / I raise the bowl and drink / to the steppe's red beets." Less an incantation than "Song," "Borscht" nevertheless feels mystical, reverberating from the connections Rigby makes between the history and food of eastern Europe.

There is much more to appreciate in *Savage Machinery*, not the least of which is Rigby's very subtle weaving together of the poems in the collection. They are less thematically connected as linked from poem to poem. Therefore, the poems deserve a slow, careful and close reading to discover what lies, layered like an onion, hidden within.

- Erica Goss