

A BESTIARY

Lily Hoang. Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2016. 156 pp. \$16.00.

In her essay “On Measurement,” Lily Hoang writes, “I call a thing ‘magic’ if I cannot immediately understand the process by which it is made.” By this definition, her collection of essays *A Bestiary* surely qualifies as magical. This unlikely synthesis of memoir, poetry, Chinese folklore, Greek mythology, science, and fairytale comments on everything from the second-generation immigrant experience to the idealized self to family trauma. At the heart of the work is an exploration of the love, anger, and vulnerability within toxic relationships, and moreover their enduring effects on the psyche.

Hoang introduces the reader to *A Bestiary*'s central character in the first essay, “On the Rat Race,” as she explains that her sister died unexpectedly from a brain aneurism and that she has since “renamed her my dead sister.” From the outset, she writes with an unadorned brevity, affording each sentence room to breathe on the page. In those moments when she describes the losses and violence she has endured, this space fills with unspoken emotion. “Real sadness,” she writes, “does not need a performance.” Further along in “On

the Rate Race,” she says:

To prove our renowned endurance of pain, Vietnamese women adorn their wrists with jade bracelets. In order to get the damned thing on, one must distort the hand, almost breaking it. I have yellow bruises for days, and yet: this is proof of our delicacy: how well we can take that agony and internalize it. The tighter the fit, the more suffering the woman can persevere, the more beautiful she is considered.

Suffering, and moreover ruminations on suffering, become something of an obsession or compulsion as the work unfolds. It is either survival or folly: rats race without end, learn to swim, sing while waiting to be saved. In “On Catastrophe,” Hoang uses a fable to explore the nature and violence of obsession further. A young man trains to kill the white tiger who ate his father, while people like his mother construct impossible tests in an attempt to deter him. First, he must shoot a tin can from his mother's head without spilling any of its water, then he must shoot the eye out of a needle and shoot a grain of salt from three miles away. The man takes on each obstacle with unwaning determination and after years accomplishes these impossible feats. By the end of the story, he has perfected his skill, killed the tiger, and rescued both

a beautiful woman and his father. In essence, he becomes the hero of fairytales and, in the process, he wins the American Dream—that is he marries into royalty, becomes a commander of the army, and lives happily ever after. His obsession, for all intents and purposes, led him to this perfect ending. However, this fable is interrupted by Hoang’s ruminations on the “Other Lily,” or her imaginings of what her life would look like if she’d followed her parents’ dream for her and become a doctor, stories from her physically and emotionally abusive marriage, and the failings of her sister’s family. Hoang throws the supposed ideal of compulsive hard work and the self-sacrificing quest for love in stark relief against the backdrop of her reality. She writes:

Days before I find his mother seizing on the ground, days before she dies, Justin and I share a blunt and suddenly we are friends hot-boxing in his mom’s garage... And then his mother died: when he was addicted to heroin, he would text me and I would try to ignore it for as long as possible. I knew he needed me to wire him money immediately.

The fable ends with a moralizing twist as the reader gains access to the white tiger’s perspective and learns that everything the tiger had done was out of his own love and suffering for his late wife. In

this way, Hoang reworks common fairytale narratives to expose their unruly deceptions. By stitching together memoir and fable, Hoang brings the two traditions in conversation with each other while her fragmentary style leaves room for the reader to draw his or her own connections.

Furthermore, Hoang comments on her experience as a second-generation Vietnamese-American immigrant in essays like “On the Geography of Friendship” where she elucidates a desire for belonging and the violence of othering through the metaphor of “the swarm”:

The swarm bellows in a language solemnly exotic to you. You search for cognates and the wind pushes through your skin and through the marrow of your bones and back out. The swarm returns to itself, changed and whole.

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You are sitting in Brooklyn and people swarm around you. Because of the position of the sun, they are variants of shadow. They are obtrusive and absent stalkers.

You press your hands against the protection of summer glass.

Hoang describes the movement and accumulation of the swarm in violent terms: *bellows*, *obtrusive*, *stalkers* and, yet, she articulates a

desire for inclusion within it: “What is the swarm? It’s a feeling kind of like being in love: of being lifted and carried, thrown into momentum towards—towards—” Desire for inclusion and belonging is interrupted by moments of violence, shame, and isolation. Here, Hoang poses questions around identity and community through these contradictory impulses. She yearns, perhaps, for the innocence of her elementary school self when she was “proud to be Vietnamese. [She] had not learned self-shame.” As she writes, “naiveté was a power that experience has drained.”

Throughout the collection, Hoang often draws attention to the act of writing the work. For instance, in “On My Birthday, Dragons, and Intestines,” she writes: “How many versions of this essay will I save? Command Shift S.” These moments emphasize the labor buried within the pages’ seemingly effortless accumulation. Hoang’s writing becomes more intimate and vulnerable as the reader comes to recognize the struggle through which the pieces were built. *A Bestiary* was the winner of the Cleveland State University Poetry Center’s 2015 Essay Collection Competition and the accolades are truly well-deserved. This collection will continue to echo through the literary community for years: for its vulnerability, for the way Hoang collapses the real with the magical,

for its simultaneously intimate and intellectual weight. Taken all together, *A Bestiary* is a truly dazzling and dizzying work.

—Abigail Burns

THIS IS THE HOMELAND

Mary Hickman. Ahsakta Press, 2015. 64 pp. \$18.00.

“I am filling your borders with letters. / This is the new word—get up and live,” the speaker declares at the end of Mary Hickman’s debut collection. *This Is The Homeland* emphasizes the constructedness of borders, positing the body as a protean landscape that hosts birds, saints, manlike flowers, and, most importantly, language.

Homeland launches constant lines of lyrical flight, but the body is ultimately the field to which they return. Bodies crack, fall, wear pearls, drink, and cling to each other. In a more visceral gesture, Hickman, who has assisted with open-heart procedures as a surgical technician, conceives of the body as a landscape in the poem “Territory.” “Blue flesh smokes up & quickly sucked / it out,” she writes. “The gorgeous view returned. The fertile // red valleys warming up. This is the way to the steel table. / This is the homeland.” Hickman’s vistas are captivating, but the metaphor unsettles as well with the term’s political valence and

the impulse to question the spaces where boundaries overlap: “Body lumps & chest hole. What land is this?”

The motif of the body as the site for the struggle for self-definition against the other reaches its climax in the trinity of “William,” “William Who Lives,” and “William My Man.” Here “William” is at once Sweet William—the dianthus flower—and “a pretty boy with hooks and fists.” In this cycle, violence and cultivation twine together into an indistinguishable assemblage as the speaker “[p]eeled his joints from the sand, knelt down to plant” and William “named my garden New York City. Then shoved me on my knees.” Even the love between the speaker and William is plantlike, unifying their bodies as it “shoots down.”

Just as the bodies in these poems elude easy classification, the “pure-chirping vacuum voice” of language also refuses to settle into a typical taxonomy. At times the sense is of a nonhuman form of speech. At other times these poems ring of Derrida’s notion of *archi-writing*. Hickman consistently triggers moments of metamorphosis through homophonic play and synapse-speed imagery, as in “Joseph and Mary”:

Frail plumes and in a flaw of softness—an altar and let our crooked smokes climb from our bless’d altar: breast and pointed red. Post yourself into the box,

Mary. Yellow heaven—slim fingers of the red flower—*sua voce*—.

Here, sentences hover in fragments or gust suddenly away into other phrases. At first, this lends the impression of damaged syntax, but these oblique structures create a complex play between concealment and revelation. Subjects are often dropped and imperative statements veil the speaker, but this paradoxically leads to a sense of vulnerability. In one particularly lucid moment, the speaker declares, “I’m here to find out / how to leave with the self.”

This Is The Homeland is gorgeous and ethereal, mystical and corporeal. Much like a flock of starlings, Hickman’s poems swarm, cleave, and scatter, leaving the reader with “No tracks. // Only traces sweeping anterior to good / anterior to evil.”

—Zachary Anderson

I AM A SEASON THAT DOES NOT EXIST IN THE WORLD

Kim Kyung Ju. Trans. Jake Levine. Black Ocean, 2016. 123 pp. \$14.95.

“This living hand, now warm and capable,” Keats wrote, “Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold / And in the icy silence of the tomb, / So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights / That thou

would wish thine own heart dry of blood.” Kim Kyung Ju’s debut *I Am A Season That Does Not Exist In The World*, translated from Korean by Jake Levine, mirrors the final gesture of Keats’ poem—“I hold it towards you”—a gesture that hovers in that indeterminate space between a consolation and a threat.

I Am A Season That Does Not Exist In The World is held together by a set of Romantic tropes: disappearances, ghosts, music, wind, and the night. The surface of the text forms a chaotic layer of metamorphoses and things that escape containment: “One day, a mirror broke and the wind that lived inside it bloomed into the sky.” Frequently, the container is the speaker’s own body. Beneath this layer of instability, however, is the sense of an occult unity: “when the scales and shadow of the stone meet, it is through a single darkness they wetly relate.”

Although these poems share aesthetic sensibilities with other contemporary Korean avant-garde poetry, they also emerge from a tradition of German idealist philosophy that emphasizes phenomenology (Hölderlin and Hegel themselves make cameos throughout the book). In many of these poems, the philosophical insistence appears in conjunction with the book’s Romantic preoccupation with time and mortality. “If I put two hands in the pockets of my pants / and roll over, onto the wall / even if the

window covers me, penetrating me deeply with its heat / every piece of cloth the skin touched, every seam, will fray,” asserts the speaker in “Life Secluded.” The intersection of traditions lends this book its uncanny energy with the collision of German High Romanticism, the stark natural imagery of traditional Korean poetry, and the grotesque surrealism of the Korean avant-garde.

This aesthetic mélange results in rapid-fire images and the perpetual suspicion that perception is fatally flawed. Jake Levine’s translation beautifully delivers Kim’s surreal vignettes and phenomenological instability. *I Am A Season That Does Not Exist In The World* is at once manic and delicate, trembling with icicles gushing light and birds vomiting black water. Here, the limb that Keats held out might just be “fingers cut off the hand / turn[ing] white on the river floor.”

—Zachary Anderson

IRL

Tommy Pico. *Birds*, LLC, 2016. 98 pp. \$17.00.

What does the epic look like under the influence of the text message form? How does the queer-identified, indigenous body move through the physical and linguistic spaces of conquest? What form does the Muse take in this landscape?

Tommy Pico's debut volume *IRL* surges out of the floodgates of these questions, "Turning from / Muse / sun of answers / towards audacity of body."

If the Western epic tradition typically deals in founding narratives, its other eye is always on some idea of futurity. *IRL* offers the possibility of queer epic through its thematic tension between the impulse to account for the past and a suspicion of the future. On one hand, the speaker seems invested in recovering cultural knowledge lost through colonial violence:

Grandma survives
a little, but not everything
Kumeyaay
is gifted to my dad
for fear it'll be ripped
from him with the same swift
She makes it back but
not everything makes it back
home. I search for it in a poem.

In other places, the speaker announces that "Future is a delusion, dilute / with reflex of imagination," a claim that destabilizes the epic's role as a site of cultural reproduction. *IRL* hovers ecstatically between these temporalities in an acutely present-tense, a kind of New York School breathlessness.

Pico also queers the epic through *IRL*'s language and form. Aside from occasional section breaks, the poem pours down the page in a narrow, heavily enjambed,

unbroken stanza. As the title suggests, text-speak filters throughout the book, again disrupting the sense of epic durability through the disposable nature of the text message. This juxtaposition appears in relation to the speaker's constant awareness that "Language is living / history class, like you n me, / conquest hardwired / into lingua franca." In response, Pico returns to moments where meaning exceeds the system of language: "infection" becomes "affection," "me" slips into "meme," "seething" is autocorrected to "seeing." In these spaces of excess and profusion, *IRL* offers an urgent counternarrative, a queer epic constructed in the ephemeral forms of digital media.

Although *IRL* resists the type of ur-narrative that might be expected from an epic, its propulsive force comes from the speaker's relationship with "Muse," a figure who at times seems an Adonis eluding the speaker's overtures, and at others, a tyrannical demigod: "Muse used to mean / purpose in being / alone— Muse is romanticized / by the idea of possession and lord / knows I can't live unoccupied."

Pico's debut reminds us that the concept of the poet as medium—for the Muse, for colonial violence embedded in English—is not simply an aesthetic question, but is fraught with political consequences as well. The vitality and subversion of this volume provide a necessary coun-

terpoint to our current moment, as well as the simple recognition that “the voice / is coming from within my body.”

—*Zachary Anderson*

