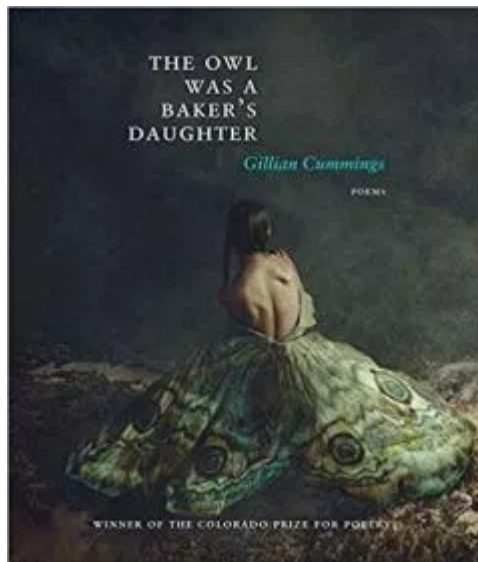




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Review: The Owl was a Baker's Daughter by Gillian Cummings



THE OWL WAS A BAKER'S DAUGHTER BY GILLIAN CUMMINGS (CENTER FOR LITERARY PUBLISHING 2018)

Reviewed by [Bianca Glinskas](#)

"The speech of rain: it was only a matter

of something asking to be let in"

Why do we feel so close to poets like Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, or Anne Sexton, whose struggles with mental health were often the central discussion of their writing? I think, perhaps, this is because poets know how to go for their own jugular, baring their hearts and deepest truths with readers as if they were lifelong friends. Confessional poetry offers emotional vulnerability which creates a kind of intimacy between poet and reader. The immense success of such confessional poets points to many readers' ability to relate; do we not all, to some extent, struggle with mental well-being? Gillian Cummings' work *The Owl was a Baker's Daughter* follows in the footsteps of confessional writing. Though the protagonist-narrator of *The Owl was a Baker's Daughter* is not its author, Gillian Cummings shares in an interview with OnDenver that, "came out of [her] direct experience as someone who lived for over six years with suicidal depression." Though the work deals with this dark subject matter, it does so in a way that is as mesmerizing as it is melancholy.

In an interview with Rob McClennan, Gillian Cummings shares, "In *The Owl*, I try to present the topic of mental illness in a way that sheds light on its potential to expand limited notions of how a person should feel and be. I try to say that if you feel like someone who "wants to die and does / not know ..." essentially why you feel this way, feeling like this is okay, too, it's human." Cummings' perspective originates from her own struggles with mental illness; her collection perpetuates an important message of acceptance and advocacy. She continues, "I purposefully didn't tell a recovery story, because I believe that the insistence upon so called "recovery" in our society actually perpetuates the problem or stigma."

The Owl was a Baker's Daughter was selected for the 2018 Colorado Prize for Poetry by John Yau, who writes in the introduction, "Gillain Cummings is (as Keats would surely agree) a "camelion poet"", or "one that "has no identity, [who] is continually filling some other body". In this work, that "other body" is often undoubtedly Ophelia. *The Owl was a Baker's Daughter* principally muses through Ophelia, inhabiting her maddened, suicidal perspective. The title *The Owl was a Baker's Daughter* originates from a line spoken by Ophelia from Shakespeare's Hamlet whose emotional turmoil has overwhelmed her into a state of psychosis. Though the work is foregrounded by this classical allusion, Cummings' incantations invoke their own source of pain independent of its Shakespearean lens for interpretation. Readers need not be literary scholars in order to enjoy and excavate the gorgeous, haunting, and lyrical insights embedded within *The Owl was a Baker's Daughter*.

In tandem, Keats' idea of "negative capability", or "the artist's access to truth without the pressure and framework of logic or science" succinctly describes how meaning is explored in this work; "Ophelia" proffers her own bent wisdom. The delivery of this "non-reason" heavily relies on a handful of recurring, extended metaphors which serve as a sort of key to translate "Ophelia's" inner language. The speaker's ongoing discussion of her suicidal depression is conveyed through these repetitive comparisons; these collectively form an inner language made up of intricately interwoven symbolism. In this way "Ophelia's" psychosis proffers its own psycho-sense; the reader is thus invited to unriddle in a way that makes this work an achingly enjoyable read. These dominantly appear in forms of wildlife such as birds, and trees and nature. Water is fittingly often the central theme in many of the more desperate, pleading pieces, an eerie foreshadowing of "Ophelia's" death by drowning. Throughout *The Owl Was a Baker's Daughter*, sleep, the cousin of death, offers "Ophelia" the relief she desperately craves. Consider this opening moment from "Unwriting the Sentence" (19):

*Nightly, it flaps out, flaps out—
not a cry but a quietness, it had become
bigger, empty of starlight. Sleep tucked it
far beneath a bed of wings and smoke-moon,
beneath the room rocking a slow tug
at her boatlessness. It would come for her.*

— (1-6)

"Ophelia's" inner dialogue examines her flickering will to live as witness to the natural beauty and devastating suffering of existence. Oftentimes these metaphors symbolize erasure, acting to indirectly discuss her internal conflict. "Ophelia's" yearning for oblivion is not necessarily synonymous with her desire for death, however "Ophelia" perceives non-existence as the only way out of her pain and suffering. Take for instance the final lines from "Colder the Arriving than What Arrives":

Emptiness

enters your body more chill than forgetting,

no way to know where the grieved go now

or if there is a land purer than violets, than silence.

— (9-13)

Therefor the symbolic psycho-sense “Ophelia” proffers is flexible, and shifts according to her emotional state. While this ominous moment showcases the dark despair of our suicidal narrator, much of this work confronts and challenges these feelings; this emotional inconsistency encapsulates the central tension of *The Owl was a Baker's Daughter*. “Ophelia’s” perspective is one where the world is more than alive; it speaks, beckoning her to stay. In “Of Blossoms and Ghosts” (8), water is not an omen for death but an inquisitive, hopeful voice concluding the poem:

What breathes and sees the broadest spaces?

How much light does a tree take into a bud?

Is it possible to love like that,

like timid tucks of fabric unable

to unfold, and yet unfolding?

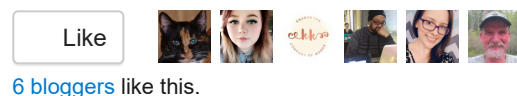
— (10-15)

These italicized, imagined voices are manifestations of “Ophelia’s” subconscious; these projections possess nature, compelling “Ophelia” to process her trauma and thereby grant her reprieve. Her externalization of these internal voices is further proof of her fervent desire to escape herself; by embodying these forces of otherness Ophelia disassociates from herself. In a sense, her madness is born from this desperate effort to disconnect from herself—to initiate her own end by becoming a self unbecoming.

The Owl was a Baker's Daughter follows the profoundly wounded interior workings of a devastated, deranged character from her psychotic breaking point to that final point of departure—her suicide. This work's romanticism does not disguise, distract, or detract from the utter suffering of its speaker but instead works to epitomize the emotional tension—the immense despair “Ophelia” feels for observing the beauty of the natural world and the painful realization that nothing can compel her to live. Cummings’ “Ophelia” examines her world in a peculiar and piercing way. The result is nothing short of beautiful sadness—the very definition of melancholy. Readers, you will be mesmerized and moved by this work.

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