

WHAT IS MISSING LIVES IN WHAT IS FOUND: ON *THE*

MINUSES BY JAMI MACARTY, *The Mountain West Poetry Series*, 2019

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The Minuses is a collection of poems that locates origin in the ongoing energy of the physical world. Dedicated to “the One who renders this ground known and unknown,” *The Minuses* renders such a ground by showing how the phenomenal nature of wind, trees, birds, plants—in essence all vegetable, mineral and nonhuman entities—exist in parity with the contingent nature of their function in time. Indeed, while even human-made things—such as doorways, windows, and public parks, also provide insight in the transparency of their use value—human beings in *The Minuses* are often dependent upon an *a priori* understanding of existence, which hinders them from observing their likewise conditional roles on the earth we share. It is accordingly a lesson of detachment poet Jami Macarty endeavors to reach, and which the poems throughout, profess. The writing method throughout the book is in dialogue with a theological concept of detachment, wherein what is sought is a release from desire—from things, people, and ideologies, to gain a closer perception of the whole, or as Macarty may say, the One. From section to section, *The Minuses* develops objective platforms, creating sites of focused observation within individual poems, as well as in sequentially intertwined poems that serve as bookends to others, where readers are able to see nature’s activity as a matter of course, perpendicular but never square, with the human perceptions that misread their part in the larger creation. The poems “Two Way” “Helicopter” “By Virtue of And” and “Thin Attachment” in the first section of the book are such an intertwined quartet:

On the roof

Isn't the desert verdant he says after rain

Clouds gain and feather white

Sky absolute blue

Until a raven flew through

I feel a smallness in my chest he says

My life is missing something

She looks at the clouds

revealing and obscuring the missing thing

There's something missing in me she says

The sky is entire *summa summarum*

He says I am not ready

to separate myself from my life ("Two Way,"9).

Floating between a dialogue in which a man and a woman are breaking up, clouds, as clouds must, "gain and feather white, "revealing momentarily, the sky which is an "absolute blue/ Until a raven flew through." The clouds and the sky exist in a constant state of change, bound to time and subject to interaction with all things that share their space. The statements the man makes, and the

isolated state in which he seems to live, provide a marked contrast to the natural world in motion all around him: “I feel a smallness in my chest he says/ My life is missing something.” He is detached, to be sure, though in the usual sense of the word, as he is disconnected from the scene unfolding around him, and his removal serves only to isolate him in reductive relation to what he calls his “life.” The woman, on the contrary, looks outward and up from the roof where the poem takes place, affirming his perception of something missing, while wryly noting how “the clouds” are alternately “revealing and obscuring the missing thing.” Acknowledging that there is also “something missing in me,” her observation of the cloud’s dual activity prompts her insight that, in fact, “the sky is entire *summa summarum*,” (translated in the note to the poem as “sum of sums” or in variant, “the highest whole” (73). In the sum of sums, what is “missing” lives part and parcel with what is found. Contingent to the condition of the atmosphere they both create and inhabit; the clouds continuously emigrate without possibility of permanent residence. Our sad man in “Two Way” might never believe that the life he feels is missing could make itself felt, once he let go his desire to possess it. His loss is solidified when he avers (no doubt believing in the earnestness of his expression) “I am not ready/ /to separate myself from my life” when he has already clearly done so. The poem “Helicopter” which shares a page with “Two Way” acts as a hinge to the earlier poem, as the description of the machine’s

motion upward through the sky's "clamped down lid" reiterates an instant again where "the missing thing" is momentarily obscured. The helicopter's ultimate motion in the poem where "one moment replaces another" is an ecstatic act as the rotors that pry "the wind's dusty lid...open/ in the earth abandoned swirl." *Via* abandonment, purchase is achieved (for now). The following poem "By Virtue of And," puts forward a series of propositions connected by the equational colon, while showing instances where the collectivity accruable in the conjunction "and" is used by homo sapiens to create disconnection, to subtract, further inscribing the tutelary title of the book *The Minuses*.

Honey given: Honey taken

By virtue of *and*

we divide and separate: branching into
palo verde: green stick tree

precipitating yellow blossoms

a mind sticks

on certain images, certain colors: the phone
buzzes:

it's the neighbor again: she
wishes someone would do something
about the bees:

(11)

Macarty's equational prosody shines a light on the natural world
keeping, as always, faith with its action, where people are somehow

unable. Bound to an idea of equity created by the laws of supply and demand wherein the value of what is given is qualified by what is taken, we become addicted to categories, confounding the accretion available in addition while violating the integrity of “and” by using it to “divide and separate.” Meanwhile, the tree giving way to flower shows us how becoming separate is also a bounty, as the tree becomes distinct from the flowers that grow on it, i.e. the Palo Verde the literal “green stick tree” which gives occasion to yellow bud. Playing off the word “stick” the poet shifts the attention to the attribute most overrated by human culture, the human mind, offering a disembodied human equation dedicated to memory, wherein “a mind sticks/on certain images...” either because it is bound to a past that no longer exists or has lost the ability to change. The neighbor possesses such a mind, as she has called “again,” stuck as she is on the bees she sees as a problem, though they are just doing their job, while she looks for somebody to do the job she’s set on, which is to get rid of them. Meanwhile, the blossom and wind do their part:

yellow blossoms

delicate, fluted:

what wind

they need blows:

the blossoms

let go easily:

falling one

at a time: it's impossible to determine
the moment of separation:

(12)

I hear Yeats' question "how can we know the dancer from the dance"
recast here as an ecopoetics, and yet the answer remains the same.

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

The end of "Among School Children" points also to a tree's
triumvirate growth and dismisses a false duality between the creation
and the creator. The Chestnut, as the Palo Verde, is a singularity
that multiplies through its own growth into three. The poem "Thin
Attachment" that follows the trio just discussed, foregrounds the
western concepts of security people form in relation to their place
in the world, in contrast to an Eastern view, wherein security is
experienced as a non-attachment to static or rigid Western views of
proprietorship:

Thin Attachment

At this house any god is rain
A woman pulls plastic from a dumpster
holds it up to her body to see if it fits

She inhabits blatantly her wish to be dry
 The rain inhabits its falling
My car inhabits the street...

The wind winds the woman wrangling the plastic

...newsprint
 scuds the fogged windscreen, veers me to a halt...

Morning's thin attachments—

On the street of beggars

a monsoon wealth

(13)

The scenario described—a homeless woman struggling with a piece of plastic as “she inhabits blatantly her wish to be dry,” and the poet driving her car which “inhabits the street” by virtue of the laws made to allow such right-of-way—calls into question human ideas of belonging. While we may believe our desire and system of laws justify our “rightful” position here, such belief may be what keeps us from seeing where we actually, moment to moment, live. Subject to its own law “the rain inhabits its falling,” while the wind “winds the

woman wrangling the plastic “and blows newspaper across the car’s windshield” which blocks the driver’s vision who is forced “to a halt.” As the elements rain and blow through the two’s personal need, a *via negativa* opens¹. What the homeless woman, and the driver view as their right are not conditions rooted in their real locale, which in terms of the poem are the homeless woman’s inevitable drenching, and the driver, as she cannot see to go, inevitably halting. The felt security each would achieve by obtaining their wish, and the attachment they have to those desires, threatens the lesson that their essential insecurity offers. An outside, third, voice, unattached to point of view, an omniscient and objective voice, speaking in the tone of a proverb or koan offers the negative reward: “On the street of beggars/a monsoon wealth.” Deprived of the security of their “thin attachments,” the now born again “beggars” are baptized in a thunderous outpouring of wind and rain that is the monsoon which delivers virtually all the rain that north America’s southwestern deserts receive in a year.

In the section of *The Minuses* dedicated “to subtraction” (27) the reader encounters multiple occasions where Macarty’s formidable

¹from Claudia Keelan’s *Ecstatic Émigré: An Ethics of Practice*, University of Michigan Press, 2018. “The traditional theological practice of *via negativa* entailed a radical denial of all definitions in order that the person pursuing this way could be united with the ultimate real, the word God itself a false promontory on this path dedicated to approach. A concept that crosses all boundaries, the term was described by Dionysus the Aeropagite, Meister Eckhart etc., and lives in the figure of the bodhisattva central to Mahayana Buddhism.”

negative capability is challenged by a world which has failed to find a language that would celebrate the truth available in contradiction. A note to “Logic of Opposites” suggests a “statement can be true and also imply it’s opposite” (75). The presiding spirit of inquiry in *The Minuses* would make such a world where oppositions parlay to form a whole. Opposite logics are not necessarily consigned to inhabit a dual (a two way) exchange, though in the empirical models of logic that dominate western civilizations, they often do (which makes the arguments of governments and lovers so tedious). The urge towards completeness in the book finds itself in constant combat with a counter spirit whose innate, if cowardly, function is to further divide—human from earth, self from other, man from woman, body from soul—into the ultimate opposition that is war. The proponents of subtraction deals in the language of one to one comparison: “I cannot say who you are without saying who I am” (21, “Reverse of Shadow”). Unstuck in time where impossibly “the past increases within the present,” (30, “Equals Rain”) and “What you say is our future is your future” (31, “Door Ratio”) the protagonists of opposition bully those whose loyalty towards the possibility of the “all” insures their victimization and silence. As the book moves away from the desert to the Northeast, the urban setting furthers divisions. A woman is groped in the subway by “someone’s hand. Who could tell whose. For the crowd becomes a place. A him,” is silent is the violation, where she “swallows commerce”

("Subway," 38). The natural world too is ominous (perhaps a suggestion of how essentially human places view the other that is the natural world) the sea personified as an intruder, "kicks in the door, strangles shore" ("Nor' easter," 39). The crowd has become a dangerous place called "him" and perpetuates the victimhood of women, nowhere more overtly than in the poem "Family." What could ideally be (and sadly so often is not) a nexus where the logic of opposites could proliferate and thrive, "Family" exits here as a site of violence where intimacy proliferates further abuse. Relationships between men and women are now inherently dangerous, as in the public and familial sphere, power is brutality which succeeds because those brutalized have given up the possibility of a third way:

Beaten once, she went back: for more.
The bruises raised in her: necessity.
She believed in withstanding

(44)

What is the opposite of withstanding? Giving in, surrendering, yielding. In this static logic of opposites, the victim remains victim and "what she lost stayed lost" (44). There is, however, at least one if not more, possibilities available to those who would reject surrender and that would be to summon the power of withdrawal, to subtract oneself, to learn, as the book proposes, that "Without is Guide" (45). Formerly "wavering in the mathematics of withdrawal," the final section of *The Minuses* returns to the desert where the terms

Autumn tilts the planet.
The length of the day becomes the length of the night.
Her hem unravels on a thorn—
evidence of her migration, a black thread,
The finder could know her as anyone, any one—
She walks in this place void of resemblances
beyond understanding
where never is allowed to accumulate.

(70)