

The Minuses by Jami Macarty

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Review by Bill Neumire



According to Jami Macarty, “Even when there’s a minus—a dear one dies—life keeps living itself. This is the ethos informing the poems of *The Minuses*.” Macarty’s debut full-length poetry collection hovers through a prepositional landscape defined by losses but also upward movement, movement toward a new singularity from the perspective of a speaker who constantly navigates the sky and desert. The book is structured in three sections titled “(The Minuses),” “(Dedication),” and “(Desert Opus),” each marked with a double colon :: — along with white space that stretches across lacunae of indented fragments, the collection’s signature punctuation—and a right-justified italicized prefatory poem. Part one is relationship-heavy, the speaker lost in that sensation of being with a beloved; however, we quickly get the sense of foreboding, as she tells us in “Through the Branches,” “I promise to tell the truth. / The truth changes.” This transitions to part two and its “mathematics of withdrawal” as we see the dissolution of a romantic relationship and a speaker in the air removed from earth. Part two takes on aftermath as in this equation laid out in the section’s untitled proem: “*take one person from another / then subtract the one remaining;*” it’s an attempt to “find who one is” through a subtraction of who one is not “without analysis of occupation family or menu.” Part two features poems of death, loss, and even abuse. At the end, the speaker becomes, in a gesture of near apotheosis, winged. Sans religious diction, part three is a quasi-biblical venture into the Sonoran desert, described with a full taxonomy of its animals and plants—saguaro agave ocotillo and cholla flowers, vultures, red-toed dove, coyotes, cacti, mesquite, jackrabbit, gila monster, jojoba, cactus wren—to become a third, reborn person; the wind and expanse of the desert becomes a place of remorse and remembrance, of endangered species, a place “where never is allowed to accumulate.”

The author of three chapbooks and former Executive Director of Tucson Poetry Festival, Macarty grounds this philosophically-driven collection in the idea of “The One”: the poems act on the math of duality, of 1s and 0s, a Derrida land converging toward a singularity, as in “Two-way”:

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.

Via the opening dedication and closing notes, *The Minuses* begins and ends with a reference to “the One.” The book engages with this notion of minuses as subtraction, loss, missingness, but also the Buddhist idea of that which you gain by losing desire and distraction; it’s a subtraction that leads to self-understanding as in “Sway” where the reader is instructed by koan-like advice:

One has to wait not will
feel not talk
spend the day in sway to be who one is.

The diction of arithmetic abides everywhere in the air of the book “as if sky plus death equals rain,” and it’s at times a coldly zero-sum world where “one moment replaces another.” Duality pervades the poems as “the past increases within the present” and “any ruin-song taken far

enough / includes its contraries.” Macarty’s use of the colon reflects this motif of equations; indeed, in an interview with The Center for Literary Publishing, she said the following:

The colon points in both directions; (...) it acts like a bridge. Also, it acts like an equals sign. The colon tethers two separate elements, making a third thing. That third thing, embodying at least the possibility of an illustration or expression of unification—of twoness resolving to oneness (...) The poems also use the colon as it is used within mathematics—to express ratios and various formulas and equations to delineate, to denote, to mean, and to give name to.

The poet’s use of the colon as a marker beyond the conventional is apparent in poems like “An Equation Indivisible”:

: in the mothers’ wombs
an equation
: indivisible
: by both man and beast

Though the title speaks of subtraction, much of this book is expressed in terms of upward direction and sky, of “the mind on a roof.” Helicopters, airplanes, sky, roofs, flight, mountains all make appearances, and “to propel upward” seems a main thread of these poems, their speaker consumed by a “vertical desire.” In the notes the poet explains, “‘Vertical desire’ refers to spiritual progressions toward divine fulfillment. By contrast, ‘Horizontal’ is primarily oriented to the physical world.” Much of this is distanced, abstractly relational, as in “look down: up.” Nature serves as guide, as we see “the daisy asserting upward” and Macarty’s speaker questioning, “from what height (...) from what depth” in this

prepositional-between arena that breeds poem titles like “Without Is Guide,” “Given Distance from a Given Point,” “Between Earth and Sky,” and “At Gravity’s Feet.” It’s a world with an “eyeles ceiling,” a wounded place where “wind roams the empty shell of the house.” All this atmospheres a co-dependent speaker whose urge to reach out is an urge to reach within, confessing in “Reverse Shadow”: “I cannot say who you are without saying who I am.” In the same poem, she asks this bruised scene: “Why are we not in the dark the secret room learn- ing to be tender // Music plays whether we dance or not.” Later in her interview, Macarty theorizes, “The poem exists, arises with and between the poet and the reader; the poem could be thought of as the meeting bridge.” Flannery O’Connor, drawing from Pierre Chardin, told us every- thing that rises must converge, and in the Sonoran Desert, described with replete taxonomical detail covering its flora and fauna, Macarty gives us a persona that sends herself “into the desert to become a third person.” If, as Don Paterson tells readers in his tome-length new reflection on the very nature of a poem’s exigency, “silence is the space in which the poem makes its large echoes,” this book is humming with desert silence, and forcefully compelling in its echoic impact.