

*In this issue, we present a feature that includes craft essays about and reviews of anthologies.*

EMILY PÉREZ and NANCY REDDY

## Channeling the Conversation into an Anthology about Motherhood: A Craft Essay

*The Long Devotion: Poets Writing Motherhood.* Eds. Emily Pérez and Nancy Reddy. University of Georgia Press, 2022. 248 pp. \$26.95 (paper).

When our own children were born, in the years between 2010 and 2015, we both sought models for how to write about this wondrous, challenging new stage of life. Even though poets like Sharon Olds, Toi Derricotte, and Lucille Clifton had published poems about motherhood, we were surrounded by implicit and explicit messages that motherhood and serious writing did not mix.

First, there was the challenge of resources—how to have enough time, energy, money, and space to devote to another being and to one’s art? Second, there was the challenge of public perception. In a 2016 essay for *VIDA* about her book *Hundred-Year Wave* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2016), Rachel Richardson recounted the story of her program director warning her away from writing about mothering, telling her, “You’re a good poet. You wrote a good book. You’ll be fine as long as you don’t start writing mommy poems.”

Fortunately, poets of parenthood persisted. In the early twenty-first century, work about all kinds of parenthood started to appear regularly in journals and collections. A new realm of fatherhood poetry—one that investigated caretaking instead of traditional masculinity—became easier to find. (For more on fatherhood poetry, see Emily Pérez’s article in the *Georgia Review*, Spring 2021, “Harder and Better: The New Masculinity of Fatherhood Poetry.”) Work by nonbinary parents became more visible (see Krys Malcolm Belc’s *The Natural Mother of the Child* [Counterpoint, 2021]). Furthermore, motherhood poems started to

push against the previous boundaries of the discourse, including subjects not usually discussed in poetry. There were poems about money—how to afford kids?—and the tension between ambition and caretaking. Poets brought readers into the birthing room and the world of bodily fluids that followed.

We rode that wave into an early-Thursday-morning 2018 AWP Tampa panel, “Writing Motherhood: Difficulty, Ambivalence, and Joy.” Despite the early hour, the room was packed. The panelists—Carolina Ebeid, Chanda Feldman, Chelsea Rathburn, and us—read poems about and discussed postpartum depression, parenting a child with autism, finding oneself in a lineage of Black artist mothers, the tension between creating art and parenting children, and postpregnancy bodies. The air felt charged with recognition and possibility. In the days that followed, people continued to approach us, asking that we further the conversation, that we post resources online, that we create an anthology. By Saturday night, we’d convinced ourselves that we could and would create an anthology of motherhood poetry that spoke specifically to our time.

This was an undertaking we knew next to nothing about. While we had each published books of poetry, neither one of us had experience with an anthology. Perhaps even more importantly, we hardly knew each other. We must have recognized a certain common drive, but was it enough on which to base a multiyear commitment? Together, over the next few years, we learned much about crafting an anthology. We established themes, solicited both poems and prose, pitched to presses, secured permissions, wrote section introductions and writing prompts, and we proofread, proofread, proofread. But the key lesson was not about technical details: it was about curating a collection rich and varied in its contributors’ voices, stories, and styles. To achieve that, we needed to build community, both on and off the page.

Post-Tampa email exchanges reveal how naive we were: “What’s next for us? Gathering our dream list of poets? Figuring out categories we want covered and also gathering our dream list of poets? I see a Google doc in our future!” That Google document would turn into hundreds; the initial folder of “poems we loved,” including ones by our original AWP presenters, would turn into a nest of folders multiple layers deep.

When we first reached out to those dream poets, many said both “Yes!” and “I wish I’d had a book like this when I became a parent.” This reassured us the book would meet a previously unmet need, that there were others who wanted to hear this conversation.

To us children of the mixtape-infused ’80s, a thematic approach to the book’s organization seemed better than chronological or alphabetical ordering. The first section, “Difficulty, Ambivalence, and Joy,” came easily. Sharing the title of the AWP panel, it set the stage for the range of tones we wanted the book to encompass. “The Body and Brain,” which we originally envisioned as a place to take on the physicality of caretaking, expanded to discuss health, domestic violence, and giving birth. We had poems about how mothering helps people see racism, environmentalism, and war anew—as well as reacquaints them with Earth’s beauty. These poems became “In the World.” Finally, “Transitions,” first conceived of as about older children, became a section about all kinds of transitions, and a place where some of the book’s most experimental writing appears, leaving behind traditional modes of meaning-making. These categories evolved as we gathered new poems, but from the start, having these four groups gave us a way to think about the kinds of themes we wanted the book to address.

More essential than themes were the voices we wanted the book to include. We sought voices of Black and Indigenous poets and other poets of color; poets who identified as members of queer, trans, non-binary, and disability communities; poets who navigated their own illnesses as well as their children’s. As part of the continuum of motherhood, we wanted work by poets who dealt with infertility, abortion, or miscarriage, or decided not to have kids; poets who used IVF, established blended families, adopted, or fostered children; poets with children of all ages. Previous motherhood anthologies had centered cisgender white women in heterosexual marriages, women who had physically birthed healthy babies. The experience of motherhood is far more varied, and we wanted our anthology to represent the world we live in.

Despite our conscious commitment, in the early drafts we fell short. A potential contributor asked that we include even more racial and ethnic diversity. An outside reader for the press asked that we include more about paid labor and motherhood. Receiving feedback at a stage

when it was still possible to make significant revisions was crucial; we recommend that all would-be editors seek at least one round of early critique. These critiques motivated us to conduct an internal audit, examining what we'd included, overrepresented, and missed. When we found gaps, we searched journals and anthologies, and asked contributors for recommendations.

For example, we first asked Clarissa Mendiola for the poem "Untitled or Nameless or Grieving a Life Not Lived," about miscarriage. In our correspondence, she also sent us a beautiful set of unpublished poems. When we later realized that the book already had lots of grief and needed more joy, we instead took "Nearly There," a poem about visiting Guam with her child and feeling a sense of home: "This is a brown child's topography." Similarly, we'd long been fans of Jasmine Mendez and wanted her voice on infertility. When the poem and essay we'd hoped to include were too expensive to acquire, we reached out to her again, and she was incredibly generous, sending us other poetry about infertility and medical interventions. Furthermore, she sent us a different essay, which we published. "More, More" presents an important perspective on the embodied experience of parenting with disability, something our book lacked. Contributors pointed us toward additional poets and poems we hadn't read. In August 2020, we received an email from Camille Dungy urging us to read Krista Franklin's "Extrapolating Motherhood," which she called "the best non mother motherhood poem I've ever read."

We sought aesthetic diversity—poems that operated in different ways on the page, poems with a variety of diction and syntax, pieces that would be considered formal and informal, traditional and experimental, visual and aural. Kiki Petrosino's villanelle and Joyelle McSweeney's sestina bump up against Lauren Haldeman's poetry comic and Vanessa Angélica Villarreal's poem designed on an x- and y- axis. Approaches range from the deeply personal, realist "My Mother Bathes Me after I Give Birth" by Kwoya Fagin Maples to the surreal, speculative scenarios in "A Series of Short Stories or Propositions" by 신 선 영 Sun Yung Shin. An essay poem by Rachel Zucker follows a poem in chapters by Carolina Ebeid and a one-sentence lyric by Khadijah Queen. Just as there is no single body that can encompass the experience of motherhood, there is no aesthetic that will resonate with all readers.

We wanted readers to find comfort in aesthetics they loved and to be pushed and inspired by aesthetics that felt new.

We originally envisioned ending each section of the book with craft essays on writing and mothering, and we solicited those from our contributors. While some essays we received described the writing process and strategies that enabled writing while mothering, others went in thematic directions. Poets explored their inspirations, their concerns, politics, the earth, family life—going further than they could in a single poem. Once again, this diversity enriched the conversation.

Finally, we wanted our anthology to recognize a range of audiences and invite them into writing. We'd envisioned mothers and nonmothers, beginning and continuing writers, readers accustomed and unaccustomed to poetry. Given the many demands on their energy, caregivers often deprioritize creativity, so we wanted to demonstrate that writing is something you can enter, pause, and reenter. To that end, some of our essays directly address how to write when one has very little time. Melissa Stephenson's "Confetti Time," Emari DiGiorgio's "Words in the Air: On Audio Drafting," and Molly Spencer's "I Stop Writing the Poem: On Motherhood and the Writing Life" all provide strategies. The book also includes writing prompts. Some give starting points and others more nuanced strategies for continuing work in progress. Finally, our original section introductions only contextualized the theme of each section, but we realized they could also gloss some content to make it more accessible to audiences new to poetry.

Though we knew we could not represent every unique identity, experience, or aesthetic, it was our hope that every reader of the anthology would be able to see some part of themselves reflected inside, as well as find writing that illuminated something new. Our book is limited by space, time, and the boundaries of our knowledge at the time of publication. Since then, we have found gorgeous, searing poems on motherhood almost every day. Perhaps you readers of this essay can take up the work to further widen and deepen the field.

One conclusion we've reached is that partnership was crucial. A piece of advice to anyone who wishes to coedit: find someone with a similar work ethic so that the work feels equal. And though we are both hardworking, deadline-oriented people, life sometimes causes delays. Did we mention we both have full-time jobs and kids? Here's a

second piece of advice: find someone willing to grant you grace, and be gracious in return. We were lucky to have complementary strengths (as well as a shared weakness for overwriting). We quickly learned who could do which thing more efficiently, and we both volunteered for drudge work. We communicated openly and honestly, apologized when necessary, and demonstrated gratitude. These practices fueled a healthy partnership.

Our working strategy involved many shared folders; thousands of emails; monthly to-do lists with short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals; regular phone calls; and a willingness to do things that scared us. So much of the work involved reaching out to strangers and asking them for something—advice, a poem, permissions. “The worst they can say is no,” was our motivator to hit “send” on each email.

Our collaborators extended through and beyond the writing community. People who had edited anthologies were kind enough to explain their processes. Poets whose work we solicited recommended other poets. Editors of presses helped us understand what makes an anthology attractive to or feasible for a press. A sibling with an MBA helped us to develop the marketing portion of the book proposal and to pare down our overly flowery pitch language. Nonwriter friends helped us figure out a good organizing strategy for the book. Caregivers need community, and as we tended to this book, encouragement and advice from friends, family, and other writers strengthened the book’s content in addition to strengthening those networks.

An amazing thing has occurred since the book came into the world. With looser pandemic restrictions around travel and gatherings, we have been able to host group readings, some in person and some online. In 2022 at AWP Philadelphia, the book officially launched. Eleven of our contributors gathered at a local bookstore. Old friends reunited and new connections sparked. Each poet read their own piece and a piece by somebody else. Yes, there were tears and goosebumps and laughter. The AWP Tampa conversation that had solidified into a book took to the air again, in the form of twenty-two poems filling the room with recognition and possibility.

GARY JACKSON

## How to Be Your Own Superhero: Speculation and Black Imagination (A Craft Essay)

*The Future of Black: Afrofuturism, Black Comics, and Superhero Poetry.* Eds. Len Lawson, Cynthia Manick, and Gary Jackson. Blair, 2021. 234 pp. \$20.95 (paper).

As a graduate student stumbling headfirst into the poetic traditions and legacies I would soon inherit, I first encountered Lucille Clifton's 1993 poetry collection, *The Book of Light*—specifically, four poems that comprise her “Superman suite,” directly addressing that whitest of superheroes. Those poems, one of my earliest introductions to Afrofuturism, became the blueprint for an aesthetic I still adhere to today. Each poem brings Superman directly into the speaker's world. Take, for example, these lines from “final note to clark,” where the speaker removes Superman from his comfortable comic book pages:

they had it wrong,  
the old comics.  
you are only clark kent  
after all [. . .]  
how you must have wondered  
to see me taking chances,  
dancing on the edge of words,  
pointing out the bad guys,  
dreaming your x-ray vision  
could see the beauty in me.  
what did I expect?

The speaker here, a real person (in the world of the poem, of course), describes the fictional superhero's inability (or unwillingness) to help her navigate real-world dangers. She counters this approach in the poem “note, passed to superman,” which seeks to empathize and humanize Superman while providing commentary on racial and gender discrimination:

i understand the cape,  
the leggings, the whole  
ball of wax.  
you can trust me,  
there is no planet stranger  
than the one i'm from.

Who better to identify with the idea that Superman must negotiate constant othering and engage in modes of assimilation by manipulating his outward appearance than Lucille Clifton (or, at least, a version of Clifton as the speaker), who once famously said “I am a black woman poet and I sound like one.” In directly engaging with Superman, she brings him to life and acknowledges his agency, revealing new insight about what he represents, from the subject position of a Black woman poet. Reading Clifton’s poems gave me explicit permission to explore intersections between Black life, speculation, and fantasy that actively resist a narrow depiction of Blackness. This aesthetic has guided me throughout all my creative and editorial work, including a recent anthology I was invited to coedit.

My first book, *Missing You, Metropolis* (Graywolf, 2010), attempts to do what Clifton deftly executes in her four Superman poems. I wanted to recontextualize what superheroes represent and to examine their humanity from the subject position of a young Black man growing up in the conservative Midwest, while also exploring other themes such as escapism and self-destruction. Whether I was conscious of it or not, I was working out my own poetic aesthetics in that book, and even my very identity. Growing up as a Black nerd in Topeka, Kansas, in the '80s and '90s, I heard from others that I was either not Black enough or too Black—sometimes, to my bewilderment, simultaneously—depending on the people I was around or the circumstances of my surroundings. My poetry became an outlet for negotiating my intersectional identity in relation to an assumed monolithic Black identity.

The idea that there is a universally agreed-upon definition of Blackness or Black culture is something with which many Black writers contend. Consider this excerpt in *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), a collection of essays critically analyzing comics, edited by Frances



Gateward and John Jennings. In their introduction titled “The Sweeter the Christmas,” they acknowledge: “The Black image has had a very troubled history in the United States. . . . [T]his collection seeks to investigate those histories and where those narratives overlap, create conflicts, and accent each other. The various explorations of Black identity in this volume are, again, an attempt to recontextualize the images connected to the Black body and its depictions in the comics medium while also offering alternative methodologies of dislodging Blackness as a monolithic identity.” Blackness is perpetually defined and redefined in this country, primarily by white America, usually based on an assumed set of general characteristics and traits. Those criteria are then used to evaluate individuals: *You are too Black. You are not Black enough.* Gateward and Jennings’s collection examines many narratives of Black life through the critical lens of a multitude of Black scholars who are not governed by a singular mode of Blackness. As someone who often writes poems that (I hope!) also resist easy categorization under some monolithic Black identity, I share their desire to “dislodge” and disrupt that generalized (and essentializing) fabrication. Of course, as one writer, I can only do so much. My work shouldn’t be viewed as representative of Black nerd poetry or superhero poetry or speculative poetry or Afrofuturistic poetry. As one writer, I can offer my take on those intersectional cross sections of culture, but how much more inclusive and fun would it be to gather a community of writers who have all dipped into various modes of pop culture and speculation?

So in spring 2019, when Len Lawson pitched me his idea about coediting an anthology about Afrofuturism and superhero poetry, with himself and Cynthia Manick, I immediately signed on. And in November 2021, Blair Press published *The Future of Black: Afrofuturism, Black Comics, and Superhero Poetry*.

As an editor, I wanted poems that celebrate a range of voices but also showcase a range of aesthetics. Similar to disrupting a monolithic Black identity, I also wanted to stretch thin the notion of a Black Aesthetic, which I’m heavily borrowing from Evie Shockley’s definition of the term. In her introduction to *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (University of Iowa Press, 2011), she says: “The Black Aesthetic suggests, among other things, a

set of characteristics of black art—poetry, in this case—that are said to be derived organically from African and African diasporic cultures and yet, paradoxically, must often be imposed upon African American poets.” Instead of a wide range of approaches to art, the Black Aesthetic is a codified set of assumed rules that results in a very familiar and reductive refrain under the guise of aesthetic critique: *Your work is too Black. Your work is not Black enough.* Similar to monolithic Black identity, the Black Aesthetic originates from the myth that all people of African descent share certain values, knowledge bases, and cultural understandings that should be adhered to in their art. Of course, this is not true, yet it’s surprising how many popular depictions (and critiques) of Black culture seem rooted in these narrow definitions.

Afrofuturism also resists standard categorization. Though many consider it to be “Black science fiction and fantasy,” even that label falls short. Scholars and writers such as Alondra Nelson, Mark Dery, Sheree Renée Thomas, and Nnedi Okorafor have created varying definitions of Afrofuturism (or Africanfuturism, as Okorafor prefers), though most agree that the term exists somewhere in the intersection of African diasporic culture and speculative worlds (specifically technology, but this, too, seems overly limiting). I am not much interested in which label fits best. Even Clifton’s Superman poems would only partially fit: Superman may be an imaginary character, but the speaker and the world embodied in those poems are not rooted in fantasy or science fiction. There are poems in the anthology that speculate on the ghost of Frederick Douglass, an alternative ending for *Queen & Slim*, Sun Ra speaking to Gucci Mane, the costs of being your own superhero and beating cancer, and the experiences of watching Miles Morales on the silver screen with your children, and playing *Grand Theft Auto III*. The anthology also spotlights poems like Douglas Kearney’s “I Imagine I Been Science Fiction Always,” which features a speaker reckoning his very existence against both natural and unnatural forces, making explicit the parallel between the raced body and supernatural body horror (aka Frankenstein): “Was I a simple machine—I’d have more leverage—more pull—I could screw with their theirness better—I could make it plain,” the speaker says, and “I don’t even know if what any of them put on me is flesh // But I know it sure as shit isn’t skin.” Other poems,

like Tracy K. Smith's "My God, It's Full of Stars," examine the cosmos through the mix of artifice and reality in the iconography of sci-fi films like *The Omega Man* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Smith juxtaposes pop culture with her father's work on the Hubble Telescope and those initial captured images "so brutal and alive it seemed to comprehend us back." These poems all incorporate aspects of Afrofuturism, and they all engage in varying degrees of world building and speculation, rooted in the past, present, and future, sometimes featuring the uncanny, other times the everyday. They don't all require fantasy or science fiction as necessary components, but they are all fueled by Black imagination. For me, that's enough. I want the tent to be as wide and open as possible.

Another aim of mine as an editor was to provide space for Black poets to explore other modes and speech acts about subjects beyond this country's existential crisis with race, racial violence, and traumatic history. While they are certainly subjects worth exploring in poetry, the pressure for Black writers to constantly confront them in their craft can feel limiting. As an editor, I wanted to relieve a little of that pressure for other writers in the same way I have for myself. I wanted to give them an opportunity to write Black joy if they desired, or any emotive prerogative of their choosing. I wanted to remind the world that Black poets are not here only to perform grief and trauma. I wanted Afrofuturism to be the umbrella that our poems could gather under.

"Blackness is a medium that Black people of the world have inherited and have added on to as the story has unfolded through history," Gateward and Jennings argue. That story, like us, is multifaceted and far more nuanced and complex than any one poetic trajectory or movement can capture, even the label Afrofuturism. The poems within *The Future of Black* represent a range of Black aesthetics instead of a singular one. To quote Evie Shockley's own definition of widening Black aesthetics, these poems represent a "a multifarious, contingent, nondelimited complex of strategies that African American writers may use to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing." I can only hope that my desire to disrupt homogenous notions of Blackness and the Black Aesthetic is reflected in the book. It's a joy to feature some of the many writers who have been doing

this work for years, as well as those who are just now beginning their careers. As always, we write ourselves into our own futures, heavenly and brutal, as distant as Superman's Metropolis, Sun Ra's Saturn, or another universe entirely, and with a breath, you can go anywhere, the way only language knows how.

## The Aesthetics of Legibility: How to Ethically Dramatize the Trans\* Experience

*The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays*. Eds. Leanna Keyes, Lindsey Mantoan, and Angela Farr Schiller. Bloomsbury, 2021. 456 pp. \$34.95 (paper).

I have long considered the phrase “trans theater” redundant because theater’s fundamental premise is inherently trans. Or put another way, if tautologies irritate you: when an individual steps onstage, they unquestionably become another iteration of themselves. For me, “suspension of disbelief,” the greatest of theatrical maxims, serves as a utopian model for the collective emotional investment we should all have in others achieving the bodily experience of their most deeply felt selves.

These are not thoughts I invoke glibly or without vested interest. Having transitioned within my New York City theater community over more than ten years, I understand the necessity and value of carving out a space to showcase the theatrical contributions and visions of trans-identified artists, whose work has been too often neglected, appropriated, and undersung. For the last several years, I’ve taught a course at New York University called “Approaching Legibility: Trans\*-Inflected Theatre and Its Potentials.” I created the class when there was no textbook to model my endeavor after, only my personal experiences, alongside PDFs or scratchy performance footage shared with me by other trans playwrights and performance makers, including Sylvan Oswald, Mashuq Mushtaq Deen, Cecilia Gentili, and Becca Blackwell. I rounded my syllabus out with excerpts from theoretical texts including *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (AK Press, second edition, 2015) and *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (MIT Press, 2017). Still, I knew my drama students were hungry for plays about these subjects. And I was too.

*The Methuen Drama Book of Trans Plays*, a 2021 anthology edited by Leanna Keyes, Lindsey Mantoan, and Angela Farr Schiller, is precisely what my students and I had hoped for. With these eight plays, each accompanied by an intelligent introduction, the collection high-

lights how trans writers play with time in order to shed light on—and undermine—the strictures of white Western heteronormativity. In their opening essay “In a Trans Time and Space,” the editors suggest that “queer and trans temporalities eschew linearity in favor of backward folds woven together with leaps of futurity.” Core life phenomena like aging, memory, and life planning look and feel different for trans individuals, and sometimes this difference creates as much or more drama than any beef with a given interlocutor. While there are no fixed formal mandates for representing trans temporality, the editors explain that they prioritized ensuring that “trans people recognize themselves in the art.” In that sense, this anthology is more concerned with ethics than technique. The featured plays’ casting mandates ensure juicy, multidimensional roles for trans-identified individuals and insist that special care be taken not to retraumatize trans creators and spectators in the realization of these works. At the same time, unifying works around a moral agenda linked to the power of legibility—“Do trans people recognize themselves in the art?”—makes a reader like me wonder after the weirder, less graspable concoctions that didn’t make the cut.

Not that these plays are straight. Far from it. Take Azure D. Osborne-Lee’s *Crooked Parts*, which weaves together two episodes in the life of its hero, an aspiring writer named Freddy Clark. When we first meet Freddy, a Black pre-op trans man in his late twenties, he is visiting his family in an unidentified city in the American South to celebrate the birthday of his troubled younger brother, Stephen. The play toggles between 2013 and 1995, when Freddy was known by his family as Winifred. In a preface, the scholar Marquis Bey notes that the title refers to the crookedness of the play’s chronology and the protagonist’s gender. (Bey also notes the difficulties of describing the play, asking “Does one use ‘she’ pronouns for Winifred when discussing *Crooked Parts* or does one project Freddy’s ‘he’ pronouns back into the past, giving the child Freddy a kind of gendered constancy?”) In my mind, “crooked parts” also references the challenge and charge of hair: Freddy’s childhood is marked by tension with his mother Angela over how to wear his; as a Black student new to a predominately white school, he must shoulder the racism of his peers’ put-downs, while attempting to protect his mother, who styles his hair and is thus also implicated by their cruelty.

In both years, Freddy struggles to break free of her maternal grip, while Angela grapples with his need for independence, which she perceives as a slight.

Osborne-Lee deftly depicts familial microaggressions, including deadnaming, with nuance and empathy for Freddy's family's struggles to reconcile their memories of Winifred with the reality of Freddy. Consider this short scene at the top of the play:

FREDDY: . . . I'm going up to bed now, but let's have birthday breakfast in the morning, okay? My treat!

STEPHEN: Okay. Sounds good, sis!

FREDDY: Bro.

STEPHEN: What?

FREDDY: I'm your brother, Stephen. Bro.

STEPHEN: Oh. Right. Sorry.

FREDDY: Don't forget. Goodnight.

STEPHEN: Goodnight.

As Stephen prepares a snack, an exhausted Freddy disrobes, sighing with relief as he removes his compression garment. But before he can get too comfortable, Stephen is at the door again, saying, "Hey, bro . . . uh . . . I made us some nachos. I thought you might be hungry." Freddy makes a place for Stephen in his bed, pulling the comforter up around his unbound chest. It's a remarkable scene, tentative and full of delicate negotiation. We see Stephen apologize for his error and gain a better understanding of the many labors Freddy must perform in order to have his masculinity affirmed. The play steadily builds toward a similarly tender meeting between Winifred and Freddy, who advise and console each other. Winifred compliments Freddy's nascent mustache, while Freddy reminds the child he once was of her tenacity in the face of white supremacist bullying.

The "prodigal son returns home" narrative also drives MJ Kaufman's *Sagittarius Ponderosa*. A white genderqueer named Archer, in the throes of a subdued quarterlife crisis, makes love to a stranger beneath a four-hundred-year-old ponderosa pine. Meanwhile, Archer's father's health declines and his feisty grandmother plots to find him a suitable marriage partner. As in *Crooked Parts*, the family struggles to understand

his gender, epitomized by Kaufman's character description "Archer to himself, Angela to his family." But that doesn't mean Archer goes completely unheard. Proximity to his queer child inspires Archer's father, Pops, to change his name before he dies—though he chalks it up to the recommendation of his doctor—in a humorous and beautiful ceremony in the family's kitchen. The ever-present tree, nestled in the expanse of a great forest, serves to remind us that the human life span is brief and that civil decorum can become arbitrary, disconnected from seasonal rhythms of shedding and regrowth.

Kaufman (whose play *Association of Controlled Dreamers* was the first drama feature in *The Cincinnati Review*, in 2018) repeatedly rebuffs the popular notion that we ascend into adulthood only to decline in old age. While Archer's sweet grandmother fails to secure her grandson a steady beau, she finds one for herself. In one of the play's more ingenious twists, Peterson, her boyfriend at the nursing home, is played by a puppet moved by Pops. When Pops passes away, Peterson takes his place at the family table, but Pops, the faithful puppeteer, is never far away. The family itself takes a new shape, yet the ecosystem of familial love remains intact, strengthening itself through the acceptance of grief and an openness to change.

Mashuq Mushtaq Deen's *The Betterment Society* situates itself in a far more dystopian environment. In Deen's brutal comedy, three women—Gertie, Lynette, and Doreen—live atop a mountain together, occasionally traveling into town for supplies that they trade limbs to procure. When Lynette reveals that she is pregnant, the trio of women must collectively determine their capacity to care for one more creature while they already live in precarity. In anticipation of the baby, the optimistic Doreen begins to sew a doll, whom she names Lil'ope. The curious rag doll comes to life through Doreen's powerful imagination; Deen describes Lil'ope as "a magical creature of possibility" and instructs that the doll be played by three or more masked dancers who move in unison. With their help, Doreen implores spectators to consider that they are not in a theater but a church and, if they agree, to join her in song. It's a strangely earnest proposition—and a gamble, as Deen has written two different endings to accommodate the audience's potential response. The juxtaposition of bluntly queer feminist content and liturgical dance lends Doreen's cry for God an air of radicalism. In fact, it



made me think of the God I imagined as a child: not a policing, vengeful deity but the immaterial energy of pure benevolence.

Many protagonists of these plays linger in the residues of their former incarnations and encounters, so it seems inevitable that reading the collection would fill me with nostalgia for my own former selves—ones less jaded, less fixed, less formed. j. chavez's *how to clean your room (and remember all your trauma)* features just such an open lead character, adorable and dangerous in their exuberance. In the play, Spencer, a nonbinary person of color, cleans their room, sorting ordinary objects that evoke painful memories. At the top of Cycle 1—the play is composed of two “cycles” rather than traditional “acts”—a chorus announces:

Spencer enters  
they are in need of meds  
and a hug

Despite the tendercore vibes of the pronouncement, I was disarmed by the acute honesty of the description; nearing forty, I enter my own messy apartment many nights feeling the same set of needs.

The play moves through Spencer's undergraduate years, portraying a series of grungy encounters with friends, interspersed with renditions of poems Spencer has collected in a book they eventually will disseminate to their family and peers. At an open mic, Spencer reads one of these poems:

um, this next one is called  
my actions  
  
“I am so tired  
I am so exhausted  
I am so lost  
  
my actions  
and decisions  
have consequences  
I made my bed  
so I slept in it  
  
that nap was a mistake”

Here, pure pathos is alleviated by wry self-awareness. Spencer has made many mistakes. They drink too much, struggle to manage their educational workload, develop codependent relationships, and smother their kin with neediness. *how to clean your room* has the unabashed moodiness of an emo band's first EP. That specific musicality is achieved through a number of strategies. Scenes fade in and out, often beginning in medias res or ending without resolution. Dialogues are framed like numbered tracks by the aforementioned Chorus, which narrates in a mixture of fragmented observations and phrases stolen from Spencer's notebook:

Nine.

"I just want him to respond . . ."

Al appears

he and Spencer can't see one another

there's distance

Spencer, meanwhile, manically narrates their own life, making every moment a high-stakes confessional. When Al doesn't answer their call, for example, Spencer says,

Oh god, he's mad

He's mad at me, I know he's mad

I'm mad

I'm pissed

at myself

Jesus, of course he doesn't want to fucking talk to me

I wouldn't even want to, fuck

I can't believe I lied to him . . .

And so forth. Nothing much happens in *how to clean your room*: Spencer decides to stay home rather than go out drinking with friends; their room becomes marginally cleaner. Yet the work is gripping. Plays are an indispensable cultural technology in part because of their ability to slow climactic violences down by isolating the banal traumas that produce discord. I suppose what makes this text effective is that every moment with it was one in which I actively chose peace and curiosity over self-loathing and regret.

If I wished for anything else from this anthology, it would be a little more mess and disagreement within its pages. With the exception of a wonderful conversation between Mashuq Mushtaq Deen and his friend Stephanie Hsu, who discuss, among other things, the tense alliance between arts and academia, the book primarily relies on understanding plays through theory, and that theory often reads as distanced and cool. As a teacher who regularly leans into this teaching model with varying degrees of success, I couldn't help but wonder if other complements to the plays might have more viscerally evoked the strategies trans people use to make art, byproducts of the skills they develop in order to survive.

## When Riders Write

*Horse Girls: Recovering, Aspiring, and Devoted Riders Redefine the Iconic Bond.* Ed. Halimah Marcus. Harper Perennial, 2021. 304 pp. \$17.00 (paper).

Being a horse girl isn't easy.

First, there are the stereotypes, which change with age. As a school-girl, she keeps her hair in a ponytail, wears riding boots to school, and "canters" around the track alone for the one-mile run. Alone. In her room hang ribbons she's earned at horse shows. On her shelves are Marguerite Henry books and rows of Breyer model horses. Then the teenager, still wearing the ponytail and boots, but now posting a selfie with her horse, her lips brushing his muzzle. Then, later, the woman in her thirties, newly financially stable, trying to fit horses back into her life now that she signs the farrier's checks herself. Her peers are getting married, or at least dating, but she spends her time on horse-showsonline.com, not Tinder. Just as well.

In the real world, horse girls must contend with real concerns about class, race, and identity. Horses are a rich woman's game. The average member of the United States Equestrian Federation, or USEF, an organization that is 85 percent female, has a net worth of nearly \$1 million. Her home value is \$600,000, and about a quarter of the members own two or more homes. In a 2012 *Slate* article, Mary Mycio, herself a horse girl, calls the equestriennes in an issue of *Town and Country* "billionaire princesses," writing, "Full disclosure: I own a horse, but I am not a billionaire princess." Horse girls often wear the tack (sorry) of popularity: white, wealthy, cisgender, and heterosexual.

Halimah Marcus's 2021 essay anthology *Horse Girls* deals with both stereotypes and the larger issues they can signal. In it, fourteen writer-riders—an aural cognate whose significance isn't lost on Marcus, and one she expands upon in her introduction—dissect their experiences with horses. Some have only touched a horse for a few hours. Others have owned multiple horses. Still others had to wait for womanhood to find themselves on horseback. All identify or once identified as

female. All share a love for horses, even if it's been years since their hips hit a saddle. *Horse Girls* is a love letter to the bond between horses and women, but it illustrates that bond without sentimentality, each essay constructing the complexity of that bond using the nonfiction tools of real-life scene and narrator reflection, both the narrative "eye" and narrative "I."

My own full disclosure? I'm exactly what you might imagine when picturing a horse girl grown up. Like Mary Mycio, I own a horse and am, regrettably, not a billionaire princess. I am white, with dirt beneath unmanicured nails and long hair that sometimes has hay in it; I am slender enough to squeeze into my jodhpurs from adolescence. Even when surrounded by women with trust funds, my whiteness, heterosexuality, and cisgenderedness have always let me feel comfortable in horsey spaces.

Of course, not all horse girls look and live like me. *Horse Girls* shines in including an array of perspectives. Of its fourteen essays, half are by Black, Indigenous, Latinx, multiracial, or queer writers. About 90 percent of USEF members are white, making these identities in *Horse Girls* ones that are underrepresented in barn aisles, so their presence in this anthology is a relief. Many of *Horse Girls*'s essays deal with the challenges of not fitting in. Being a horse girl is challenging enough. Being, say, a Black barrel racer in Texas, as Sarah Enelow-Snyder writes about in "A Racer without a Pedigree," is harder. Competing against "contestants with smooth blond hair, glittery pink eyeshadow, and confident smiles," she struggles to find her place, both in the winners' circle and in herself. Enelow-Snyder recounts her humiliations and discomfort in clear prose that borders on flatness. That's fine by me. In one scene, Enelow-Snyder describes a supposed (white) friend yanking her hair, "harder and harder, until I thought she was going to rip hair from my scalp." Scenes like that don't need to be steeped in metaphor. They're enough on their own, and there are plenty of them in this essay. While each essay in *Horse Girls* tackles different themes, the reins (so sorry) holding them together are the same: no matter how uncomfortable these women have been made to feel in horsey spaces, on the page, they soar.

Finding connection, escape, and solace on horseback is a tale told over and over again in these pages. Braudie Blais-Billie writes, "in our

family . . . horses are how we survive.” As a half-Seminole, half-French Canadian woman, Blais-Billie spent her girlhood trying to fit into two worlds and never succeeding. Nur Nasreen Ibrahim can forget about her “horselike nose” and “thin hair” in the horse-filled village of Nathiagali, five hundred kilometers from her home in Lahore, Pakistan. Alex Marzano-Lesnevich, who is trans, writes of their childhood riding lessons, “I found what I longed for every time Carefree broke free of the trot, shrugged off my cautious reins, and galloped. . . . Carefree, I loved.” After a section break, Marzano-Lesnevich time travels. “The year is 1816, and a tall girl named Sarah Dowling who refuses—scandalously—to wear a dress comes knocking at the door of Patience White.” This is a summary of the opening to the 1969 lesbian novel *Patience and Sarah* by Alma Routsong. Marzano-Lesnevich breaks up their essay with research into nineteenth-century trans characters, both real and fictional. Horses and the nineteenth-century American frontier are laminated into a symbol of freedom—freedom from the body, from gender, from self. In self-aware prose, Marzano-Lesnevich uses history to crack their own past open, the breaks in linear plot providing insight into their sense of identity: “*If I’d known back then*, is what I think every time I discover such a story. *If I’d known. If only I’d known.*”

Breaking a linear plotline is nothing new, especially for narratives of trauma and identity, and some of the essays in *Horse Girls* buck (again, sorry) convention, becoming lyric essays that defy genre expectations. Carmen Maria Machado’s “Horse Girl: An Inquiry” is the most formally inventive essay in the collection. In it, she writes brief titled vignettes that characterize a girlhood marked by difference: “Fat. (Though I wasn’t, not really, not yet.) Queer. (I didn’t know I was, but maybe they knew?) Latinx. (Despite a robust nonwhite tradition of horseback riding . . .).” Each vignette speaks to the others, creating a dizzying, beautiful cathedral window of horse-worship in which the animal is revealed as a totem of beauty and belonging, two qualities the adolescent Machado did not feel she had. The essay ends in a series of rapid-fire questions, allowing Machado to interview herself. Each Q & A allows Machado to shift subjects without transition, moving associatively rather than linearly. The effect is relentless, as if the essay’s narrator were digging into herself until she arrives at an answer

to the question that seems to have sparked the entire essay: “What Were Horses to Me?” The answer? “A beauty that could be borrowed.”

In another essay that aims to answer questions, “I Don’t Love Horses,” T Kira Madden braids an investigation of a 1991 movie familiar to any self-respecting horse girl, *Wild Hearts Can’t Be Broken*, with an exploration of her own horsey past and present. Among other questions, she explores the idea that the horse does all the work—a misconception common to nonriders. Having been on two state-park trail rides on mounts so sedate they might as well have been sofas, some people conclude, “All you’re doing is sitting there.” Most equestrians roll their eyes and change the subject, but Madden centers her essay on that question. She’s interested in the emotional labor of horses, not just the physicality that passes, electric, between horse and rider. Because, as she says, “everyone knows horses are therapy,” Madden concludes: “Yes. . . . The horse does all the work.” Marcus opens the book with Madden’s essay, but she is far from the only writer-rider in this book for whom horses provide solace. On his long back, the horse carries more than his human’s physical weight. He holds hopes, sorrows, and fears and transmutes them into motion. Into partnership. In the thirteen essays that follow Madden’s, the horse becomes more than a horse.

In “Daredevils,” Maggie Shipstead resists the popular idea, rooted in Sigmund and Anna Freud’s work, that horses symbolize sex, especially for girls. Shipstead writes,

The minds of girls are treated . . . [as] gauzy pink zones of confusion where the desire to ride a horse is indistinguishable from wanting to have sex with a man.

I blame Freud.

Though seeing Freud in an essay makes me roll my eyes, in “Daredevils” it’s a necessary reference. The conflation of horseback riding, power, and sex is so common (note that the trappings of S & M dungeons look much like a tack room in a stable) that Shipstead needs to trace it back to its roots. On a horse, Shipstead enjoys not domination but connection, a feedback loop that comes from the physical closeness necessary to ride. Horses help Shipstead face her anxieties, but not in a simple exchange of power. Instead, horses become the site of epiphany,

which is, according to Shipstead, both the goal and bane of beginning fiction writers. In real life, she explains, epiphanies unfold slowly. In an example of content-becoming-form, Shipstead's entire essay enacts this process. The essay opens with the narrator remembering herself at age five, fearing a visit to Niagara Falls. It ends with a narrator who, some thirty years later, travels to Botswana for a "horseback safari" that requires the rider to "be able to gallop out of danger." Horses are the catalyst for this slow transformation. For Shipstead, and for most women who ride, riding is a complex relationship. On horseback, we horse girls borrow power—or courage, or freedom, or whatever it is that we lack. If we're lucky, we retain a little of it once both feet are back on the ground.

Many essays in *Horse Girls* cover a lot of ground. In recounting an entire life with horses, or a distant past life with horses, some pieces end up without enough flesh-and-blood horses on the page. Abstract horses don't elicit the same emotional response as real ones rendered in vivid sensory detail. The anthology is at its best when the pages are filled with horse breath, hay-tinged and warm. Take this passage from Rosebud Ben-Oni's "We Aren't Close to Anywhere," which might be my favorite essay from this anthology: "I laid my head against his still-damp coat. I could hear him breathing. I still do. I will always remember that deep chamber of being, the rising and falling of him. I left part of myself there, within him, in that soft, baked earth of an eye, his wet terra-cotta eye . . ." Ben-Oni's lyric travelogue of a week spent on horseback in Iceland riding a stallion named Odin also narrates her return to her own body. Chronic illness robbed her of trust in her physical form; a horse returned that trust. Once she climbs on horseback, the prose unravels into single-sentence paragraphs.

For a moment I was in the suspension of a horse's breath.

Somewhere, the restless ghost quieted her anxious desire to make herself known, that parts of my old self were still *here*.

Somewhere, she wrestled herself into an idea of just *becoming* by *being*.

The sentences breathe along with the silent horse and rider, mimicking the shift from mind to body that happens on horseback. Moments



like the ones quoted above appear throughout the book, evoking the embodied experience of working with horses.

*Horse Girls* isn't the first anthology of essays about horses by self-identifying horse girls, but it's among very few of its kind, and it's the first with the privilege that comes with a HarperCollins imprint. Like in Ben-Oni's piece, personal essays can recount and reflect on embodied experience, making them well-suited vehicles for the subject of animals, beings who are all about embodiment. Horses, after all, can't narrate their own experience. If they could, I suspect their prose would be nonlinear and full of sensory detail, as many of these essays are. *Horse Girls* is unique, filling an empty stall (I'm sorry, really, I am) in a stable (okay, maybe I'm not sorry) of equine literature that's otherwise populated by YA novels and how-to books. Marcus's anthology is for real-life horse girls—or, more accurately, the women they grew up to be—but it's also for anyone interested in the ways animals beautify the human experience. As Carmen Maria Machado writes, "Can you borrow beauty? . . . Can you be beautiful without a beautiful creature beneath you? I'm still not sure I know."