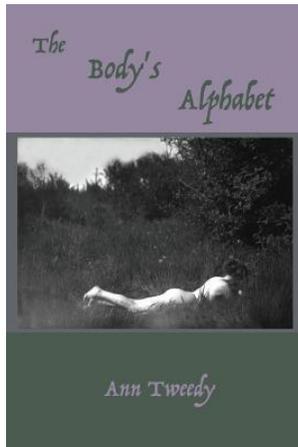


REVIEWS

A Review of *The Body's Alphabet*

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The Body's Alphabet

by Ann Tweedy

Headmistress Press, 2016. 108 pages. \$10.00

The poetry of presents the complexity of relationships between mothers and their children from multiple perspectives—from the viewpoint of a child tormented by her hoarding mother, to a mother's experiences with birth, breastfeeding, marriage, and sexual orientation. The poems appear to be chronological, introducing the poems' speaker with memories of her childhood then gradually moving into phases of her adulthood, each conflict nesting within the next to build a personal history.

This collection is the first full-length book of poems by Ann Tweedy, an active poet and essayist, as well as a law professor and practicing attorney. In addition, she has two published chapbooks and her poetry has appeared in many literary magazines and journals, including *Literary Mama*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Rattle*, *damselfly press*, *Lavender Review*, and *Harrington Lesbian Literary Quarterly*.

The first of five sections introduces the speaker via her childhood memories of a deteriorating home and a deteriorating mother—a hoarder who leaves no room for her daughter physically or mentally—one who leaves her daughter fractured, a daughter who has inherited a perpetual chain of difficult mother-daughter relationships. In the third poem entitled "fracture," the speaker addresses her mother directly and presents a story of longing that spans generations in a few clear lines:

. . . even your mother, who cried

on the corner when she learned
she was pregnant with you your sister
consoling her where do I go from here?
the brother who molested you whose side
your mother took in arguments . . .

The last lines of the poem continue by describing the speaker as "the selfish only child" who asks herself, if she could miraculously escape the bloodlines, the archetype of the women who came before her, what would then be left of her mother?

This first section of poems describes the exterior and interior structure of the daughter's memories—the finishes and materials in the vivid colors of her childhood home, both brilliant and rotting at the same time—the conflicts between the hidden and the exposed as described in the first stanza of "Interior Architecture:"

It's almost meaningless to say the house was bulldozed,
That house with its pale yellow clapboard exterior, deceptive
 somehow
White shutters with red shapes, rotting window boxes.
It was a place that a child could not invite friends to,
It was a prison of artificial walls, the stacks of newspapers, old mail,
 the boxes
of who knows what, the careful stepping of the child through those
 rooms
The child didn't notice the careful steps, how they became part of
Her.

The detailed description of the speaker's childhood home makes it instantly relatable, the way it existed in her memory, and then how it felt to see it destroyed and replaced. The poem asks the perfect question, "What is it that loss takes from us?" It seems the speaker is trying to grasp why the loss of something with no tangible value, and something that represents painful memories, changes her in greater and unexpected ways.

The final poem in this section entitled "pale pink" seems to avoid giving an answer to the question asked, but instead provides a metaphor for how we somehow continue to mature and grow, despite the lack of nurturing, despite the loss—

only the roses in their ballet splendor
seemed out of place among that chaotic, undernourished flora.
they grew for a few feet
along rotting poles and rails.

The next section is aptly titled "thresholds." Here the speaker drifts from her youth into the more adult physical sensations of the body, into the luxury of another woman's touch at the hair salon, the "bite-size" pleasures of eating ice cream, and the poignant honesty of a child who wets the bed for the comfort of creating warmth from her own body. In this section's fifth poem, "Small Town Vignettes," the speaker remembers "the hum of airplanes from the municipal / airport that continuously permeated / our house" and how

"their hum and buzz are the sound / of home however little sought after / that sometimes is." She once again reminds readers of home—the memories that make one feel and hear home with a sense of longing, no matter how much loss resides with us there.

Tweedy takes it even further with "a few remaining trees" to remind us of the small things that have the power to make a child feel significant when surrounded by adults who are tending to their own pain, as it appears the speaker's mother is. She addresses that very "terror" as if the emotion itself is "a parent / urging and impeding." The poem proceeds with startling movement into the speaker's own parenthood, tying the knots of family tighter, even as they seem to slip:

to stand in the face of you and make you
watch me do the thing you've told me not to!
it's not success or failure anymore—it's just doing,
saying no and yes to you at once. . . .
i call on you now—as i stand on the precipice
of pregnancy. of course you're here already, were here before it came
to this, saying no yes. i let myself believe no for as long
as i could, but at least i've come to challenge you.

The last four poems of the section take a turn from the speaker's pregnancy and giving birth, to the comfort and discomfort of partnership—with a new baby, with a spouse, and back toward the body. Tweedy writes of the specifics of nursing, of becoming what seems to be only a body to the speaker's infant son, and how mothers come to terms with the necessary tasks of raising a family and their children's love.

In the third section, these poems of body shift into unfiltered self-questioning, sexuality, stories of those who care for others, and the invisible stains of lovers. Tweedy uses both unexpected and mundane moments to engage readers in situations and physical reactions that split the stuff of relationships wide open—from the speaker bailing her husband out of jail in the middle of a move across country to taking notice of a server while dining at a restaurant. Still, the topic of loss returns in each section of the book. Specifically, her poem "bulkheads" ends with the same loss of the previous poems, but with jagged edges:

i'm with pigeons, pride and bravado
hand no place here. little can be gained
from even the boldest emotional
fuck you, but the losses are incalculable.

The last two sections of the book include several poems with wildlife themes, and connections to self through a love of the natural world, even though humans tend to love badly and even though amidst our love, the loneliness never leaves us. Again, the imagery is vibrant with color—the blues, grays, and emeralds of birds, the black and yellow of snakes against stone, the blood streaked bodies of chum salmon "ripped by so many rocks / in their against-current trek"—reminding us of our own fragility and of nature's strength. The final few poems expose a more worldly view into the many ways lives are subtracted and in the many ways "it hurts to live."

This collection of poems adheres to the bodies of mothers and daughters, lovers and partners, childhood and children. It reminds us how close and distant we can be, at all times, to each other, to nature, to living, and to death. Through her poems, Tweedy connects her readers to "an alphabet only the body can interpret." For me, the alphabet she refers to here is one of personal history—a language only our own memories can help us access, a language written in the DNA of our physical forms.

Trish Hopkinson

Trish Hopkinson has always loved words—in fact, her mother tells everyone she was born with a pen in her hand. She is author of three chapbooks, the most recent forthcoming from Lithic Press, and has been published in several anthologies and journals, including *Stirring*, *Chagrin River Review*, and *The Found Poetry Review*. She is a product director by profession and resides in Utah with her handsome husband and their two outstanding children. You can follow her poetry adventures on her blog where she shares information on how to write, publish, and participate in the larger poetry community.