

EAT Poems #16



Photo by Aaron O'Laughlin

Dedicated to Activist, Writer, and Musician, Travis Fristoe.

Tracks

1. Home State	00:51
2. Nine-Dollar Bacon	02:23
3. Rites of Spring	03:10
4. The Most Rickety Song in the World is Want	02:05
5. Ode Defiantly Calling Out John Hughes, Director	03:30
6. Elegy for Marina Without the War and Famine	01:01
7. Open Window on State St.	02:05
8. Exiled in Palatka, FL	01:10
9. Aubade	00:31
10. The Murder Hole, Brooklyn, NY	01:30
11. Recidivism	00:46
12. Everything Beautifully Sideways	02:18

All poems by Laura Minor and read by the author.

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Album Notes

“All these seeds,” Laura Louise Minor writes in a poem not in this collection, “and nothing grows.” Those words encapsulate the sort of wasteland the poems showcased here lead us through, one in which, at first glance, desolation reigns where it should not. Being a poet, and a particularly nuanced one, Minor ought not to be taken at face value: much, in fact, does grow here -- namely, her layered, poignant, revealing poems.

In them, Minor’s speakers crisscross a bleak landscape they can’t quite change nor accept, a landscape embodied by the scrub and scorch of Florida and the asphalt and noise of New York City. It is also a cultural landscape: John Hughes, Roman gladiators, Marina Tsvetaeva, Philip Larkin, and Ovid, among others, are summoned to inhabit these poems, bringing with them the richness and texture inherent in both myth and history. Minor’s is a poetry of fragments that refuse to settle for less than being whole. It is also a sort of alchemy – the desire to turn dross to gold – which ultimately offers a bounty of transformative possibility.

Perfect at shadow play, Minor writes in “Rites of Spring” of once having “a real Ginsbergian hope,” the poems’ title seemingly a nod to Stravinsky but actually a reference to the mid-80s post-punk band that gives the poem its central song, “For Want of You.” But Minor does not seek comfort in emotionalism or facile hopes of change: “[E]veryone,” she goes on, “knew something / had to be done, but no one knew / what to do.” Instead, in this poem about the death of an ex-lover the speaker once caught in bed with another woman, Minor chooses to memorialize the ex-lover by remembering the way he laughed: the past (that Ginsbergian hope included) may not have been all that, Minor seems to suggest, but how we choose to remember, how we choose to reconstruct, is how we choose to live. The poem ends with the speaker herself laughing at someone’s jokes as she drives, while “pressing into the wheel:”

I kept pressing down, leaning into
The luminous scholarship of the stars
In the black dress with white polka dots.

That is the sort of transformation Minor’s poetry insists on: after betrayal and loss, she looks up at the possibilities of the universe not in despair but in hope, moving forward, always forward, learning as she goes. Not many poets could write a phrase quite as apt in its loveliness as “the luminous scholarship of the stars.” Such moments abound here, and they turn these poems into a series of delightful discoveries.

Crucial to Minor's poems is the centrality of gender. We are here in the presence of an imagination determined to see the world in her own terms – note above how both the speaker and night itself may be wearing a “black dress with white polka dots.” Elsewhere, we find “women with fat fingers / nipples the size of Meyer lemons,” a celebration of female bounty and an almost-invocation of ancient fertility figurines, with an added twist: this femininity is not all milk and honey. The same sentiment echoes in the lines “Extraordinary women unpack themselves / like dirt around water” – perhaps a surprising reversal until we remember that when it comes to growing things, it's the dirt that comes first (try planting anything in the ocean). And if in “Open Window on State St.,” “[o]ur mothers say / with no sense of their irony: / You have to be your own cheerleader,” Minor begins “Home State” with “Mother, forgive me,” a strikingly fatherless reworking of the usual confessional phrase.

Certainly, the poems here speak of heartache and disappointment, of mistakes made and of their consequences, and of the search for closure if not outright forgiveness, except that Minor seems to understand that closure or forgiveness, like learning from one's mistakes, is something only the self can choose for itself. Minor's speakers can be “the other woman,” and they explore all that position entails. “Affairs,” she writes with knowledge that does not reveal it all, “are plastic and red-nosed,” a deft illumination of the promise and fact of an affair through the contrast between the made-up magic of a children's Christmas song and the reality of mass-produced holiday trinkets. Perhaps no moment is more poignant than the end of “The Murder Hole, Brooklyn, NY 2011,” where “the other woman” (in this case, the speaker), thinks of the man she had an affair with, but, tellingly, also of the woman they both cheated on, riffing on one of Philip Larkin's best poems in the process:

Like the figures in Larkin's Arundel Tomb,
I make myself a historical event, never finished.

And who cares if I too, persist
In my stone wimple, to place my hand
In a dead man's palm.

Though he cheated on her,
They're still holding hands at the end.

And it is in that gendered consciousness of the world that Minor's poetry truly triumphs. One may be tempted to compare her to Anne Sexton (if Sexton had benefitted from the last forty years of feminist consciousness). What Minor really does here is not so much confess as survive and speak of her survival, with all the connotations those terms carry in the age of #MeToo: Minor looks back only so she can move forward.

Not entirely unrelated, the most revealing aspect of these poems is that, ultimately, Minor's central relationship is not with other men or women (though that is certainly important) but with herself. In "Exiled in Palatka, FL." Minor's speaker addresses not so much a distant lover (who doesn't even appear in the poem) but herself: "How many times do I have to play Orpheus to myself, / and fail? How many country songs do I have to become?" In an ending that masterfully captures the gulf between what is and what may never come to be, or perhaps between being and learning to be, Minor writes:

The best thing Ovid ever said about exile and loss,
hungry from looking back, was:

Volo tecum nullo modo possum,

I want to be with you
any way I can.

So says the poet,
even in his hatred for Augustus,

even from his faraway Black Sea.

That "you" (the first and last time the pronoun appears in the poem) is, one senses, Minor herself. "I want to be with you / any way I can," the poet says to herself, and we sense the life-force inherent in that ultimately radical position. What grows is what refuses to not grow.

In these poems, which I hope you will listen to many times over to fully let them work their incantations, Minor demonstrates above all how even today (or perhaps particularly today), a woman speaking honestly about being a woman is still amongst the most revolutionary of aesthetic acts.

Andres Rojas

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