



THERE ARE NO WOMEN IN OUR HOUSE

poems by Iskandar Haggarty

There Are No Women in Our House

Iskandar Haggarty

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Foreword

The poems in this volume cover a huge range of emotions and experiences; startling for an author still in his teens. It begins with the subtly gothic ‘Keepsake’, in which the narrator braves the terrors of his Boo-Radley-neighbors and swipes a Bible from their front step. This small act of courage culminates in a euphemistic existential crisis when the narrator discovers that the pages are blank, and, after this shock, a small admonition at the end – in “graphite clockwork dormouse handwriting” – that God loves you. When the narrator tries to give the book back – for no child is capable of writing the narrative of its own unpenned life – he finds that the house, too, is empty, and he is trapped with the responsibility of the unwritten pages.

In many ways, the tones and motifs of the rest of the poems are set up in ‘Keepsake’. In most of the poems, the locations themselves take on a grim, almost visceral, persona that smacks of the sufferings evinced therein. The empty house of the first poem, with its “ribs/forever expanding” becomes the “house of/broken bones” in “Rain Poem 3”, or the floorboards of the house in “Bluebells & Bowerbirds” from which the narrator tries desperately to scrub away “the black/ stains of my father”. In these poems, a home is not a shelter or a refuge: it is a place of secrets, fears and dark entrapments. They are *personified* places, becoming the agonies of their occupants. The setting of “Dear Oleander” expresses this idea most vividly,

My veins are small.
They are dark, like
spiderwebs.
This house looks like
a labyrinth of small
veins,

The walls
are the color of
disappointment,
the windowpanes are
rusted over with
sadness.

These environments communicate the vague horror of everyday life, for, throughout the volume, there is a sense that something dark and unknown lurks beneath the humdrum routines of getting-by. We see it in the neighbors in ‘Keepsake’, who bring “no nothing” to the world around them. From the old woman, who grits “her/ shark teeth to tiny/ nubs” to the overt violence of when the “nest in president Kennedy’s head tipped/ over and all the birds/spilled out” (“Powerful Magnetic Fields at the Hearts of Giant Stars”) there is a sense of the destructiveness and casual viciousness of which people are capable.

Within this bleak world, the narrator - though usually disappointed in his endeavors – never ceases to *try* to make contact. For the most part, these attempts are innocuous: trying to touch lips in “Rain Poem 2”, the uncle’s bid to explain the world to, and protect, the young narrator in “The Spaces in Between”, or the haunting evocation of relatives now dead or gone in “Powerful Magnetic Fields at the Hearts of Giant Stars”. However, so deep is the loneliness of the characters who inhabit these poems, they must push the contact further than it can go. In “When Plants Collide”, we see the narrator’s craving for complete absorption into the very being of his lover:

caught underneath your
fingernails and
embedded in
your iris

This yearning for contact embraces not only other people and other lives. We see in a number of the poems a need to escape the bounds of the self, and connect to the elemental,

My finger floated up into the
cosmos, blurring until
I no longer knew what was me
and what was infinity. (“The Spaces In Between”)

This impulse to scatter the self, to push beyond the physical, is returned to frequently:

Their grey matter sprinkles
across the universe,
skips as stones do
upon cosmic oceans. (“When Planets Collide”)

Or again, in “Flutter”, when the narrator’s mother starts to “rain down/ from Ursa Major”.

Images of entrapment inform most of the poems in this volume: the body is too limiting, houses swallow their occupants, relationships are either unattainable or they ensnare us. Yet these images co-exist with their obverse. The poems thrill us with their desire to escape and seek, with the need for communication in its purest form, and the sense of pushing beyond the here-and-now in order to flow “in between the soft/pitter-patter/of our galaxy”. (“Rain Poem 4”).

The underlying compassion of the poems is undeniable, and they express the surge of an irrepressible energy. The structures of the poems break and erupt under the pressure of this energy as they try to touch upon something absolute.

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10th October 2016.

Contents

Foreword.....	i
Keepsake.....	1
When Planets Collide.....	3
Flutter.....	5
Dear Oleander.....	7
Rain Poem 2.....	8
There Are No Women in Our House.....	9
Rain Poem 3.....	10
The Spaces In Between.....	11
Bluebells & Bowerbirds.....	13
Rain Poem 4.....	16
Powerful Magnetic Fields at the Hearts of Giant Stars.....	17
Afterword.....	22
Acknowledgments.....	24
About the Author.....	25
About the Cover Art.....	25

Keepsake

When I was seven the
neighbors across the street
scared me. They
kept to themselves most
of the
time. They had
no kids,
no nearby kin,
no car,
no criminal records,
no nothing.

He would sit
on the porch, rocking
back and
forth
in his chair as his
bones cooked
in the sun. She would
stare from
behind intricate stained-
glass windows, gritting her
shark teeth to tiny
nubs against the
sill.

They were quiet folk;
never caused a row,
never left their lights
on too long,
smiled when talked to and
shook hands with conviction.
They kept a bible on their
front step in case anyone had
lost their way.

I tried picking it up
once. "Son," he
said, not moving from
his chair,
"between you an' me; they're all
lies."

I said *yessir* and
scurried away, legs
weak at the joints.

I opened the
book when I got home, but
it was empty.
Flipped through
until the last page;
written there in
graphite clockwork dormouse
handwriting, delicate, was
"God loves you."

I tried giving it back the next
day, but
the house was an empty
nest,
its ribs forever
expanding
in a long, drawn-out
sigh that just never
came.

When Planets Collide

Their grey matter sprinkles
across the universe,
skips as stones do
upon cosmic oceans.

Icicles form in the
pockets of space;
crystalize in the heart
of your eye.

When I die,
I want to think of
nothing less than
how you'd

catch my grey matter,
reshape me until
my fingerprints are
beautiful

until I am smooth
and gleaming soft
in between the folds of
your dress,

caught underneath your
fingernails and
embedded in
your iris.

When I die,
I want to think of
nothing less than
how you'd

pull me in close and
let me listen to
the gentle hum
of your universe.

Rain Poem 1

This is how we live –
with pistols hanging from
motes of
dust
in the hallway.

The morning dew
never seems to
settle
around here.

I don't suppose it ever
will.

Flutter

I.

Your mother had
sparrows
tangled in her hair

and fireflies
trapped inside
her vocal cords.

Every morning, she'd
awaken before the moon
had slumber in its eye

and lightly brush your
snoring father's
head full of Saturn

with her lips.

II.

Your mother was made
of ashes and was married
to the stars.

Each night, she'd rain down
from Ursa Major,
sprinkling the edges

of thunderbolts
and canopies,
fertilizing the soil

with morning sadness.

III.

Your mother was
the daughter of
Jupiter.

Really? I asked,
my eyes full of
crescents.

The butterflies in Grandpa's eyelids smiled.

Dear Oleander

There are orchids
on the bathroom floor.

My father's ghost keeps telling me
to be a man,
but I am not a man.
I am a set of susurrations,
of unused, mildew-covered clothing,
I am what the brook said
to the pebbles travelling
downstream.

I wash my hands in the
alabaster sink,
cold water running over
my wrists.

My veins are small.
They are dark, like
spider webs.
This house looks like
a labyrinth of small
veins,

The walls
are the color of
disappointment,
the windowpanes are
rusted over with
sadness.

I throw up
soggy flower petals
of every color,
every size,

every shape but
yours.

My father would be proud.

Rain Poem 2

Maybe I'll pull you close
and press my face against yours,
the lips touching
but not
kissing.

There Are No Women in Our House

There are no women in our house.
Uncle Allen tells me that women burn
kind of like alcohol
but not in a good way.
He says they burrow right into your stomach
right into your core
and make homes
out of bone dust and old food
and stay there.

There are no women in our house.
Grandpa Walt tells me that women sting
with sharp nails and red lips
they'll kiss you my boy,
they'll kiss you
and you'll fall into a pit full of ghosts
and you'll feel like lighter fluid
and your tears will smell like gasoline.

There are no women in our house.
There is no one to make our beds
or cook our food
or to clean up after us;
we have a hoot

but at night
I hear them crying softly in their
stained bedsheets.

There are no women
in
our house.

Rain Poem 3

Look away, love.
I don't want you to see me
in this house of
broken bones.

The Spaces In Between

I always asked to
listen to Uncle Allen's stories
about the stars.

After dinner, he would
pull me onto his lap,
take a thoughtful few puffs of
his pipe, and ask me if I knew
how darkness was born.

You see,
he'd say,
The fabric of the night sky is
spun out of rusted dreams,
 dead spiders, and
 the sad bones of
 lonely homes.

He said that when time
began, the sky was
white with stardust, but
old gods grew jealous and
created the spaces
in between.

Now our skies grow dark at
night, our cities become blurry and
quiet, our children's eyes weigh
heavy with the dimmed dreams of
sleeping stars.

I saw myself
reflected in the spaces,
glowing dark, phosphorescent,
my body made up of things which
had never been said.

Those nights I tried
counting galaxies
from my bedroom window.
My finger floated up into the
cosmos, blurring until
I no longer knew what was me
and what was infinity.

One,
Two,
Three,

Everything.
 Everything.
 Everything.

Bluebells & Bowerbirds

I.

Last week I was invited to
my mother's funeral.

She lay in a glass casket
surrounded by pine trees.

Ashes fell from withered
branches as silken butterflies

carried the electricity of stars
between their gauzy wings.

The Bowerbirds slid a talon
under their breastplate

down to their navel,
reached a claw in

and extracted their bowers –
still glistening wet from birth –

all on display for
my mother.

Grandpa Walt laid
bluebells on her grave

and Uncle Allen
watered them with

his tears.

II.

I woke up
that morning

to a chorus of
dewdrop harmonies;

downstairs, Grandpa Walt
feasted on frozen rosebuds

as Uncle Allen
bled dark honey

from the corner
of his lips.

I opened my mouth
to ask about my mother –

about her death
full of quiet –

but my throat filled
with dark feathers.

My father climbed out from
under my teeth,

squawked as the rays of sun
turned the bone marrow

under his dark coat
into rivers,

and tore his own head off.

III.

I scrubbed the black
stains of my father

off of the floorboards –
it took hours.

Grandpa Walt explained
that he went to the place

where souls go
to die.

I shrugged
my shoulders.

Who needs a father
when you have

an uncle,
a grandpa,

and two generations
of dead mothers.

Rain Poem 4

 This is where dreams float;
 gently, in between the soft
 pitter-patter
of our galaxy.

Powerful Magnetic Fields at the Hearts of Giant Stars

I.

I only remember the
slight red stain
on the corner of grandma's lip,
how you told me it was just the birds
that got out of their cage (they liked to peck
her insides).

There's a fisherman living next door
who hasn't used a rod in ten years,
who sits outside drinking malt scotch whisky,
who hasn't seen a shore since the
nest in president Kennedy's head tipped
over and all the birds
spilled out.

II.

I only remember the
small record player that
blared tiny animal
screams on repeat.
 Oh uncle Allen would like this,
 he'd like it so much,
Mama would say,
 Go get him
 tell him he ought to see it
 tell him he'll have a ball.

And I got him
and he loved it
and he knelt by it
all night making
soft cooing sounds.

I hear some people
say the fisherman never
leaves his house because
there are bodies in the
basement and he is worried

their spines would
sing if the doors
were open too long.

III.

I only remember the
time Grandpa Walt forgot to
take his medicine and
started to untuck his shirt.
He grabbed me with
maelstrom fingers,
shook me like a
tempest,
told me it wasn't
yet too late to –
but tender needles
turned his tongue to dust,
turned his eyes the color
of dying stars.

At night the fisherman's
dove-cries seep through the
papier-mâché walls
of our homes and my
ears bleed because once I
thought I heard the faint trill
of spines.

IV.

I only remember the
cracked smiling linoleum
kitchen floors as Uncle
Allen ate from a
can of mealworms,
their juice running
down his chin.

Oh boy
He'd say
Oh boy
ya gotta try
these
he'd gulp,
the white maggots running
across his skin,
down his throat,
crawling underneath his
purple tongue,
his beady piggy eyes,
his mealworm face all
bloated and veiny,
Oh boy
Oh boy
And he'd coo
happily to himself.

Fishermen aren't made of
glass. Their
hearts are knots of
pine, their skin
is cracked mollusk shell,
their eyes are magnetic
tidal waves.

V.

I only remember the
canaries that lived in
mama's spine, that
would sing me to sleep with
songs from Jupiter
until they ran
out of oxygen and
melted.

Mama says that it doesn't
matter who the next
president is because

none of them have had any
birds since Kennedy,
only empty cages in their chests.

VI.

I only remember the
half-bucket of fish
rotting on my neighbors
porch.

 These aren't just fish
he said once,
 They're from the cosmic ocean -
 they have sturdy arms,
 they don't cry, even when it gets
dark.

And he looked like he was made
of soft planets and buttermilk
and a tear fell from the
pocket of space above his
head, splashing into
the bucket and turning every
fish into a canary, canaries
with strong skulls that
don't melt.

VII.

I only remember the
day rain fell like
ashes from the
weeping stars and
all the birds disappeared.
It was the day grandma
died and three men in
suits like hollow cages
knocked on the
fisherman's door and told
him he had twenty four hours to
move out. He cried
plexiglass tears -

fragile, but not
fragile enough to
break.

Afterword

In trying to express the contents of this chapbook of poems to a close friend, I found it difficult to provide a concise explanation. It would be easier if I was talking to my class of high school students. Words like *beautiful* or *touching* or *precise* or *vivid* would suffice. That said, maturity ages the power of words, and I found myself at a loss, incapable of summarizing the contents of this chapbook. ...Is there *beauty* here?

Page | 22

The crispness of language and clarity of imagery lend itself to that kind of reaction, but the stark sadness and sharp criticism evident in Haggarty's use of adjectives and extended metaphors make for less of a love song and more of an exposé on genius and heartbreak. These juxtaposing sentiments of vulnerability and machista bravado unearth an explication of male reality that almost humanizes in its dehumanization, simultaneously demonizing and deifying as it offers its surreal and absurd underbelly for the audience to cringe at and lust over.

Haggarty draws inspiration from a collection of authors, either present or in ghostly remembrance, in order to create and convey this nightmarish faux biography. Defined by a synthesis of *joie de vivre* and *ennui*, this articulately suppressed desire is a throaty tale of idiosyncrasies where observations seem slanted, measured and affected by our collective gaze. Elders like Whitman, Ginsberg, and Hemingway serve as the identifiable forefathers of Haggarty's poetic discovery and cast of characters in this rawly macabre but poignant narrative. Similarly, echoes and remnants of Plath, Marquez, and Bukowski lurk beneath the lines, evident in his use of diction, alliteration, and tone.

Uncannily inviting, Haggarty's fragmented but alluring reality conjures the kind of desperation and hunger characteristic of a Berkeley Beatnik, complete with a sound that accentuates the howls and pleas that lie within. His precise but contradictory diction helps draft a palpable world of emotion and longing. Archaic, obscure, and at times all too colloquial, Haggarty's juxtaposition of the natural, man-made, and celestial results in a more honest telling of the creation and mythos behind the modern American voice. Via his precise diction and eerie observations, the author is able to include us all in the frightening terror of what it means to be a *poet*.

Emerson states, "the poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty. He is a sovereign, and stands on the centre. For the world is not painted, or adorned, but is from the beginning beautiful." For my students, this is a simple definition that facilitates the underlying concept of *beauty* and what is beautiful. But, as another

June cycles towards me, and I send another troupe of students to graduation, I wonder what happened. I wonder if Emerson found Iskandar thumbing through dusty shelves or back-alley second-hand bookstores. I wonder what trove of inconsistencies were gifted and bartered over. Regardless, I can hear the incantation...“is the creator of the universe...The poet is not any permissive potentate, but emperor in his own right.”

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About the Author

Iskandar Haggarty is the editor in chief of *Firefly Magazine*. His work has been published online and in print, most recently including *Verse-Virtual*, *Lockjaw Magazine*, and the *Indianola Review*. He currently resides in Massachusetts.

About the Cover Art

Eren Isvan is a Scottish-Turkish poet and rapper based in Los Angeles. His works usually deal with society and the human condition through the lens of the fantastical and mythological.