



## Charm and Strange Poems

**Linda Casebeer**

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*Charm and Strange Poems is an elegant, unsettling poetry collection that's concerned with the significance of everyday words, meanings, and forms.*

Waking and dreaming lives collide in Linda Casebeer's poetry collection *Charm and Strange Poems*, which includes images from nature, domestic scenes, and faraway places that repeat shapes, colors, and objects.

The elegiac free verses of the collection unspool in long, unrhymed, and unmetred pieces that lean on their symbolism, metaphors, and juxtapositions. Images and experiences recur, like the red roses blooming in one piece that evoke the outline of an atomic cloud in another. Nature imagery, most often of flowers, is subverted to suggest darker forces just beneath a respectable top layer: "What if by *flower* you mean *peony* / white petals crawling with ants / beat down by April thunderstorms." Elsewhere, in "Name your poison," common toxins drip from a bottle of oleander into the architecture (social and physical) of a small town, tainting everything they touch.

The poems are linked thematically, resulting in layered images whose meanings change each time they are repeated. A nightmare in "Imagine the weight" is transfigured into an unsettling dream in the adjoining "Dreamscape," while, in the third section, "Hook and eye," poems set around a lake evoke the bright colors and textures of the landscape. In the gorgeous entry "Switchboard," the cords used to transfer calls become the "ganglia forming perfect patterns" of a developing child.

Many of the entries dip into wordplay to tell loose narratives about experiences in the distant or recent past; some deal in anxieties about the future. Portmanteaus, including "girlwife," "sundappled," and "deadmen," punctuate the collection, their images unusual. Some titles and lines borrow from popular idioms, including "Ye gods and little fishes" and "Good bones." Although this wordplay points to linguistic sensitivity, only a few pieces are deliberate in their reflections on such forms and expressions, as with one that comments on a trip to a Gullah-speaking community.

The poems are uniformly composed of short, enjambed lines; some use stanzas, but none are rhymed. The overall monotony of this form dulls their novelty after the first section, with the enjambment wandering in and out of linear narratives.

The book's five sections are neat and ordered with intention, resulting in a compelling thematic web of shifting and expanding symbolic meanings. Here, a rose is a rose until it isn't. With an ambitious reach, the book brings together disparate topics, like angels, architecture, and Africa, to find commonalities and shared meanings.

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CLAIRE FOSTER (November 19, 2020)

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