

From Your Hostess at the T&A Museum

Kathleen Balma

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From Your Hostess at the T&A Museum is an insightful poetry collection that is as funny as it is sharp.

Kathleen Balma uses wit and wordplay to dramatic effect in her poetry collection *From Your Hostess at the T&A Museum*.

The collection is a lighthearted jaunt through the poet's personal interests, including film, literature, history, and art. Intriguing commentary on the state of society also factors into its entries. "Somewhere a Town" catalogs local European traditions, like a carnival wherein people throw oranges and the Running of the Bulls. Taken together, these traditions are made to seem ridiculous and fun, like an acceptable form of primal release. But the poem goes deeper by ending with an abrupt tonal shift that highlights the thin line between what's harmless and what's brutal—an incisive turn of the sort that reoccurs throughout the collection.

Entries like "Genetically Modified Crop Conspiracies" revel in their own wit. That particular poem plays on social pushback against genetically modified foods, as well as conspiracy theories that abound about governments: here, corn has listening device implants, and soybeans are Mexican sympathizers. Nods to "peas and hominy" and "Soy de aquí" ("Say it fast and it rhymes with soybean") further these jovial sensibilities, though working toward a dark third act in which pigs and vegetables are crossbred; that turn becomes a clever way to take on issues with policing.

Also contained in these poems are numerous allusions to popular culture. Several poems are modeled after, or are dedicated to, other artists and poets. "Poem on the verge of a nervous breakdown" is dedicated to Almodóvar, and is named after his 1988 film. In it, a woman's madness is reflected in her setting fire to her bed; its meanings are self-apparent.

"The Forgiveness Project" is modeled after Szyborska, with a series of questions about the project that are offered without answers, resulting in a philosophical meditation on the nature of public forgiveness:

*Who runs the project and for how long?
Are reservations and appointments a must,
or is it first come, first served?
Is there a suggestion box? A gift registry?
Will I need a witness?*

The book's longest piece is the skillful entry "Snubbed: A Motion-Picture Ekphrasis." It investigates a monkey society, drawing on a Xi Zhinong documentary to suggest a connection between two infant monkeys and the story of the prince and the pauper. Such re-imaginings help to illuminate social idiosyncrasies, as of parenting and toddlerhood. That piece, in particular, speaks in a compelling way to the specter of benign neglect, musing on rapid changes of fortune that occur in society, both for those who must fend for themselves, and for those to whom much is given.

Throughout, *From Your Hostess at the T&A Museum* is an insightful poetry collection that is as funny as it is sharp.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (April 8, 2022)

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