

Ghostbread

Sonja Livingston

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Crossing from one world to another is a trope of the memoir *Ghostbread*, this year's winner of Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Award for Creative Nonfiction. But Sonja Livingston is no mere tourist of the past; as she writes in her epilogue: "And I don't wish to condemn where I came from with a celebratory exploration of where I am, and yet, I celebrate." A premise here is that the milieu of impoverishment is distinct from the place where the author currently resides—a place where she no longer needs to "worry about how to pay the electric bill." Livingston writes of a personal exit from slums in the cities of Buffalo and Rochester, the rural towns dotting Ontario's southern shore, and an Indian reservation in western New York. These are communities that remain, the epilogue reminds.

Told in 122 short installments, each of no more than three pages, the form of the book reflects Livingston's understanding of memoir-writing, which she describes as "suck[ing] everything in and forc[ing] yourself through." The rooms you find in your past "feel smaller somehow. Constricted." Such constriction is enacted in the book's form. Livingston writes with an understated restraint and paints her past in careful detail. The result is captivating. *Ghostbread* is a heartrending encounter with an adept essayist.

A conventional coda for the book would be to call for readers to improve the conditions of these communities, but *Ghostbread* ends with a different note: "there is no rope strong enough to pull someone from one life to another. And perhaps it is arrogance to try." (November) *Janelle Adsit*

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