



★ Here Is a Game We Could Play

Jenny Bitner

Acre Books (May 15, 2021)

Softcover \$19.00 (232pp)

978-1-946724-40-3

In Jenny Bitner's *Here Is A Game We Could Play*, twenty-four-year-old Claudia is trapped on the banks of the Susquehanna River, in a town too full of people to be a ghost town, yet too stripped of opportunity to be truly alive. Here, people "thought the river ... had the power to bring us something larger than this town: God, a story, a way out." So Claudia watches the people, the river, and the contents of her own mind as someone who's trying to belong, perhaps to no one so much as herself.

The book is written to a potential lover about the games entailed in their courtship, but it also slips in and out of Claudia's real-life relationships with family, friends, and lovers. Labeled as games, the chapters have headings such as "Pillows," "Listen," and "Earlobes." The power of the games themselves exists in their haunting blend of lucid dreaming and vestigial memory. As the games morph in response to the more traditional narrative that precedes or follows them, they reveal Claudia's needs and fears, suggesting her differences and obsessions are both endemic and etiological.

In particular, Claudia's obsessed with poisoning, and is sure "there is poison somewhere in me, but I don't know what or where it is." Rather than trying to categorize poison, Bitner plays with its omnipresence and fluidity. As in most industrial towns, poison is everywhere, its presence literal, hypothetical, and metaphorical. Whether dangerous or delicious, poison just is—a fact that's as much a part of the novel's embodiment as Claudia's fears.

Capturing just how much belonging shapes a person, in its absence as much as its presence, the novel strains between those two poles; like any true connection, it is a "terrible and beautiful thing."

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (May / June 2021)

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