

## The Alchemy of Paradise

**Susannah M. Smith**

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A luminous novel told in snippets, Susannah M. Smith's *The Alchemy of Paradise* considers how best to live in the face of loss.

An unnamed museum curator looks back on her idyllic childhood, wherein her father was an architect. While renovating a crumbling estate for his family, he dedicated a room to her collections. Her mother made every day special, too, with her fashion sense so theatrical that it elevated dressing to an art. But then the curator's father drowned in a Venetian canal, and her mother withdrew, leaving her alone in her grief. Her grandmother's loving attentions and mystic outlook helped her to move forward, but not forget. Now, decades later, the curator memorializes her father by assembling his left-behind belongings in an in situ exhibit, opening it with a grand party that rivals those of days gone by.

The unconventional prose is marked by immediacy and intimacy with the curator's thoughts. She is vulnerable and direct, as when she describes finding her husband in bed with another woman as resulting in "palpitations, my heart feeling like it was beating / in double time somewhere outside my chest. / Nausea. / Not sleeping, not eating, not crying." In fact, prose poems are a frequent occurrence in her narration, which shifts with ease between varying modes, including essays, ruminations, and imagined conversations with the dead. The latter acts as a way for her to alchemize her relationship with death from loathing to acceptance, a philosophy rendered via original realizations. "Death opens us up to life," her departed father says. "Think of how your life has expanded and deepened...Nothing has gone wrong here."

Metaphysical and insightful, *The Alchemy of Paradise* is an innovative novel in which a curator contemplates her father's death.

CAROLYN WILSON-SCOTT (May / June 2026)

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