



The Migratory Moment

Marnie Holt Swenson

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The Migratory Moment by Marnie Holt Swenson is a hybrid book of poetry, dialogue, and paintings that examines an anguished speaker's view of her origins through memories. Vernacular and fractured lines sift truth from fiction, creating a moving, erratic portrait of fragility and loss that spirals into "a puzzle I cannot solve."

The book navigates between the story of a woman who believes herself to have been an unwanted birth, "a thing of despair"; the confusion of family relationships; a father's suicide; and questions from a therapist. As the speaker confronts her own past, spiritual ambivalence and childhood scenes weave together in a dark pastiche. Vague back cover copy—which frames the work as seeking "what it doesn't really understand of the physical, mental, and emotional elements contained within"—and veiled personal moments leave an impression of diaristic forays.

A series of oil paintings reveals the story in an oblique way. With a muted, frequently gray palette, they depict alienation. One woman holds a revolver while gazing into the distance. A reclining figure is dominated by an incubus or beast. Another, nude, is crucified, suggesting female experience as one of extremes. The most heartbreaking, *Dichotomy*, departs from the others, showing a red-haired woman in a sun hat seated on white steps, seemingly at ease. It is a rare, beautiful glimpse of everydayness that hints, perhaps, at reprieve from the fury the speaker in these poems inhabits.

When distinct, clear images arise, including a blue racer snake, the writing offers a breath of air. Lines that reveal a sharper sense of craft include "i only ever saw him in dress slacks and dress shirt / mostly brown and white and black shoes and black socks and Old Spice." A rapid succession of monosyllabic words and repetition of "s" and "b" sounds create appealing, ominous music. The use of white space is also a well-considered feature. Lines gather and swarm, extend to the margins or diminish in thoughtful ways that echo the content, though on occasion, differing font sizes and typefaces preclude a polished design.

The Migratory Moment is an ambiguous pairing of childhood trauma and searing self-awareness. Whether the titular moment refers to the speaker's sense of time on earth, the desire for flight from a destabilized world, or an implosion that results in being remade, this is a work of sustained, raw intensity. Survival becomes art.

KAREN RIGBY (July 14, 2016)

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