

★ **This Tenuous Atmosphere****Maria S. Picone**

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Poetic, inventive, and spare, Maria S. Picone's *This Tenuous Atmosphere* is a meticulous novella about a woman's search for family and belonging.

Asia feels like an outsider in her fantastical outer-space world. Orbiting Earth among space debris, she is controlled by the absurd requirements of “ghost men” who reside in a government-funded craft. She tackles a series of meaningless jobs, mostly salvaging and reassembling parts from wreckage, and tries to follow the nonsensical rules of capitalism. She enrolls in nebulous training programs to advance, endures farcical performance reviews, and must confirm her identity during “a war on immigrants.” Exhausted and lonely, she travels to Earth to reconnect with her mother in Seoul. Later, she makes a daring trip to recover her father, who is marooned, trapped by gravity, on the backside of the moon.

This imaginative parable—set in an abstract, incongruous, dreamlike world—describes the bewildering estrangement of being an outsider, of being “other.” Every sentence is chiseled and evocative. When the language addresses the natural world, the words are poetic and poignant: “A pine needle, blue and perfect, blew down to my feet. Everywhere, there was something to be saved.”

While the physical details of Asia's plight are perplexing and foreign, her emotional struggles are universal. The book is grounded in the nuances of the heart and the gripping power of reconnecting. A story that begins with otherworldly alienation ends with a happy reunion: “I had nothing but the love that bent spacetime: a thing more powerful than hope.”

This Tenuous Atmosphere is an ingenious, unforgettable novella about a woman searching for home, family, and purpose in a strange, disorienting universe.

KRISTEN RABE (March / April 2024)

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