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Accretion, articulation, exploration, transformation, naming, sentiment, private and public property these are just a few of Juliana Spahr's interests. In this, her third collection of poetry, we find her performing her characteristic magic, turning these theoretical concerns into a poetic odyssey.

From her first poem, written in Honolulu, Hawaii, to the last, written in Berkeley, California, about her childhood in Appalachia, Spahr takes us on a wild patchwork journey backwards and forwards in time and space, tracking change in ecology, society, economies, herself. Through a collage of "found language" a deep curiosity about place, and a restless intelligence, Spahr demonstrates the vibrant possibilities of an investigatory poetics. This verse is more inclusive than exclusive; consistently Spahr includes grape varietals, the shrinking of public beachfront in Hawaii, endangered plant, fish, and wildlife species, the melting of the polar ice caps, and comparative poverty rates in her eclectic repertoire. She also knows how to sing in the oldest tradition of poetry of loss, and her lament for nature is the most keen.

Well Then There Now Details

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From Reader Review Well Then There Now for online ebook

Janey says

Through repetition and inventory-like poems (write the names of things down obsessively so they don't disappear in our memories), this book expresses in an uneasy, helpless manner how wrong things are in the way we treat the environment and the way we treat each other. It's pretty weird how Spahr does this. Most of the book are pieces on everyday life in Hawai'i, focusing on specific observations & small topics (that somehow don't feel "small" at all). The book ends with a large-scale piece that has its beginning in a childhood in Appalachia, morphs into a sex scene between the narrator and Chillicothe, Ohio, and then marches into a discussion of class and gender in global terms. "As I write this other stories keep popping up and I keep abandoning them."

Arla Charisse says

beautiful.

Danny Caine says

Foundational eco-poetic book, fascinating range of forms and subjects, thought-provoking and exceptionally well executed. Also very much out of print; if anyone finds a copy or has one they're willing to part with, hmu

Rodney says

WTTN yokes together a decades' worth of Spahr's shorter works, linked by the locales (complete with street address and ZIP codes) in which they were written. The structure implies a thesis about place, and about the concomitant experiences of displacing and being displaced, but when I went to extract it to write this, I found less a thesis than a process: a process of trying to *be* placed, to create a sense of place in places where one is, or was, but doesn't belong.

Spahr's process involves snapping pictures, walking streets, researching histories, taking ethnobotany courses, pushing writing back and forth through translation machines, producing lists and catalogues, but above all thinking, which may be the book's home gerund, as in: "As I am always walking on Dole Street, I am always thinking about Dole Street," or "I was thinking about a story I had heard about a French grandfather," or "I was trying to think about _____," in which "think" isn't the gerund but "trying" is, and "trying to think" is maybe the better key phrase for Spahr's writing anyway.

What attracts me most in the work is how it performs thinking at the level of syntax, building up larger, complex patterns of repetition from relatively simple and straightforward phrasal units, a technique which owes something to Stein but reminds me even more vividly of the way Minimalist composers restrict and recycle their tones. Because thinking for Spahr primarily involves connecting—this here to that there, the body to a landscape, the present to a past, things included to things excluded—grammar itself, which sets rules for connecting, takes on a heightened ethical dimension in her writing, so that ecosystem and language system

and biosystem and social system all finally stand in for one another, or are seen to be part of one another, just as “Some of we are all eating grapes” expands to include “Some of we are all together in the grapes.”

A paradox in Spahr’s writing for me is that as direct and inclusive as the mode of address is, I don’t finally feel a part of her “we,” except in the most general terms (which may be exactly the point) of having a white blood cell count or breathing or belonging to the set of beings included in a statement as broad as: “We are in this world.” What I sense instead in the work is a powerful mind thinking through serious questions in a unique and highly personal way, with the thinking, or the moral imperative of trying to think, being theme, virtue, and obstacle all at once:

“I wanted to end this piece with a scene of metaphoric group sex where all the participants were place names, but the minute I attempted to do this I got bogged down in questions of which places would penetrate and which places would be penetrated.”

D'Argo Agathon says

Page 11: “You know, this is a little strange, but it flows, and the repetition is hypnotic.”

Page 12: “Wait, the same poem continues like this? For multiple pages? Oh man, is this going to be like *Discipline*, where the poem just keeps going without the intrinsic stamina it requires?”

Pages 13-14: “Actually, I still like this. It’s meditative; it’s grounded and I get it. The metaphor of the grape is beautiful, and I want a glass of wine, now.”

Page 15: “Oh, Juliana Spahr, you are amazing.”

Spahr’s book does right by everything I have complained about for the last three or four collections: she provides a “legend”, so to speak, for the deciphering of material; each piece reads coherently, even if it is not chronological or is “interrupted” by seemingly random information; the content is rooted in realistic imagery; and the tone is clear, consistent, reflective, and engaging throughout. In other words, this is the kind of experimental poetry I can get behind – unstructured, personal, stream-of-consciousness style poems that still actually make sense.

That said, I do not think these poems are perfect. I love the “memory interruption” poetry and the repetitive nature of many of her pieces; however, the narrative poems go too far to the other side of vague, and this time leave too little to the imagination. Metaphor is nearly non-existent and it occasionally feels like I’m reading a slightly more personalized Wikipedia entry. I don’t feel “poetic” during those times, and though I do get the “keep every memory” vibe from them, I can’t quite grasp them as “poetry”.

“Unnamed Dragonfly Species” holds a space somewhere in between the extremes offered here (repetitive mediation poems vs. narrative encyclopedic entries), and I found this poem to be the best of the collection. The inserted terminology/animals give the descriptions of nature a biology textbook feel, which is fascinating to me, and when reading, I felt exactly like I was on a guided tour – one that I actually cared about learning from.

Overall, I liked where Spahr took me, and I think the last line of the collection – “love, still, and also despite” – is one of the best lines of poetry I’ve read in a long time.

Abigail says

I'm still not done with this, and as I read it I'm trying to figure out what makes it so moving. In any case, it's very worthwhile and I love the author's plainness about her methods and willingness to be direct, accessible without losing any complexity of thought and meaning. It reminds me quite a bit of *Radioactive*, by Lauren Redniss, even though that was graphic nonfiction and this is poetry. They share a philosophy of embedding the speaker or central character in the complex networks of history, relationships, and power that exist around them.

Ty says

This is the first and only collection of poetry I've ever read. It was nice and moving and made me think of things. Now I want to read more poetry.

It made me think of the geography of my neighborhood and who owns what and the history of that ownership. Also, I liked Spahr's celebration of nature in the context of catastrophic climate change. Some pieces suffered from a bit of liberal guilt.

Carrie Lorig says

the language has a real move about it. the syntax is abrupt in its playful-ness. the first part especially is a giant tidal wave i like surfing on. this book is accumulation, so silt, so many pictures obviously taken from a phone. i love that. and it won't let you dredge it. the grimace it has towards pristine beaches, the way it tries to embrace eco-poetics as a possible entry point into talking about how and why we love the green and what do we even love about ourselves, our places. race, ownership, gender, class. i like it. it has a great heart about it.
