



# Strings Attached

*Diane Decillis*

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### **Strings Attached** Diane Decillis

Poems that consider threads of emotional attachment and separation against a backdrop of art, food, and Lebanese culture.

In *Strings Attached*, poet Diane DeCillis takes inspiration from the story of the elephant calf with a thin rope tied to its leg. Even when it grows into a massive animal, the elephant thinks the same string still restrains it and never attempts to break free. This powerful, funny, and sometimes self-deprecating collection considers all the ways that strings bind us in relationships and explores their constant tightening and loosening.

Although we may never sever the strings attached to our wounds, DeCillis shows that when given enough slack we can create the illusion of having been set free.

The poems in *Strings Attached* consider tension in a variety of relationships. The short string of an American girl raised in Detroit by a resentful Lebanese grandmother whose culture values boys over girls. The attachment to a strong mother who exemplifies feminism but who is mostly absent in order to support the family. The cosmopolitan father who abandons but captivates, and the strings of relationships with older men, built on longing for the missing father. The long strings of a secret life that teach you to be distant. The strings that cuff you to your home, and the triumph of loosening them after years of agoraphobia. The frayed strings that come from being too American in a Lebanese culture. The strings of food and tradition that connect to family and friends.

DeCillis's verse reflects an insistent search for identity and the happy discovery that outsider status can be a good thing, a kind of earned badge that provides new ways of seeing. All poetry readers will relate to the personal and perceptive verse of this debut collection.

### **Strings Attached Details**

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Author : Diane Decillis

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## From Reader Review Strings Attached for online ebook

### Christian Belz says

I have a new favorite poet: Diane DeCillis. With a heart that understands, her poetry faces the painful or the awkward twist of experience with open eyes and mellow being. No matter how things shake out, there's beauty in life and Diane makes me feel like everything's okay. Her words are genius, with one line after another having me gaping in wonder at her artistry and compelling me to grab the next person I see and exclaiming "hey, listen to this!" Diane gave me a new personal anthem, too, with the poem "Margin of Error."

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### Kimberly Seibert says

I like how the author is from Michigan and it makes some of her references more relatable for me. Great collection based off reflection of her life and people in her life who have had an impact on her. I thought it was clever in "Origami Pantoum," how the verses doubled back on themselves kind of weaving the words together, the title too is very fitting. Other favorites from this collection include; "View From a Room, NYC," "Postcards of Home and Homesick," "Reconsidering Yellow," "Mr. Right," "Weeping Women," and "Ingratiating the Monster."

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### Aubrey says

Let us be generous for a moment and think on two categories of reading little noted and half of a somewhat missed: poetry, and writings by women of color. I'm not interested in status quo quibbling or elitist nitpicking. What intrigues is the newly noted mathematica of Wollstonecraft who stated a ubiquity of immortal (genderless) souls amongst human beings, a common potential for virtue in each soul, a universal necessity for reason to hone said virtue, a global need for education of all, so that the ultimate population of reasoned virtue may be achieved and save the world from the tyrannical likes of pre-revolutionary France. In more modern, godless terms, my 9.4% of my library and 6.3% of my read shelf in a world where less than a tenth of the women are white make for some degenerate statistics, degeneracy in a far less hierarchical and far more scientifically potent turn of phrase. As for the poetry bit, somewhere along the centuries it turned from most vaulted form to easiest to compose between bouts of work and childcare and domestic underpinnings, so of course we can't have the public imbibing it with *too* little care and much too much enthusiasm. Rote memorization of the aristocrats in school: yes. Penning a literary movement beyond the mythos of eclectic spinsters and yet another oh so precious white male: no.

Poetry's always been hit or miss for my kind, the autodidact who's made their way from the very beginning without the means of heroic couplets or the matters of some bro from 19th century upper class England, so the fact that I'd be comfortable with putting my critical cred on the line for pretty much any of the pieces in this collection is not easily broken down. It may be the suffusions of food, color, and cosmopolitan endeavors of the gendered/racial/culture crossing sort. Or it may be, for all that novelty, there is a heavy predominance of the more familiar fetishes of European types, Francophilia, an inculcated lust for the usual pedestals, the usual genius, the usual enlightenment. What I can say for sure is that, once I return this book to the library, first patron of the title by way of having requested its purchase, I hope more are caught by the ripe red cover and the diminutive length and the singular resonance of Lebanese-American poetry fronted by a picture titled *Tosca*. I've no idea if the operatic overtones are intended, but it melds well enough with the

overarching modern flesh encasing classical bones feeling for me not to probe.

*I look out the window, wonder if this French  
liqueur has influenced the way I see the leaves  
sprouting from baby green to sage adolescence—  
the color of risk & knowing. Absinthe: bitter*

*wormwood of silvery leaves and nodding  
flowers. Blend aromatic fennel, star anise,  
juniper, and dittany. Add lemon balm,  
angelica, hyssop, coriander and macerate*

*until narcotic green. Van Gogh poured  
its color onto canvas, thick impastos of ochre  
and emerald spilling into **The Night Café**.  
Hemingway, Wilde, Poe, and Baudelaire*

*reached for its ripe graphic fruit, a prickly  
essence prodding openings for poems  
and stories. The leaves in my yard  
flutter like café awnings. I imagine*

*Lautrec, his hollow cane filled with  
absinthe, its heady anise perfume—  
Gauguin driven by it to make his colors  
bolder. Artists and poets gathering*

*for the green hour. Picasso lifts his glass,  
**If only we could pull out our brains**  
**and use only our eyes, toasting La Fée Verte,**  
nymph who makes his wish come true.*

*-'Artemisia Absinthium'*

This is my first finished work for 2016: The Year of Reading Women of Color. 'Twas a good start.

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## **Rebecca Foster says**

A lush debut collection of poems dwelling on the author's Lebanese-American identity. In the rich metaphorical language of food and color, DeCillis, a Detroit native, blends memories of her Lebanese grandmother with longing for her absent father and admiration of her unconventional mother. This is my first taste of the Made in Michigan Writers Series; I like what I see so far.

The poems are full of warm, diverse food imagery: almond croissants, osso bucco, bone marrow, a self-referencing fortune cookie, even the author's shellfish allergy. Whether she's remembering her grandmother boiling milk to make yogurt and teaching her how to stuff grape leaves, alluding to food-themed films (*Babette's Feast* and *Like Water for Chocolate* appear in "To Be Fed"), or watching a girl ruin a Duncan Hines Pineapple Cake mix on a TV program, DeCillis finds food an endless source of inspiration. It often serves to emphasize the sensual differences between Lebanon and the United States:

**“I say / Maxwell House coffee / is to Turkish coffee as Twinkies are to / baklava, crisp Lebanese / baklava made with chopped / pistachios, drizzled with fragrant // rosewater syrup.”** (from “As Pressing Is to Flowers,” but later revisited in a sardonic way in “Baklava Killed My Father,” which includes a recipe)

**“A young girl, my grandmother Sittu / looks out her window / at the mountain in her Lebanese / village. She describes it: soft purple, / yellow and gold—a smear of fig jam / on warm buttered toast.”** (“The Grammar of Memory”)

Prose poem “Music from Another Room” is the culmination of all the culinary influences. It documents every dish of a typical Lebanese family feast: hummus, baba ganoush, tabouli, lamb kabobs, pita bread, pomegranates, date cookies, and ends with reading fortunes in the grounds of the Turkish coffee.

DeCillis’s dominant color palette is blue, red, green and especially yellow, as in the two poems “Reconsidering Yellow” and “Yellow According to Rilke,” sampled below:

**O yellow of lemons—make that *limoni*,  
(sounds even more yellow in Italian).**

**O honeyed stars [...] the yolk heart sunny-side up.**

**Who can sleep in a world with so  
much yellow?**

Green is present in the trademark ink her father used on all his postcards, the liqueur and “leaves / sprouting from baby green to sage adolescence” in “Artemisia Absinthium,” and “the funneled startle / of red, the green gesture / of photosynthesis” in “The Botanist and Her Amaryllis.”

DeCillis is playful with art forms: “Cubist Still Life” is a satire about a girl named Cubist (“she was viewed as one dimensional [...] Her yearbook described her / as ambiguous, shallow, and one most likely to collect dust”); “Falling in Love at the speed of the William Tell ‘Overture’” mimics that piece’s incessant rhythm; and “Reconsidering Yellow” teasingly describes a poetic form (“She obsessed as if she were a / pantoum, repeating the first / and third lines of her life”) – which then makes a proper appearance in “Origami Pantoum,” referencing Whitman, Stevens, Basho, Neruda and Chekhov.

I would also mention “What Would Hitchcock Do?”, a comic poem about how desserts torment the narrator on vacation while she is dieting; some of the lines are contrived to shoehorn in film titles (“The woman / offers us dessert and like / some psycho, I lose it”), but I still enjoyed it.

The collection closes on the title poem (one of the best), which celebrates DeCillis’s mother. She left New York to enter an arranged marriage with a Druze man back in Lebanon, convinced him to return to America with her, but then divorced him at age 23 and became the primary breadwinner for her family. **“Mother was an Edward Hopper / painting—a woman drawn / to a wedge of sunlight, an oil drum / rolling down a quiet / street at night...She was modern / art, a light / in the window—never the apron, or even the strings.”** I loved the way that title metaphor simultaneously evokes family ties but also a feminist shirking of traditional roles.

Reading poetry is so often assumed to be hard work, but these poems are a joy. I would highly recommend them for readers who prize cross-cultural fiction or memoirs with recipes.

**Related reads**, also from Wayne State University’s “Made in Michigan” series:

- *Making Callaloo in Detroit* by Lolita Hernandez (short stories that share these culinary and intercultural

themes)

- *Quality Snacks* by Andy Mozina (short stories)
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### **Bethany says**

I It is impossible to set a date for either starting or completing this book of poems because I pick it up before the next book, after the last book, and during this book. Diane Decillis ' s words inspire me and make me pause and reflect. Her passion for art and food take me places I have never been and remind me of how much more there is in this world to explore. I will continue to read and reread every poem because each time I do, I find something personal and profound. Love the collection. Her strings are now attached to a part of me.

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### **Nadia Ibrashi says**

If you want to laugh and cry, lust over art and food, be entertained and illuminated, learn about family, friends, betrayal, please read this book "Strings Attached," by Diane Decillis. An exquisite book of poetry, it reads like a well-lived life. I enjoyed the various poetic forms the author used, and the amazing titles for her poems. A substantial book of 94 pages pages that the reader will enjoy over and over again.

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