

MARTY SAUNDERS

Ideas of Story and Meaning: *The Catalog of Broken Things*

A. Molotkov. *The Catalog of Broken Things*. Portland, Oregon: Airlie Press, 2016. \$16, paper.

The Catalog of Broken Things is a book of our moment. Its four concept poems fall within the continuum of hybrid poetics, adopting what they need from tradition—the poem as a communicative vehicle, consistency of voice, deft construction—while abandoning some of the more traditional expectations of world-building, linearity, and closure. Within this vein, the stylistic range of these poems is broad, but the collection consistently calls into question our ideas of story and meaning-making through the speaker’s interactions with the dead and the ways in which the speaker engages in and resists the creation of a cohesive narrative.

The first lyric sequence, from which the collection takes its name, deals with the speaker’s family, both dead and alive. The desolate landscape of the poem, its surreal imagery, and its elliptical qualities set the tone of the collection and foreshadow the content. The third section of the first poem provides a useful look into the book:

My father holds a fishing net of small suns
each shining hesitantly, uncertain
which planets might revolve around it.
He carries his boat.

His eyes are oceans of salt
with rocky islands in the middle
where light goes to sleep.

His hands are heavy from the work.

His lips a crack in darkness.
The moon fails, falls. The wind listens.

The actions of both the dead and the living in the world of the speaker take on a ceremonial weight, though the images of the speaker's family often evade interpretation. Yet as the collection progresses, evasion becomes a mode of exploring larger questions surrounding language and the construction of stories.

The second poem in the collection, "The Protagonist's True Story," interrogates our ideas surrounding narrative. The speaker sets up a series of experiments: In the final experiment, "I am you and you are I," the speaker says in the poem's opening, ". . . We meet in the middle of an empty field. You take out your weapon of choice. Perhaps it's my choice." Here several questions are raised by the speaker. Firstly, who is the you? Is the speaker addressing the protagonist using the second person, as one might reasonably assume? Or is the speaker speaking to himself in the second person, since the speaker, after all, created the "you"? Or is the speaker speaking directly to us, the reader?

Each reading is plausible and leads to different readings of the poem. Herein lies Molotkov's point: our narratives are fluid and ambiguous, subject to change by the reader, and, above all, by the writer.

This theme is expanded upon in the third and fourth poems in the collection. The former, "The Melting Hourglass," continues to tease the reader into considering her relationship with the speaker:

Dear Reader
I unwrap myself
like a delicate candy
.....
is there anything left
after the wrapper?

The reader is given only what the speaker allows, or what we are able to read into the imagery of the poem. Resisting a traditional reading, the poem forces the reader to consider her role as a meaning-maker in its meta-narrative.

This device is heightened and brought to its conclusion in the final poem of the book, "Your Life as It Is." The poem is structured like a series of journal entries, written in the second person. In line with the previous poems, the reader is invited to consider who the "you," or the

speaker of the poem, is—again forcing the reader to create a strategy for entering the world of the poem. The ending is instructive when considering the book’s aims and the aesthetic of the book as a whole:

You go outside, but the outside is gone. It’s like a vast empty field, but without a field. It’s like you, but without you. You have brought a library of building blocks from which you will construct it all over, every day. You must create yourself and the world around you. This is your life as it is.

The reader is left with an existential affirmation: we must create our own meaning, both in the book and in the larger world we inhabit. And so this is a book that rewards a reader who is imaginative, who enjoys hybrid aesthetics and surreal imagery, a reader who is interested in thinking about the construction of narratives, about our systems of meaning and belief. Those comfortable in this territory will enjoy this collection of “. . . curious glances, exploratory words, [and] shy smiles.”