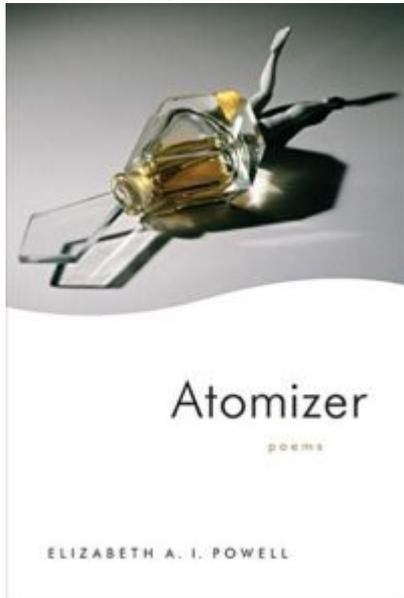


Review: Atomizer by Elizabeth A. I. Powell

written by Guest Contributor | May 10, 2021



Atomizer by Elizabeth A. I. Powell

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112 pages – poetry

To catalogue all the scents namedropped in Elizabeth A. I. Powell's *Atomizer* would be to craft a how-to manual of olfactory ingredients that make up the author's past, from a childhood on the farm to the tender adult who is simultaneously hopeful for and dubious about romantic love.

In *Atomizer's* proem, Powell calls her time on the farm the "heart notes" of herself:

(*Memory*): Back on the farm, grandmother supposed the smell of skunk wondrous. I loved the leather smell of cowhide, the salt lick, the watery smells, the lavender and hay rot. This is when she gave me her sister's atomizer.

The cows were in heat some days. I was prepubescent.

...

I search for Adam online. To become consumers of smells we must make associations. But we don't have to know a pinecone intimately if we are always smelling Glad pinecone spray for bathrooms.

Indeed our desire to smell pleasant things is from our lost garden.

The heart of the scent: I have loved men who have hated women.

Even in this youthful biography, Powell hints at the maturity to come and the puzzle of pregnancy, culminating in the heartbreaking oxymoron of loving a horrible man.

She revisits the prologue to adulthood, where she plants the seeds of growing up, throughout *Atomizer*. In "When the Insemination Man Comes to the Farm," Powell writes, "I'm young; I don't understand; I hide behind hay bales/with the heifers; and we start to grow up." She describes the insemination process, which is clinical, and parallels it with a clinical view of a human's pregnancy, too, with all the biological effects but none of the ensuing relationships: "I am always pregnant and lactating/in my imagination."

In general society, so many stories of pregnancy are romanticized, with a focus more on the blessing of it all, less on the biology and mechanics. But Powell focuses on those stories that aren't so rosy and heaven-scented. In "Killing Rabbits," she gives a brief history of pregnancy tests: "They used to inject women's urine into rabbits to see if the rabbit's ovaries changed. Yes, meant pregnant. Either way *the rabbit died*, but the term came to mean: *you are pregnant*." In "The Book of Sires," she revisits the cow pens again, comparing insemination with the search for a mate. Consider:

In reality it was a semen catalogue
a print precursor to online
dating, but for cows.

And

I found him, online
displayed as if in a "Book
of Sires." I was in heat.

The contrast is uncomfortable, unexpected and, frankly, funny (in that *It feels wrong to laugh, but I'm going to just go with it* sort of way).

The personal details in *Atomizer* make it read nearly as a memoir, and Powell relies on a variety of poetic forms to tell her story, including narrative storytelling. The poem "Cinema Verité," for example, is broken into scenes like a play. The characters are only ever called "he" and "she." It's unclear if the characters in each scene are the same, or if Powell is telling us a variety of unhappy-relationship stories. Are these fictional characters? Or is one Powell? Are they all Powell? Or pieces of Powell? In the end, the *who* doesn't matter: It's the *what*, the *why*, and the *how* that's important.

What unites the various narratives in "Cinema Verité," in addition to the themes, is what connects the piece to the book itself: the use of scent to

convey meaning, tone and atmosphere. In Scene 1, "he liked his wife after the party smelling of toothpaste and anti-aging serum ..." In Scene 4, "She no longer even realized when men looked at her, until she saw him. He must be the new guy, she thought, his sweaty coveralls in the greasy light, a patchouli and oil-rigged smell gurgling from him."

Powell also includes a few ars poeticas in her book. These examinations into the role of the poet fit neatly with the poet's search for her own meaning. The truest poem in this form can be found in "Stalking Me Onomatopoeically," in which the poem is personified, an actual person with whom the narrator can interact: "I sought a restraining order against the sociopathic/poem that kept pounding on the door of my mind at four a.m." The poem "smelled of Paco Rabanne" and told the narrator, "I looked fat/in my Lord & Taylor dress. So I bit the poem's ear,/again and again." Taken at face value, the poem in the piece is the nagging idea that insists on being written, even though the poet is in bed. However, the poem can also be read as a metaphor for a cruddy or even abusive relationship. "On therapeutic advice I sought the restraining order/against the poem because it couldn't contain itself, pushed me/down with a conceit stronger than my fragile couplets(.)"

A poem titled "Ars Poetica," meanwhile, is not actually a traditional ars poetica. With a different title, in fact, the term likely would not cross the reader's mind, as the poem is a narrative about a time when the poet's mother washed her mouth out with soap. But an ars poetica is, at its heart, the effort of a poet to understand why she writes about the topics she chooses, to study the form and its cause and, in turn, puzzle out the effect. As Powell includes in her book's epigraph, "I, a universe of atoms, an atom in the universe. -Richard P. Feynman." There's the atom's connection to the atomizer, yes, but also another nod to ars poetica. Writes Powell in the poem, "the words my mother found/horrid, disrespectful, utterances I loved/and let loose, becoming bubbles/floating out my mouth/in punishment, the lather bubbling up/my nasty sentiments: how I loved the world so hard I hated it ... my mother tried to make me say it *nicely*. I couldn't."

Atomizer is not about saying it nicely. It's about saying it honestly.



Jaclyn Youhana Garver is a freelance writer and editor from Fort Wayne, Indiana. Her poetry has been featured in *Poets Reading the News*, *Narrow Road*, the *Superstition Review* blog, *trampset*, *Prometheus Dreaming*, and *The Oakland Review* (forthcoming). Her reviews have appeared or are scheduled to appear in *The Literary Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, and *Poetry International Online*. She was a scholarship recipient for the January 2021 Tupelo Manuscript Conference and is working on her first poetry book.