


[If the Tabloids Are True What Are You?](#) [by Matthea Harvey](#)

written by Guest Contributor | April 15, 2015



If the Tabloids Are True What Are You? by Matthea Harvey
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 In *If the Tabloids Are True What Are You?*, Matthea Harvey sews together image and text to craft a poetry of fantastical hybrids: the wrenchmaid and the electrical meroutlet, radio animals, girls made of glass, a house made of people. The whimsical possibilities of these hybrids become a means of navigating negativity as Harvey explores domesticity, fantasy and violence through ekphrastic and pop associations. Image and text interact and conflate, provoking a hybridization that gets caught up in the brutality of the everyday and the opportunistic sensationalism of tabloids: a tabloid-poetry.

Many of Harvey's poems take on content that fits within a tabloid-poetry space. The book opens with a series of prose poems that document the social and domestic dramas of a variety of mermaids. In "The Objectified Mermaid," a merspork that has come ashore endures the objectification of her otherness. In "The Deadbeat Mermaid," a merclock leaves her family. Harvey then directly conjures the tabloid in a series of tabloid-headline poems such as "Cheap Cloning Process Lets You Have Your Own Little Elvis" and "Woman Lives in House Made of People." The speakers of these poems could be the subjects of human interest stories (if human interest includes possession by Shakespeare and colonization of other planets). Additional aspects of tabloid culture make appearances: the obsessive documentation in "Telettrofono," conspiracy theories involving aliens and hula hoops, the unreal resituated as real, and the making-public of private spaces.

Harvey involves us within this tabloid-poetry from the beginning. Addressed directly in the title, readers are hyper-aware of our involvement. *What are you*, the book asks before we even get to know it, a question we return to and de/reconstruct, asking in reply *and what are you*, wanting to make sense of the book's range of presentation and voice. This interaction feels kindred to a tabloid's beckoning us to investigate public-private spaces, a beckoning that provides us with a glimpse into scandal and intrigue with the hope of connectivity: *I, too, am part of this. This—expansive knowledge of supposed health problems and who is cheating on whom and various imminent deaths—is evidence of my place, my presence.* Harvey offers a similar hope of connectivity. Our participation completes the tabloid-poetry experience by providing an audience for content which demands it. Take the hybrid mermaids and their domestic plight: "The Straightforward Mermaid starts every sentence with 'Look...' This comes from being raised in a sea full of hooks." The demand

for attention returns again and again in *Tabloids*, and readers provide this attention through fascination with the simultaneity of humor and chaos, silliness and looming violences. The tabloid-poetry says look, and we look.



But what are we looking at, and why are we looking? Or, put another way: why hybrid mermaids? Why tabloid? The immediate answer is the easy one: Harvey uses tabloid-poetry for comedic effect. A merspork is *funny*. But she also uses it to investigate the whimsy of fantasy and pop culture as means of navigating negativity. The tensions between whimsy and negativity make themselves visible in the relations between fantasy and reality. The mermaid prose poems, for example, with expected associations of freedom and possibility, document hardship and longing. In “Woman Lives in House Made of People,” the potentially-wondrous fantasy of the situation illuminates a woman’s loneliness:

They were lonely. I was alone.

Out of those two sentences,

I made myself a home. My house sighs,
has a hundred heartbeats, dimpled

cupboards and a pink mouth for a mailbox.
There’s always a tangle of legs in my bed.

In “Stay,” the only segment in *Tabloids* that breaks the 1:1 image-text ratio, the boundaries between the realistic and the fantastic degrade. Domestic images (like dining room chairs and people wearing upper middle class clothing) are suspended in small cubes of ice, made immobile in their capture. Harvey renders the everyday as fantastic, magic, beautiful, but she simultaneously renders the fantastic as frozen, immobile, entombed.



Following “Stay” are poems of tragedy and entombment: documentations of mass flooding, the weaponization of otherness, and post-apocalyptic modes of understanding. These are then wrapped in packages of cuteness, both undercut and reinforced by images of tiny, precious objects.

A tabloid-poetry reveals its underpinnings in its degradation just as a tabloid shows its hand when it plays its hand a little too well, when sensationalism becomes the point rather than the mode. Harvey gives us a glimpse of this in “Stay” where the violence of domesticity and civility are the point of rather than the mode of the poetry. Harvey draws us back into the tabloid-poetry interplay of fantasy and reality, but with a heightened awareness of the violence underlying it all. When we arrive at “Telettrofono,” the final section in the book, we encounter rewritten histories of an inventor and his wife that mingle with Harvey’s mermaids. Here at the end, Harvey returns to the possibility of fantasy with her re-writings of the Meuccis, with the poems in this section divided into various fanciful modes of the telettrofono (one of Antonio Meucci’s inventions) including “Preset Verifiable Fact Mode,” “Preset Mermaid Monologue Mode,” and

“Preset Fairy Tale Mode,” among others. The telettrofono is reimagined as a whimsical device in a whimsical world: its inventor is married to a mermaid, and its preset modes are put to use not as a product to be sold but as a means of knowing. The preset modes function to provide details about the Meuccis and display their affection and longing: “Preset Antonio Meucci Monologue Mode: If I could make her anything? ... New legs. New legs. New legs.” But despite the freedom in re-written histories, the telettrofono’s modes are all *preset*. All of the voices in “Telettrofono” are preset, as if pre-recorded and machinic, and the fantastic, the seemingly-free, the joy of exuberance and sensational beings are trapped in their fantasy, their freedom, their magic.

The book ends with the “Preset Stage Direction Mode,” which contains a series of instructions for the ending to a play. This feels like an appropriate ending to and analogy for the purpose of a tabloid-poetry. Everything is tightly choreographed. The mermaids look fantastic. The stage is perfectly lit and everyone knows their lines and the show is marvelous. But the point is not that the show is marvelous but that it is a show: it’s not just the modes of the telettrofono that are preset, but the domestic mermaids and the woman in the house made of people and the figures in “Stay.” In a tabloid-poetry, everything is preset, on display, ready to be used, to be sensational.

✘ **Travis A Sharp** is a poet, intermedia writer, and book artist. He is co-founder and co-editor of *Small Po[r]tions* and Letter [r] Press. His writing has appeared with or is forthcoming from *Deluge*, *Big Lucks*, *Pacifica Literary Review*, *Tinderbox Poetry*, *Belleville Park Pages*, *Riprap*, and others, and he has exhibited work at Gallery 1412 in Seattle and The Alabama Center for the Arts. He tutors and teaches writing at the University of Washington, Bothell.