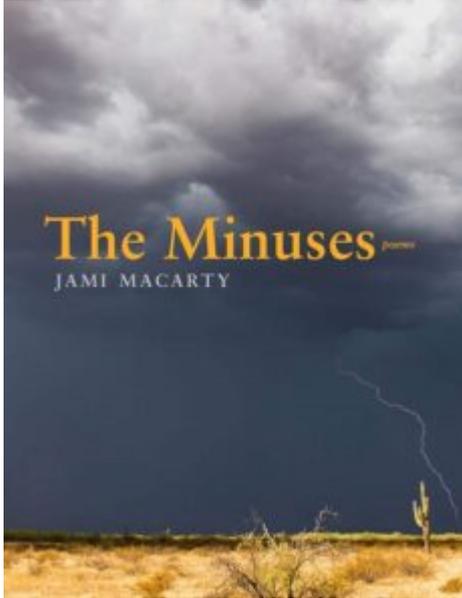


Review: The Minuses by Jami Macarty

written by Guest Contributor | September 14, 2020



The Minuses by Jami Macarty
[University Press of Colorado](#), March 2020
90 pages / [Bookshop](#) / [Amazon](#)

I first encountered Jami Macarty's work when the title poem of this book won The Real Good Poem Prize selected by Kiki Petrosino. I knew then that I wanted to read more of Macarty's poems. *The Minuses* was published this year by the Center for Literary Publishing at Colorado State University as part of the Mountain West Poetry Series. This collection of poetry provides subtle contemplations on existence, loss, agency, the natural world, and nature's power.

To set the tone, let's begin with lines from "Monsoon Desert":

She is what she fears and in the desert she fears sun

The sun suppresses: a claw fallen on the landscape

[...]

She waits for the quenching

Wind roams the empty shell of the house

The poems in this book are masterfully calibrated. The pacing is slow, careful, meditative throughout. There is space to breathe around the lines. Macarty's phrasing delights and surprises. Like in the poem "Equals Rain" with the line "We pace the aisle of what happened to the sky." Or in "Related Sequence" which ends with these stunning and echoing lines: "Loosening September sky// The day feels its own weight and buckles// In a window, a lace dress hangs itself" and ends without punctuation, asking us to consider the implications of the image.

These pages are studded with thought provoking moments and questions to digest. Like in "Reverse of Shadow" when the speaker asks the self in one long line: "Do I know when to turn my back on what I previously trusted"—a powerful question, especially within the context of the poems in this collection. It's undeniable that there is a female figure in the poems navigating abuse and loss. And this thread is often explored through and within nature. This book feels interested in what we can learn from nature, including about oneself.

There is a keen attention to environment and ecology in these poems. Motifs of wind, air, and sky weave throughout. "Wind sneaks into trees" and in another poem "...wind inaugurates rain." Nature has agency and in many poems, humans are powerless to it. Like how "The wind winds the woman wrangling the plastic" in "Thin Attachment." Or in "Nor'easter" with the line "Underneath the abusive sky—" which begins with this embodiment of vulnerability: "The house on Atlantic Ave/ teeters on the embankment's edge—//a feather could send it crashing." Often, an examination of the natural world serves as a reflection of human nature and human relationships. Or like in this stanza from the poem "Door Ratio": "Like day's incessant sun/ batters mountains/ powders extrusive ledges." We are all subject to nature's hand in one way or another. Overall, the point of view in the poems appears in awe of nature's power—as in both fear and amazement.

The thread of mathematics in *The Minuses* is captivating, purposeful, and accessible. With lines like, "The rain inevitable/ as if sky plus death equals rain" in a poem set against a funeral backdrop. The idea of subtraction shows up in several poems, of course, and we are asked to consider the idea of loss or a taking away and what is left? Because in life, what remains after the subtractions? Or thinking more broadly, what is the sum of it all? One poem tells us, "The past increases within the present." In this existence, we are always adding and subtracting. Or, at the hand of nature, there is always addition and subtraction, whether we choose or not.

One of the most striking aspects of this collection is the crisp imagery and the way it communicates. Like this line in "Given Distance from a Given Point": "The full moon gathers wet footsteps from stones." This is just one of many lines in the collection that invites the reader to consume it once then twice and then return to it again for its quiet, calming spark. Macarty's lines shine—lanterns in darkness. Set against a landscape backdrop, this gorgeous and moving collection feels both specific and timeless in its

explorations. These poems speak to the human condition in fresh and stirring ways.



Holly Mason received her MFA in Poetry from George Mason University in 2017. Her poetry, interviews, and reviews have been published in *The Adroit Journal*, *Rabbit Catastrophe Review*, *The Northern Virginia Review*, *Foothill Poetry Journal*, *University of Arizona Poetry Center Blog*, and elsewhere. She received a Bethesda Urban Partnership Poetry prize, selected by E. Ethelbert Miller. She has been a reader and panelist for OutWrite in DC (a Celebration of Queer Literature) and participated in DC's Al-Mutanabbi Street Starts Here events as a Kurdish-American poet. Holly is currently on the staff of *Poetry Daily* and lives in Northern Virginia.