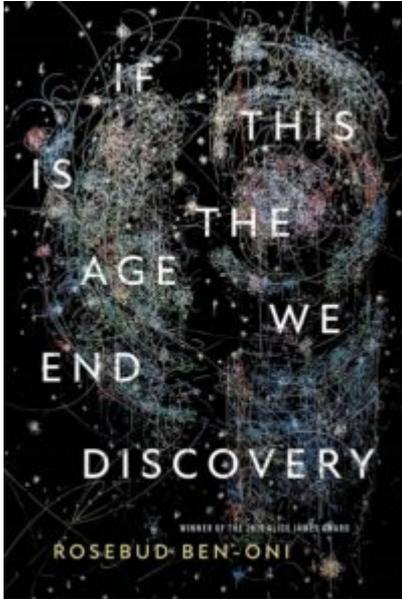


[Review: If This Is the Age We End Discovery by Rosebud Ben-Oni](#)

written by Guest Contributor | May 13, 2021



If This Is the Age We End Discovery by Rosebud Ben-Oni

[Alice James Books](#), March 2021

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98 pages – poetry

Of all the forces that comprise our physical existence, Rosebud Ben-Oni's poetry collection *If This Is the Age We End Discovery* (Alice James Books) digs into the most compelling ones: attraction, repulsion, and a third unwieldy, simultaneously nullifying and transforming force. The cover art by Kysa Johnson is a fitting visual introduction to the poems that spark and spin off into new dimensions within the pages. Materials from the physical world swirl with the imaginary and imagined, the known and improbable, as the speaker of the poems grapples with the idea that she may indeed be living within a simulation, or a Rick and Morty episode, or the undersea setting of a sci-fi drama.

Part I grounds us deeply in reality, as the speaker grapples with heartbreak, physical and emotional distance among family members, and the turmoil of caring for loved ones. Physical storms set an ominous, electrically charged setting that explodes the deeper into the collection we go. In "Poet Wrestling with Her Empire of Dirt," the speaker shares a poignant moment with another: "Aba says light / of my eyes, / where are you getting your science. / I no longer know. I used to believe / in string theory. But the field / breaks. Too many. Rules" (7). Even the borders of this physical dimension seem to fall short of all that can be contained or felt in this moment. The speaker huddles in a bathroom with other women, all seeking shelter from a storm when they encounter a dead bird full of maggots. The bird's

interruption in the poem is in stark contrast to the tender moment at the beginning, as if a harbinger from a faraway galaxy or a nearby dimension that tears a whole into the fabric. Undeterred, the speaker is drawn to the object of repulsion and picks the bird up, then is ultimately transported to the outdoors where "Birds gather around me. Dark lights / against blue cement. They wait it out. / They stay perfectly still. Right out in the open" (10). The birds represent opposite forces – both repulsive and attractive at once.

Part II begins the titular poem "If This is the Age We End Discovery" where physical dimensions start to flicker and blur on the edges. "I've come to faint days before I know blood will be drawn. / When I hear the sleet, the whipping / Of time petrified on sheetrock, I collapse / Into vessels they can't find yet / Again. As if there's no more originality" (35). The speaker here falls in and out of consciousness, freezing time in the process. She continues, "As they stroke my head: She's gone out again. / If only I'd gone somewhere." (35). The speaker lingers in an in-between, untethered to physical space.

In another poem, the speaker begins to toy with the forces that comprise her physical world and push into infinite dimensions. "I've wed / my own body vermillion. / Blushing & brickish electric- / plush, / these organs. Make my spleen a shrine / to excess. Who doesn't have time / for infinite timelines?" (37). The language here dips and falls, dripping with rich colors. She ends with a proposal, as if taunting the universe. "You say the aim of being / you is {being you} & creation alone {is the favor}- / when all language will always escape & betray / its creator" (38). The speaker wields language that seems to hold the potential to turn against itself, against the very hand that is crafting it. The brackets function as a container for what cannot be contained, excess energy that cannot be harvested. The poem ends in a rhyme that echoes off the page: "Creation is a spell / of double negation" (39). The sheer force behind creation is again harnessed by the speaker, who brings two similar vowel sounds together as an embodiment of the attractive dimension of creation.

Of course, much like Newton's Third law of physics, creation too has an opposite equal, as exemplified in the poem "Poet Wrestling with Her Own Aloneness in Its Time of Need {She's Going the Distance}." As the speaker navigates the liminal space of the airport in a TSA line, "Everything is / gathering / in the middle of nowhere, it / just feels like I" (40). The powerful force of a storm, always kept at bay in the physical space of Part I, floods the space here, this time spinning matter together into new combinations.

One such combination is the arrival of the vampire bunny in the poem. The character feels like another interruption, to the established setting of the poem – a rip in the fabric, something borne from another dimension. Its arrival triggers a cascade of scientific language, an outpouring from the speaker fusing the quantum material of this universe into some new creation "even if he's mostly tachyons / with fangs of squarks / & smuons / all of which decay / too quickly / in super / -symmetry, / all of which violet / your laws of everything / that's allowed to be / real" (42). There is tension between the expected rules of physics and what happens when that fabric

begins to fall apart and decay, unleashing some powerful “monster-bunny force” (43) into the mix. Again, instead of being repulsed, the speaker embraces the otherworldly and materializes with this remarkable character in another setting, She spells out the attractive force at work: “Entwining on the ocean floor” (45).

As attraction and repulsion push and pull against each other in these poems, we encounter zero – a third force that materializes into something greater, more mysterious, and more attractive to the speaker than what we have yet encountered. The speaker notes, “Zero is always greedier... “Zero is hunting for patterns. To the power of. Zero. Is the air erupting / & dying while sleep... Zero of us seeps through. Zero receives” (46). Zero accumulates an unwieldy meaning through material.

In Part III, the speaker introduces the three Heads of the Crown: Efes, Ayin, and Tohu, symbols that represent “Zero,” “Nothingness,” and “Chaos” respectively (48). On the opposite page, the speaker provides more definition to “Efes” as:

(1) Modern Hebrew for “zero”

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(2) In mystical Jewish texts: “to nullify, to conceal”

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(3) Poet’s proposal: responsible for Dark Energy, vampire bunnies & insomnia; insatiable lover; enemy of mathematics & elegant equations; Creation’s Twin; presents Nullification properties as possible Transformation (rather than destruction) of the quantum & the “real” worlds; reveals Itself at the singularity of a black hole; does not abide by any law; changes the riddle (49).

Zero seems to be a more slippery force, multidimensional, a contradiction in itself: both repulsive and attraction in one – and isn’t this the exact force behind creation? The poems in this part of the collection propose a hypothesis of what happens when harnessing the power of Efes through language: “But go on. & anyway. Bind my legs & arms in your infinite & immaculate / vampire bunny charms. & gravity of desire.” (71). This attraction to power and enlightenment proves ultimately futile: “is that when Everything is proven. Fatal. Because such proximity / does not lead to anything more / than little vampire bunnies / who were just as human / as the last question / I will eat from my own / swollen & stained lips” (73). The speaker pushes the limits of hypothesis – what happens when one asks *if* over again?

Once we reach {POST} :: LUDE, the speaker is finally grappling with the fact that *if* may not yield an answer, and instead, yield more of the unknowable,

uncontainable force: "What if we are the science / fiction. Or the humors / of Dark Energy. Who will always be stronger. & who / the diction. To gain influence & power. & encrypted {I / see you}" (77). The force behind all of this torqued language is becoming material, powerful, still unknowable, but also something physical, something tangible. As the rules of physics fall apart in this space, the speaker notes: "I suspect. Efes. That You are the one. Breaking. / of Everything" (79).

The poems continue to unravel what happens when the speaker starts to embody boundlessness: "To know the secrets. I possess. / What time I {ran with} / a sharing of darkness. / You have all. Your answers {the / night}. There's no room. / To escape. & You. / Know that none. / Can hold / me {I'm bending bars & singing electric third rails-}" (80-81). Time and space bend to the will of the speaker, mixed up in scientific language: "I spin & spin a twisting neuron :: You spin {in} dimensions / {I'll never exist}" (83). Language itself bends to the will of the speaker and finds new combinations among familiar words: "of deep deep silence / :: hyperspaceawakening ::" (84).

Time also ceases to bind the speaker to a physical reality. It slows with beautiful imagery: "The Light together :: *enjambé* :: / wreckless & / ramshackle / threads binded" (94). Reality is more than vibrating strings, more than string theory. Reality is all of the forces together, both attraction and decay. The :: in these poems marks a sound, a twisting away of energy, the spin of a quark, the unbound energy shedding in waves, an increase into entropy. In these poems, the speaker continually upends and creates an end anew, finding new meaning in the contradictory forces tearing through. She faces what she herself has unleashed. The speaker asks: "How will You end / me now." (79) and responds: "It's like this: If I die :: I'll give birth to something :: to nullify" (87), again summoning the end rhyme that temporarily brings order to the words on the page.

As we near the final poem of the collection, we end in an unexpected place, in fact we might not have ever left: the hypothesis, the renowned impetus for all scientific discovery. Instead of a grand declaration or resignation, the speaker simply ends with "{*what if*}" (96), proposing one last time a hypothesis. The end both arrives and births a new beginning.

::: sling-

{shot} faulty & error :::

was it :: {in would be} :: ever :: real

is there {am next} & will we

:: sing ::

{o perhaps You

& You & I

will until

something

:: Greater than ::

gives—}

o o o what if

{what if}

(p. 96).

Much like Ben-Oni's *Atomic Sonnets* (Black Warrior Review), the scientific language in these poems bubbles, zaps, overflows, and spins off into new dimensions. The poems immerse us into the same matter that comprises atoms, at once strong, unpredictable, and mysterious forces. As readers, we see the inner workings of what could be possible through physics as we know it – or what might happen if we were to nullify all that we know and give into the forces that underpin our physical existence. These are poems of discovery, crafted by a poet who unlocks and unleashes the extraordinary power tied to each word she wields.



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