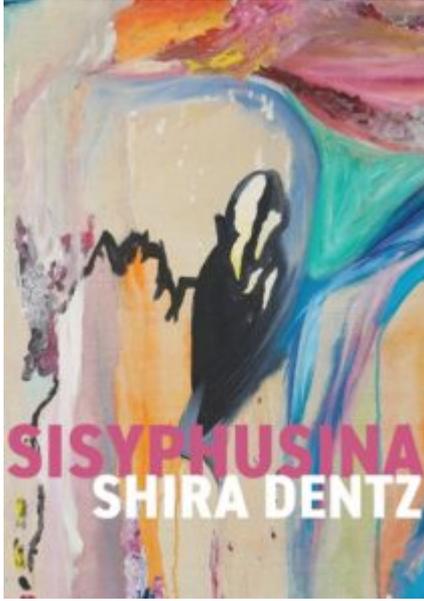


# Sisyphusina and the Myth of Separation

written by Guest Contributor | July 13, 2020



*Sisyphusina* by Shira Dentz

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In Greek myth, the gods punish Sisyphus by making him roll a boulder up a hill, which then always rolls back down, and he must repeat this action in perpetuity. One imagines that this boulder that rolls down the hill again and again accumulates dirt and creates a growing struggle to push it up the hill. In Shira Dentz' new multi-media book of poetry, *Sisyphusina*, from [PANK] Books, it is not a boulder that the narrator must contend with. *Sisyphusina*'s perpetual labor is life, the body, aging, and gender: life within an aging woman's body. While there is this socio-political tendency to examine these aspects as stand-alone qualifiers of and deviations from the "universal man," this is not reality. These aspects of the narrator's experience are all rolled into one subjectivity because there is no "universal man." One exists in a specific, marked body. *Sisyphusina* confronts the myth of separation.

Dentz writes about the constant discomfort of life: an office that is never the right temperature and has motion-sensor lights, cravings for sweets denied over worry about weight, chin hairs that appear, and the feeling of being unbeautiful as the woman's supposed decorative purpose is stymied by age. In "Metonymies," Dentz recounts an incident of a girl chipping a tooth and, later in life, deciding not to re-fill the crack, finding it not worth the trouble. However, she then poses the question, "Why do I/cover my gray then? Is gray a different kind of mark?" It seems significant that the chipped tooth is a mark from childhood whereas gray hair is a mark of age. Being a woman means choosing which imperfections to hide and which to display, but those decisions are influenced by the invisible, arbitrary measurement of social acceptability. In "Eva 1 & Eva 2," she writes, "As i

pinpoint hairs to pull out of my chin. i want my skin soft and/smooth so that when my imaginary lover touches it's baby soft." A woman is always under the gaze of another, even when alone. There is always an imaginary judgmental viewer on the female body.

The predatory male gaze heightens a woman's awareness and self-consciousness about her body. In "Cabinets," the narrator dreams about her father's hands reaching out of the shower wall to pull her in. She says, "I wanted to run outdoors/for help, but was in my skimpy summer pajamas and it wouldn't be decent even/though I was desperate. I didn't want to act unself-consciously because, that, I knew/from experience, could result in being prey." The experience of being a woman (or one who is socially designated as "woman" regardless of gender identity) is to always be conscious of one's own body, to always have to think, "What will make me prey?" One cannot simply exist in a body marked as "woman." It is a constant anxiety to monitor oneself through the view of a predatory gaze. The mind must always be connected to the body in this way for survival.

Earlier in this nightmare, she tries to will the dream away with her mind. The mind and body are at once connected and disconnected. The mind remembers a terrifying bodily experience and re-interprets it as a dream. The dream feels like a bodily experience, but it isn't. The mind also knows that it isn't a bodily experience and tries to will it away. At the same time, the mind exists within the body. It is not truly separate. The experience of being a human is this mind-body tension, but living in a marked, othered body means this mind-body relationship is infiltrated by terror.

Dentz extends this challenge of the mind-body relationship to the author-character relationship in "Units & Increments." It is a poem that repeats its text in different iterations. Amongst descriptions of foods that the narrator wants to eat, the unsatisfying foods that the narrator considers as substitutions, exercise, uncomfortable office conditions, anger, and a crush, Dentz also repeats, "There is no author here." A character is formed from the author's thoughts, but Dentz takes this further to discard that line between author and character. The author writes from a body and a subjective experience of the repetitive conditions of one's life. One eats, and then one must later eat again, and one must think about eating. One exists physically and emotionally, and the physical and the emotional are also not separate. In "Eva 1 & Eva 2," the narrator is a writer trying to create a character. Dentz takes the reader through the thought process of developing a character, of mirroring the self, and of distraction. The writer exists outside the text and inside the text at once.

Humans also exist in outdoor environments. Dentz includes descriptions of the natural world throughout the book. There are lakes, mountains, and pink skies, and humans and animals that inhabit the environment. Dentz combines natural and human-made objects, beauty and ugliness, in several poems. In "a suit a suit makes," there is a "nude-colored plastic bag" from the grocery in the narrator's car that she feels inexplicably attached to. Then she describes "salmon-colored mountains," which she then clarifies: "salmon makes them sound prettier. they're dumps of earth." The poem makes clear that there is no separation between the natural and human-made in the human experience.

Furthermore, this idea of the natural as beautiful and the human-made as ugly is a false dichotomy.

Roses are a recurring image in the poems. They symbolize both beauty and youth at once, and the two ideas joined in this symbol are also the two ideas conflated. There are even two poems, "rose" and "r o s e," where the text is shaped into a rose. They are made up of words that have little to do with either youth or beauty, like "cayenne" and "economy," which neutralizes the symbology of the rose. The rose is simply an object among others, which exists outside of human interpretation.

The physical embodiment of text is usually an apparition. We see the words on the page, but this seeing is largely unconscious as we interpret what we read. Fonts are often meant to be unobtrusive, invisible, so as not to distract from a text's meaning. Dentz challenges this in much of her work by enhancing the text. Different sizes and bolding are used to emphasize some words over others. Text is interrupted by image, and one must read around and within images. Text is not an inert entity. It is a visible manifestation of thought. Text is embodied.

In "Eva 1 & Eva 2," the narrative breaks apart both syntactically and formally. The poem is re-arranged and re-structured, apportioned in stanzas. Some text is bolded and bigger. On the right side of the page is a dot with a vertical line that draws the eye down the page. On top of the page is a horizontal line, as though it pushes the poem down, pushing like the oppression of the narrator's anger. It ends with a line that resembles a human hair. The next poem, the first one titled "Sisyphusina" (there are three of them), does the opposite: it proliferates. Words from the beginning of the poem are expanded on at the end of the poem. Words that are both verbs and nouns expand meanings based on contexts and syntactical order. The objects of the poem—ghost, rose, lace, bee hive—are things that gradually increase over time (there will always be more ghosts), much like the female body that proliferates and ages.

Text as image is combined with other images in *Sisyphusina*. The poem "copy" is white text overlaid on a photocopy of a hand. Letters become images: X's are "birds' feet" and M's comprise "a mountain range." One exists within an environment, the shape of which in turn influences writing. Text in a circular shape asks, "how does repetition affect meaning?" There is no before nor after this question; it cannot be read linearly. One must repeatedly ask the question about repetition. The form of the text represents its meaning. Dentz then addresses the photograph as a simultaneously contemporary and historical object: "an object caught between presence and absence of its subject." One exists both within and outside of one's historical, geographical, and temporal context through the photograph.

*Sisyphusina* breaks the artificial separation of art forms, of digital and analog art, and of interior and exterior text. The book combines photographic stills, drawings, charts, and other images, and text as visual art. Additionally, the book includes a link to a video component of the poem "saidst" titled "Rose Winter" and a QR code to listen to a musical performance in collaboration with the text. The book is not contained within

the physical object, and text is not restrained to the written word.

Photographs interrupt the text in "saidst." The same text repeats but is cut differently by different images. The intrusion of the images is much like the repetitive voice of the "saidst" (pronounced "sadist") of "the monster in my head." The photographs are stills from a video (the url is included on the page) in which Dentz reads the poem over video of a snowy yard and field, an interior room in which someone thumbs the palm of a small female mannequin, someone lying face down in the snow, and other images. At the end of the video, the camera is upside-down and moving, making it appear as though the horizon is bending wildly, like the earth might crack and fall into the sky. The horizon is an optical illusion of separation between earth and sky.

"Aging Music" is a set of instructions for an "improvisatory musical performance" that is framed as a meditation exercise. These instructions include that the audience is interspersed with the performers and that the environment is part of the performance. The context is the text, and the audience is also the text. There is emphasis of the merging of sounds because "merging with sound or silence will produce a resonant state of awareness." At the end of the poem is a QR code to listen to a performance by Pauline Oliveros, "created as part of a collaborative multi-media piece extending from *Sisyphusina*." The music is eerie and tense, with prolonged strings and brass punctuated by percussion, doors banging, and people laughing. In the middle, there is an almost silence that is then broken by slow wind chimes or a xylophone. At times, it sounds like whale songs, a sci-fi movie score, birds, insects, water, human voices, field recordings, and traffic. It is as though the orchestra were an ecosystem of fauna. There are random noises from many different instruments, much like animals in a forest, each instrument-animal making its own call, arriving and retreating as it is stimulated by its surroundings. The human animal is also included, much the way Dentz easily blends humans and human-made artifacts with natural settings in her other poems. We want to imagine a separation exists between human and nature, but this separation doesn't exist.

This merging, these boundary crossings, through all of *Sisyphusina* is a way for the reader to examine subjectivity and connectivity. The border between interior and exterior is porous, like skin, and one cannot so easily determine a difference between one and another. Dentz shows us that all of life happens at once, and facets of experience are simultaneous and inseparable.

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**Adrienne Dodt** is a poet and sometimes essayist. Adrienne's poetry chapbook *Return* was published by Damask Press in 2015. Ze also has a poem featured on the *X-Files* tribute EP *Purity Control*, released in 2015 by What's For Breakfast? Records/We Used To Drink Together Records. From 2013-2016, ze was a regular contributor to the *Spoon River Poetry Review* blog. Most recently, zir play *The Weird Sisters* was performed in October 2019. Adrienne teaches English as a Second Language in Chicago.