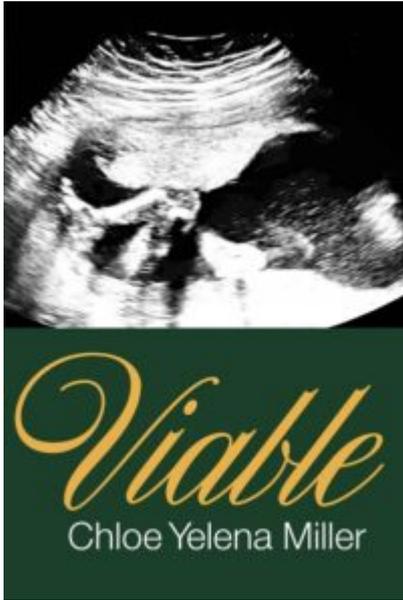


# [Review: Viable by Chloe Yelena Miller](#)

written by Guest Contributor | March 22, 2021



*Viable* by Chloe Yelena Miller  
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[Bookshop](#) / [B&N](#) / [Amazon](#)  
94 pages – poetry

As a culture, we prefer sunny stories of motherhood, where the “mommy” is blissfully exhausted yet cheerfully engaged with her charge. When the un-airbrushed truth comes out, it’s often greeted with disbelief and hostility. Take, for example, the reaction to Chrissy Teigen’s brave telling of her miscarriage. Many insisted they didn’t want to hear about the tragic transition from one state to another. Instead, the taboo of miscarriage renders this very common experience not just unspeakable, but impossible.

As poet Chloe Yelena Miller explores in *Viable*, her newly-released collection from Lily Poetry Review, the liminal state of pregnancy is embodied both internally—within the primordial cosmos of the womb—and externally, where one’s identity is perceived and interpreted by others, which is reflected in the very language used to characterize pregnancy and parenthood. With poignancy and precision, Miller’s collection charts the experience of two pregnancies, one birth, caretaking as a new parent, and postpartum depression, without framing motherhood as an inevitable destination, or a foregone conclusion.

*Viable* begins by exploring the in-between state of grieving a miscarriage, which Miller represents through a play on the verb “to be.” In “Wasn’t,” Miller describes: “Before anyone else knew / I was pregnant, / I wasn’t.” The knowledge of the pregnancy is what makes it “real.” The lack of awareness on the part of “anyone else” further shrouds the experience in mystery, erasing the grief suffered and compounding the pain. A miscarriage, in this

way, becomes further unseen, and also unspeakable.

A bilingual writer, fluent in Italian, Miller zeros in on the limitations of language as a means of encompassing life and death. In "Carrying," she writes:

*To be, such a weak verb.*

*To howl, to breathe, to linger,*

*more viable*

In "Meaning to Be," a friend suggests a miscarriage indicates the baby wasn't "meant to be," employing a cliché while demonstrating insensitivity to the meaning of "to be" as "to live," or "exist." Miller pushes back against this obtuse dismissal, employing tense variation to insist:

*But, I want to say,*

*My baby was meant to be*

*She was meaning to be.*

*She had meant to be.*

Slight variations of "meaning," which can also describe intent, redefine miscarriage as a passive occurrence. Instead, Miller imbues the fetus with intent and therefore life, rendering the pain of this loss all the more acute.

Throughout, Miller's work reflects an interest in the ironies of language and the emotional nuances they reveal, as well as the sexist superstitions embedded in the language that makes meaning of pregnancy itself. A found poem called "Pregnancy" offers absurd, condescending, and downright shaming advice culled from women's magazines. This poem is juxtaposed against the one that follows, titled "Proverbs," which includes common admonishments such as not to announce a pregnancy until after the first trimester. The positioning of the two highlights the ridiculousness of all such advice as an attempt to order the chaos of creation, as if each pregnant person could control every aspect of their fecundity, including the body's interior workings.

Instead, Miller's poems reveal again and again that life in all its stages and states is awe-inspiring, frightening, and ultimately entirely out of our control. When the miscarriage is discovered, the black and white sac on the ultrasound screen is described as "galactic space debris"—an empty universe, a nothingness that contains the potential for everything. A womb is an unknowable, internal world, nestled within the warm, animal dark of the body.

When Miller describes another pregnancy, this time ending in a live birth, she is careful not to erase the one that resulted in miscarriage, writing,

"My second pregnancy ended in C-section." The experience of hope and grief is reflected upon throughout the collection, providing a framework for the relationship with the baby born by C-section:

He had been inside

knew me the way no one else did

What does he think of me, now?

The comma placed in the last line of the stanza expresses hesitation and insecurity. A whole new relationship is forming, as the life inside becomes external, and therefore independent. The terror of new motherhood is expressed in this moment of instantaneous being—a manifestation—which therefore carries opinion, or judgement: "What will my child think of me?" Miller wonders.

At birth, the baby is awarded an independent identity, and the mother's identity is also redefined and reduced by the complex classification of "mother." Miller addresses the transformation as a kind of erasure and rejects the trope of pregnant woman as sacred vessel, a bowl to be emptied: "Empty, I'm renamed woman – Mom."

The final poem of the collection is titled "Your Creation Story." Miller addresses her now-six-year-old directly, telling him, "It comes to this: Your creation is yours." The journey is not a journey at all but an epic, agency passed from one being to another to create a legacy of life and experience.

Miller maps her experience not as an inevitably inclining narrative, with a live birth as the happy ending, but as a topography of feeling. Here we find an example of the emotional syzygy of parenthood, where grief is contrasted against joy, exhaustion existing alongside exaltation. It is an experience, not only an identity, to be called "Mom." Yet the contours of identity shift and change: the self is not simply replaced, one archetype swapped for another, but continues to adapt, however painfully. Miller's nuanced poetry lays bare the contrast of falling in love with your new child, while also suffering greatly from the challenges and change that come with it. Readers who've never experienced pregnancy or parenthood will relate to this cognitive dissonance, as will any female-bodied person who's struggled with the biological imperative. Thoughtful and intensely moving, *Viable* embodies that dichotomy with grace and poignancy.

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**Lindsay Merbaum**'s essays, interviews, and reviews have appeared in [Bitch](#), *The Rumpus*, and [Electric Literature](#), among others. Her first novel, *The Gold Persimmon*, will be released from Creature Publishing in October. She also serves as co-editor of Book Reviews at Necessary Fiction.