

SUGAR
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REVIEW



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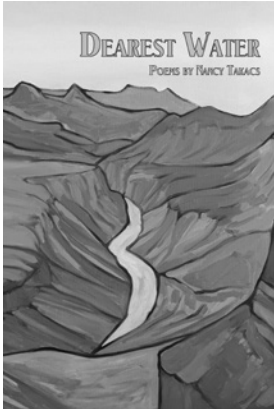
SUMMER 2022



POETRY

DEAREST WATER
BY NANCY TAKACS
(Mayapple Press, 2022)

REVIEW BY KEVIN MILLER



Nancy Takacs' new collection *Dearest Water* reveres life's wild, jeweled beauty. The title's opening endearment is language to fit the times. Beloved, these poems consider precious resources, people, and places with a fury to fight extinction. Takacs' keen sensibilities and exact language combine with a painter's eye for color and texture to showcase natural, sacred places. Her poems are diverse in approach including lyric, narrative, direct address, and persona poems. These poems are affirmations edged with tenderness, steeped in compassion, wary of danger.

The section "For Women Only" opens with a poem after Tony Hoagland's "For Men Only." Takacs' poem, also the section title, responds with a sleek confidence, "it wasn't easy inventing the language, / turning our mmm's and ah's / into hummingbirds and gardens." She finds strength in the women's 'wings':

*My mothers and I went on
to invent many gardens,
rambling roses, apple trees.
We fluttered in the honeysuckle
trailing our green wings behind us.*

This poem shows the hollow-bone strength of women, the beauty of the garden, the transformation to strength, and recurring wings:

*We ate outside listening
to the sparrows and chickadees,
on our glass table that shattered
once when lightning struck it.*

*It was then we invented
the portable table,*

*sprang it open near lakes
where we swam the butterfly
to the deep, and back a couple of times.*

It highlights resilience, the ability to soar, and humor. The women of section one “dwell in possibility,” the windows numerous, the doors are “Superior Doors.” In a timely “supply-chain” phrase, they are “out of doors” and into the wild.

In “Remnants,” aunt and niece share a special after-Mass trip to the garment district. Takacs’ tactile sense is a recurring touch throughout the collection:

*she was so good
at her own designs
and invisible seams
she became loose with pleasure
as our palms felt the prickles
of weave, our wrists the feather
of selvage.*

*Over our arms
we hung watered silks
and sheer chiffons*

The result of the shared knowledge that aunt teaches niece is as strong as the toughest fabric: “I learned about luxury / for almost nothing, how to eye / the sharp store owner, / and bargain bitterly / for whatever I love.”

Takacs blends practical knowing with the niece’s fierce learning, and “bargain bitterly for whatever I love” is the poet at her finest. Another example of the felt image occurs in “Making Up.” She captures the reconnection of lovers after an argument. In this deft, tactile image, Takacs describes a tentative reconciliation: “holding a hand can be like a hornet in a balloon.” The sting in relationships comes with the territory as she ends “Fossil Fish,” a poem about parents after a day of fishing ends with its own sharp truth: “some days / they baited their lines / and never argued.”

In “The Beekeeper,” Takacs praises the woman artist, keeper, and student who “watches to see what they will do.” And what the keeper learns from the bees, she uses to teach us: “she has learned the word *let*, the word *inter*, // leaves the bees more / than enough honey for winter.” And this line instructs us: “She is careful / not to walk between the beelines / from heather to hives.” Pay attention.

Interspersed with her work with the bees, the artist-beekeeper returns to sculpting “the girl / who has been all along cradling the bird / in her light-filled studio.” In a sense the description of the keeper mirrors the work of the poet. “She is in love with the work / that has come from flowers” is apt for keeper and poet. Like the artist beekeeper moves from bees to sculpting, Takacs deftly shifts between precious resources, people, places, and things wild.

The poet respects the beeline, finds her way around, her way out of the way with care for what is wild. Poems meander into discovery, praise, and surprise. In “Amethysts” a neighbor, Diane, faces a series of physical setbacks with charms and wisdom. “Once a union negotiator, / Diane flew the world, / working her charm.” Diane says, “I’m a good witch, careful with amethysts. I drink / two glasses of wine each day at six.”

The wonders of the path reveal gems, foreshadow the weave of the wild and hidden jewels in later sections. In the poem “Utah Garden,” “poppies are the ones raising hell... their flaming crepe, / their centers dark / and alive as bees.” The opening section ends with the speaker sitting in her son’s room, in her mother’s maple chair, where she reflects on the story of her conception. In “Resurfacing,” she paints:

*in a warm bath, I stab and swirl
my brushes in Forest, Viridian, Spring,
letting them bleed new leaves
that wander into a desert April,
drift and burst into stars.*

The poet is in the comfort of dearest water alive with possibilities and watercolor.

The section “Wildness” opens with the poem “Wolverine,” a work of praise and wit as the speaker tells the skunk bear they are alike, loners, then admits being “too soft, lounging on her futon... digesting tasty memories of Proust.” Takacs’ self-effacing humor is refreshing. She shows scorn for those boiling lobsters alive and chagrin for her own eating the eyed scallops. It is a complex journey from sweater wool to wolf hunts.

“The Garden State” moves between New Jersey and Wisconsin, and it ends with two couplets searing a kept memory:

my mother always knowing where I was

as she eased open the window screen,

*pinning our swimsuits on the line,
not yet calling me in for supper.*

The image of the mother pinning suits is powerful, the sacred moments between the call for dinner, perfect.

In keeping with the beekeeper and the notion of women who know and show the way, “the oldest woman in Minocqua” walks on water and knows the difference between ICE and ice and tells. In “Ice,” the talkative store owner at lakeside:

*cleats across it till spring, earrings dangling
beneath her earmuffs, to talk politics, telling
others over their sausage gravy that climate
change is on our doorsteps, and now ICE*

*is using our taxpayer money to deport
all the good people in cities—*

The path out of the beeline winds to precious resources. The collection’s title poem, “Dearest Water,” is its most haunting poem. In twenty-two lines, a direct and unwavering thump to the chest makes clear how dear water can be.

The poem “Meditation” ends with this stanza:

*Or when I say a prayer
why I always think of what is woven.
Not a prickly pear, alone.*

The weave continues in these poems. The prickly pear’s fruit bears striking resemblance to the votive candle. A focused offering, lovely in its image, still the prayer we have in this collection is “what is woven.” Takacs makes loose ties, airy in their plait, as the final stanza in the section on hidden jewels shows:

*It’s not a long way off,
this end not really an end
but a way of going wholly
into our wings, into
the hearts of our bodies.*

Wholly and holy, the collection closes with two longer poems in a section called “Notes to God from County Road H.” The first of the two, “Drought,” continues the emphasis on dearest water. Takacs’ note-like style offers a series of short, conversational prayers, “Notes to God,” or notes to self in their own prayer-like consideration:

*I watch the soft mouths
of range cows,
in the hot desert, eating the last
bale of alfalfa.*

*They are black,
so beautifully black,
breaths wet and green
as they sway toward
my empty hands.*

Nancy Takacs’ poems continue the care and keeping of sacred beings, places, and resources. *Dearest Water* is a reverent bow to water, to what is precious and essential until the end, “which is not really an end / but a way of going wholly / into our wings, into / the hearts of our bodies.”