

Action Books Press

Cute Girls Watch When I Eat Aether is Maria Hardin's debut poetry collection. She is a Swedish American artist and poet who originally wrote under the pen name Mai Ivfjäll. Hardin's book is a collection of her life, sharing personal experiences and what she wishes to become. With powerful imagery and intense language, each poem creates a new understanding of the fragmented self "i" narrator. The feminine voice discusses the different experiences the body holds from eating disorders to chronic pain to a body of nothingness, making Hardin's contemporary style experimental and imaginative.

Hardin's short poems take up about a fourth of the page, staying in a single stanza. They incorporate space between words and phrases forming a small imperfect square. Her opening poem "Fragment #2" explores how women are treated like items one can have ownership of. The narrator accepts this possessiveness and is aware that eventually she will be discarded when she is too much to handle. This piece quickly introduces the reoccurring representation of women's issues. Although deeply meaningful, her shorter poems are quicker to decipher.

Her longer poems cover more pages when ideas cannot be simplified into a small space. These poems are often three pages with a single stanza covering about half of a page. In "Poembody" she begins depicting chronic pain, writing the line, "what is a word for chronic pain that doesn't sound mallcore?" (Hardin 16). The length allows for deeper exploration of poetic elements. The sense of frustration is strong in this poem as there is anger toward language when people often overuse words, making them lose their meaning. Her chronic pain is no longer taken seriously since the words to describe her pain are normal for people to speak. Readers sit longer with Hardin's words, bearing the weight of her lines, slowly learning more about the poet's life.

She also utilizes repetition, especially when the narrator is frustrated that nothing has changed, therefore forced to experience it all again. She sometimes repeats the same line in separate poems, managing to refit the repeated line into a new idea or reiterate an existing idea. In her poem, "With the Cuties or I Will Intone," Hardin manipulates the rhythm by incorporating blank space in between lines,

“your body is
nothing my body is
nothing our
bodies are nothing” (Hardin 47).

This choice is calculated as it helps add to the meaning of the poem. She pulls on the idea of the fragmented self, literally showing on the page how one is separate from its body. The blank spaces cut into the rhythm, creating an auditory fragment. She introduces the experience of feeling separate from her body, building on the idea of nothingness, almost creating a sense of dissociation. Hardin's choices cut into various elements of poetry, creating depth from singular choices.

Hardin's imagination creates unnatural images depicting the narrator's experiences throughout the poems. In “Halo,” she revisits discussing her chronic pain, “unravel it onto the hospital floor let pain become my prayer / let my prayer become my incantation, my lullaby” (Hardin 64). The first line paints an out of place image of a hospital patient “unraveling” their pain. She is putting it on full display for everyone to see, memorizing it. She builds on the familiarity of her chronic pain as it invades her life, even invading her language. Her diction adds to the imagination, pushing readers to grab a dictionary so they can dive into Hardin's mind.

Hardin plays with religious undertones throughout her poetry, even connecting herself to the Virgin Mary. In “Mariaology”, which is also the name of her website, she wishes to take the place of the Virgin Mary, not in a religious manner, but to become the Maria that is remembered. She reclaims the word “Mariaology”, a study revolving around the Virgin Mary, using it to define herself. The poem ends with the fear of being forgotten, of becoming nothing. Sometimes she turns these religious snippets vulgar, like “the canticle of my cunt” in “Poembody”. Her religious usage is often a restructuring of the word to fit her poetic style, reflecting her personal experiences. Her language is powerful, leading readers to form a prayer as they read her poetry.

Hardin's depth allows her poetry to connect to the feminine experience, making them relatable to such readers. In her poem “PICA” she discusses eating disorders, “is this nourishment/ or violence is consumption care” (Hardin 13). She creates themes of cannibalism as the narrator's body eats herself, or the fragmented versions of herself. The questioning tone pushes for answers, realization. This poem is reflective of the violence of an eating disorder, a struggle

which is felt throughout the rest of her poetry as she discusses women's issues or dealing with pain. Her depth weighs on the readers, allowing for a deeper sense of connection.

Hardin's debut poetry collection is experimental and imaginative, giving readers a new experience. The fragmented "i" narrator captures the struggles people face. To read these poems, one must give it sincere time and attention, and only then will they enter Hardin's mind and see the beauty and intention of her stylistic writing.