

ON ELEGIACA AMERICANA

from **HOLE IN THE HEAD re:VIEW A Review of Elegiaca Americana** by

Claire Millikin - Jeri Theriault

The title of this collection, *elegiaca americana*, casts the entire book as an elegy for American culture, with poems offering commentary on climate change—"a fierceness at our backs," plastics "trashing us" as they "infiltrate oceans"—or America's military-industrial complex, where "... children / will always count less to America than bombs." Millikin calls America "a stolen world."

The central elegy in *elegiaca americana*, however, is for the speaker's loss of innocence. Traumatic secrets, never to be shared, lurk in her childhood home. Mother teaches daughter to "tell lies to keep the secret safe." Both parents seem to offer menace: "mother put me to bed without a word, / because I'm my father's favorite." Even normal-seeming activities suggest a threat. When the father teaches the daughter to play pool in the back room, a hint of something amiss comes when the natural world pulls the daughter's attention away from the domestic scene, as though she is dissociating from the moment. She sees "the pear tree, the jacaranda, frangipani, / glistening beads in unforgivable / ropes of light," the word "unforgivable" transforming the moment from innocent to troubling, a vulnerability suggested by the outdoors permeating the walls of the house. Likewise, the rain, a recurring image, suggests a property being swallowed or blurred, as in "A thousand years of rain under the roots of the longleaf pines" "and even inside the house there are "centuries of rain / behind the mirrors."

While the speaker cannot bring herself to completely break the taboo against sharing secrets so long buried within the house and within herself, she creates a kind of gothic blur for the reader, the way a well-done horror film creates mood with place details and camera angles, suggesting that the monster or murderer will appear at any moment.

She is explicit about some of the trauma: the death of a twelve-year-old cousin who surprised her father "with his mistress, holding his gun," or the speaker herself at the age of fourteen placed "in solitary confinement, / as punishment for run-away." The father is threatening, the mother an accomplice. "I wasn't safe / in my father's house but had nowhere else." She longs for her mother even though the mother's needs weigh her down, "the way the drowning hold on to anything, anyone." The daughter must choose her own survival over her mother's, a choice akin to leaving the South which claims her, while simultaneously "casting her out."

In the poem "Elegiaca," she can find no way "through to the self," a loss she deems generational:

Because

no one knows where great-grandfather came from
except the name of the county, Muscogee. He walked east
toward Savannah, building a house for his ghosts.

The house is still full of those ghosts, the color of rain. Maybe the speaker robs the house of its power by making it so insubstantial. A house is only a building, after all. But who is the family who lived there for generations? There is a sense of mystery: "no one knows where the grandfather came from," and the county name, Muscogee, suggests a ghostly connection to the indigenous people from whom the land was stolen.

The speaker clearly identifies with the ghosts of the old house. She is a "simulacrum orphan," "thin as paper money." At 13, she comes "to dislike being seen." In twelve "selfie" poems, however, she makes a valiant attempt to reclaim her lost self, so long blurred by the history of the house and her own incomplete memories. One of the selfie poems, "Selfie in Willow Drive

"Backyard" presents the willows as mourning figures, calling them "pleurants," which means "weeping" in French. In English "pleurants" are sculpted mourning figures inside a tomb. Referring to the willows in this way suggests a dissolution between the outdoor grounds of the house and its interior, and equates the house with a tomb. The poem is an assertion of self, but, blurred by rain, that self is less than clear. Perhaps the speaker is committing to her own survival, declaring the willows her teachers: "The world I am always building began from you, / water nymphs at the base of roots, / this work of drowning and rising." This is both an admission of vulnerability and an identification with "rising," a declaration of indomitability.

In the other selfie poems, moths fill the house and become darts, shadows become words, "a mother tongue for grief," while some surviving winter elms create "veined structures of hard life's breath," like ghosts or the mourners brought to life by the willows. "Nothing comes back," the speaker declares, and "a principle of the world is disappearance." Even a suitcase, symbol of her leaving, becomes hunger, "its mouth open in the dark / drinking distances."

Millikin resolves her speaker's searching and loneliness by zooming out and returning to the largeness of her elegy—offering a dirge not only for her own childhood or her family, but for the whole country:

America was always on edge.
It wasn't just us, seeking home somewhere.
It was everyone, looking for a home
as if America were open, and not stolen.

The overwhelming sense of these poems is of a speaker coming out of the mist, a ghost in her own life, to tell her story and reclaim that life. This proclamation of self is heroic and real, a breaking of the rule of silence, the commandment of the childhood household. Like the little girl in a fairy tale, left without a way back home, Millikin's heroic speaker mingles with the ghosts, exploring the wilderness as she searches. The denouement of this heroine's journey is not a return to the house, but rather a return to self.

Jeri Theriault has received 2023 Maine Arts Commission Literary Arts Fellowship, the 2023 Monson Arts Fellowship, the 2022 NORward Prize, and a 2019 Maine Literary Award. Her poems and reviews have appeared in *The Rumpus*, *The Texas Review*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Plume*, and many other journals. Jeri's poetry collections include *Radost*, *my red* and *In the Museum of Surrender*. In 2021, she edited *WAIT: Poems from the Pandemic*. She lives in South Portland, Maine. <https://www.jeritheriault.com>