

Review of *Cleave*
By Kathryn Ionata

Cleave: Poems
By Darla Himeles
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The cover of *Cleave*, Darla Himeles's first full-length poetry collection, features a painting of two hands tentatively cradling an empty bird's nest. It's an apt image, as a significant portion of the text focuses on the speaker's fervent desire to conceive a child. "Early May, I held my arms // for your imagined weight," Himeles writes, speaking to both the absence of a child as well as the sense that he or she exists already. The word "nesting" is sometimes used in reference to parents preparing for a baby, but more broadly it means to build a home, and Himeles explores the concept of home throughout these poems. Oftentimes, she shows the presence of violence in the home. Himeles is unflinching in her depiction of violence, but there is also so much grace, humanity, and humor here.

I noticed birds as a motif throughout this collection. Sometimes they appear as descriptive detail, but more often they take on significant roles. In the clever "Still Trying," Himeles describes a child stomping her feet in the presence of a gull, much like the gull itself does to force worms to the ground's surface. This poem appears after a number of others that involve the wish to have a child, and the "trying" of the title calls to mind the abbreviation for "trying to conceive" or "trying for a baby." The gull is trying to get food through its temper tantrum-like action, and the speaker wonders if "life will rise," perhaps in the form of an infant, if she digs in her own feet forcefully enough. Birds appear again in "Chino, California," where the speaker watches crows fight while waiting for her father to be released from prison. Far

from a gull who just wants to eat, these crows have “beaks like swords” and “slashing wings.” Their dangerous behavior acts in tandem with the figure of a violent father that recurs in a number of poems.

More so than birds, violence is everywhere in this book. Even a “daybed” is “stab-sprunged.” Himeles delves into childhood trauma and also looks outward at the threats facing refugees, women hiking alone, and more. Sometimes this violence is shockingly rendered, but the reading experience is tempered by the extraordinary things Himeles does with language. She often connects the natural world, especially animals, with the violent, using skillful wordplay and association. As poet Lorine Niedecker writes about cold air “mous[ing]” in — with “mouse” being used as a verb, and no mouse to be seen in the poem — Himeles describes a woman’s movements as “You buck / then fawn” in a poem with no actual deer. Rather, the figure in the poem acts this way out of posttraumatic stress. She feels, perhaps, hunted, poised to run.

In this uniformly strong collection, I still had a few favorites. The brief, taut “Tony the Cat” shows a father who “hurled” his children’s cat “like a javelin.” Of every line in this book, this is the one that embossed itself into my brain. But the happier poems are often just as impactful. “Prayer for a Marriage” imagines the speaker and her wife “old, hunched and softened” but still “kiss[ing] / in the open street, three hours late” for dinner because they have been at home doing the same. The joy in this poem leaps off the page.

I will not soon forget the playful “For the FedEx Guy,” which is full of wonderful surprises. When the FedEx guy appears at the speaker’s house, it was impossible not to think of William Carlos Williams’s “The Young Housewife,” and the parade of men coming to her door

to deliver ice, fish, and possibly much more. In Himeles's poem, the delivery man is a "warrior," a "trouper / of duty and pride," and he hopes the woman answering the door is "warm inside." The repeated long "I" sounds and iambic meter create a musical quality to the language that contributes to the playfulness of the poem.

Himeles queerly subverts Williams's housewife-delivery man trope by revealing the contents of the package she's accepting: frozen sperm that she will use to hopefully become pregnant. But this is no sterile medical procedure. As the speaker bids farewell to the FedEx guy, she notes, "I'll take / it from here, with my wife..." Thus, task completed, the delivery man is rendered unnecessary, as are men in general (minus genetic content).

Himeles continues to play with expectation and surprise in "Marriott Hotel, Marina del Rey," a true stunner of a poem that seems the collection's apotheosis of theme and image. The hotel's red-indigo carpet reminds the speaker of "busted lips, peculiar // welts on a mouth's petals." Again, in the innocuous, there is violence. Then, from a figurative flower to a literal one, the speaker describes her father clumsily dipping his head to smell a lily, then getting pollen all over his face and hands. He is so bumbling, so inelegant, that the speaker wonders, in one of the most disarming moments of the collection,

How could I not still love you,
even after your knife bloomed

my mother's chest, even after
your fist split your new partner's lip

into a blued canyon?...

The juxtaposition of violence and beauty is startling. To imagine what it means for a knife to bloom is a sobering experience. An earlier poem in the collection, "What It Felt Like," describes the speaker's mother with a knife in her chest, but there, the speaker is a child who can only "run" and "pray." Now, the speaker is the one with the power to devastate:

...dear

father, dear terrible man,

thank the lilies

for my tenderness.

This is a poem that demands rereading. There is much to discover and rediscover. I came away from it, as well as so many of Himeles's other poems, thinking that it was not how I had expected the poem to go. Perhaps that experience can be applied to the speakers of these poems, as well: This is not what I expected, says the child watching their father commit a horrifying act of violence. This is not what I expected, says the American when the "molester president" is elected. But, as she notes to the long-desired baby daughter to whom the poem is addressed, "[I] conceived you anyway." In the face of the unthinkable, there is hope. There is a child who is no longer "the ether / to which we cleave," but real. A new kind of home.

