



**A.E. Hines, *Any Dumb Animal* [Main Street Rag, 2021]**

*A.E. Hines was a finalist in the 2021 Sandy Crimmins National Prize in Poetry.*

In reading A.E. Hines 2021 collection *Any Dumb Animal*, the reader becomes confidante, sharing the grief and rage of these poems and caring that the poet finds his way to the end of the book vindicated, or at least some sort of peace.

Organized into the sections “Revival,” “Regret,” and “Rebirth,” *Any Dumb Animal* struggles through violence, grief, and homophobia. Images of water flow through the collection. In several poems, the poet refers to nearly drowning in his youth. There is a breathlessness and urgency in many of the poems that amplifies the collection’s mood. The poem “How We Learn” establishes not only the near-drowning, but the way parents precipitate the danger and respond to

it. Through this poem’s straightforward narrative, much of the rest of the collection is foreshadowed and contextualized:

...I bob and choke,  
nothing in my ears but the terrifying roar  
of my own muffled screams.

The poem ends with a “non-swimming, apoplectic mother” and a child having to reconcile a father’s cruelty and a mother’s inability to save him. The rest of the collection feels like it is just catching its breath in the aftermath of this ordeal.

The first poem, “Phone Call” (the first of three poems with that title), also refers to the lingering, unresolved pain of drowning in a father’s cruelty. Poems about family from the perspective of both parent and child weave through the collection, reminding us how fraught those relationships are. Poems like “Revival” and “My Father’s Son,” also in the first section, highlight a child’s disconnect with parents and grandparents — some of whom are well meaning, and others who are not at all.

Not much further into the collection, Hines presents the perspective of a father processing the impact of a divorce on his own son. Several poems that refer to his son have a question at the center, such as the following in “Two”:

... “Why can’t you  
just divide the house in two...”?

The misunderstood text of the second “Phone Call” that starts the “Regret” section also presents an unasked question: *What is wrong?* The poem “How Many Minutes?” spirals around a child’s question of how long the pain of a jellyfish sting will last until the poet himself asks the same question:

“How many? What number?”  
And I realize he’s coping

by counting down, building up  
what courage a six-year-old can  
by imagining when his pain will end.

....

...just for awhile,  
at least, he's decided it best  
he go live with my ex.

Tell me, if you can. Give me a number.  
How long will I feel this pain?

The poem "Mirror" addresses the link the poet creates between his father and his son. In it, the poet is confronted by "the sound / of my own father [rattling] from [his] throat." Rather than give in to violent action— "That would be just like him, wouldn't it?" —the poet asserts his control and denies his father the terrible victory of perpetuating abuse:

Go ahead, you old bastard. Remake my body  
in your image. Reconfigure my face. I will  
never again let the dry lightning of your anger  
pass across my eyes. I will never let you  
into these hands.

The third "Phone Call" opens the "Rebirth" section and establishes a clear boundary: the poet as a force field protecting his son from his father, in any form his father might take.

The stretch through time can have a distorting effect on image or moment. Hines presents a version of nostalgia that is dangerous and heavy as water. Its weight can impede progress and hamper positive growth. The past is a scab that gets picked again and again. The poems "Almost Like Being Choked by a Lover," "Regret," and "Seventeen" among others interrogate gay adolescent sexuality. The poet discusses accepting abuse, imagining the reward that follows risk, and eventually escaping the secrecy built to appease his mother and the family's status in the neighborhood:

the convict made his escape to the woods,  
unshackled by Southern Comfort  
and Mountain Dew, and the first  
drunken boy who did not refuse  
a glance, a hand,  
a face falling into his lap.

The poems in the final section reflect a growing ease and concomitant rejection of shame. The discomfort and distortion of earlier poems clears up. Some poems express a quiet satisfaction with where the poet has arrived. Other poems, like "Mirror" and "Give Me a Dog Named Outrage" transform the grief and anger of earlier poems into a searing, purifying focus:

Give me a fury,  
with rusted metal whiskers  
and nostrils heaving flame,  
something nether-worldly and gnarled.  
A beast that, dare I give up on the world,  
stares from the darkened corner  
and considers eating me  
if I do.

In *Any Dumb Animal*, A. E. Hines exposes the cruelty and danger inherent in rigid adherence to traditional ideas of parenthood, religion, and masculinity. As a reader, I felt relieved reading the final poems. Using direct, emotionally evocative language, the poems crash and recede like waves wearing down the effects of a painful childhood and marriage. Eventually, healthier attitudes and relationships replace the damage, take root, and blossom.