

*Fabulous Beast*. Sarah Kain Gutowski. Huntsville: Texas Review Press, 2019. 98pp.

In her prose poem epilogue, Gutowski introduces two major threads of this collection: motherhood and myth. “—A long, long time ago, people used / stories to explain the world around them. When their daughters asked, / How was the earth made? they answered.../...My daughter thinks about this.—Do we use stories / to explain things now?” Gutowski’s collections answers; we use poetry to explain things now. The book has three heads; each section is centered on its own mythology and women are the central axis. The story of *The Sow* involves twenty-three poems; twenty-one of these with *Mother* in their title. *The Mother*. *Our Mothers*. *A Mother*. *The Sow* is a shape-shifter and yet not fully in control of her body; Gutowski offers a particular and jarring comparison between physical forms here: this is the truth of the mother. “For how long will she stay incarnate/ in this new shape? / For how long will she be/ locked in a strange skin, married to an alien name?” The sow is consumed and much of the imagery of this section touches on the raw nerve of motherhood truths: “She abhors her lack of patience/ with the piglet’s teeth”. Gutowski accesses the mind of the mother in this sow: “Birthing was less a miracle and more of a letting go”—and we are given the unaltered insight, the work and disappointment, the longings and the aches of being a mother. The lessons of these stories explain a more complex experience of mothering. “Like a shelf of snow too heavy for its tree limb, / she feels a piece of her second self fall away, the one who/birthing her young.” Mothers, Gutowski explains, are transformed and have many, many lives.

The use of story carries into the second section, where a new woman endures the physical and psychological torment Gutowski introduced in *The Sow*. Here we join the fairytale of *The Woman with the Frog Tongue*, “A long time ago, and very far away/ a little girl began to

speak with the language of birds.” Like the sow, the girl endures and is transformed, here trading her birdsong voice to a hobgoblin who curses her instead with the unruly frog tongue. The poems in this section are titled as chapters in the story or are questions, asked of the Mama, who seems to be telling this graphic tale of a woman silenced. “In time, the silence and the non silence—her stifled breath, / her furor without words—began to irritate/ like a hair unseen, will torture the skin it hangs against.” After the woman cuts off her tongue, Gutowski creates three possible endings for her story—this choose-your-own-adventure creates a looping back, “Once the children left the meadow, their ghosts hanging/ like clouds of dust and fog that couldn’t burn away;” this tri-ending both mimics the way a mother might tell a bedtime story one way one night, and then later change the ending, but it also speaks to the idea of the non-explanation, which is an offering of agency to the listener.

The third section, *Minor Gods*, returns to the prologue’s myth imagery; although each poem involves “A Woman...” in the title, the stories are of characters from classic mythology. The shift in story telling class from domesticated animal in *The Sow*, to fairytale in *The Woman with the Frog Tongue*, ascending to mythology in *Minor Gods*, demonstrates the progression of how stories have been used to explain our world; the talent of Gutowski is demonstrated in her ability to transform storytelling from an exterior to an interior phenomena. We learn about ourselves in these poems, we experience our pain, our silencing, our occupation by others. As Gutowski’s epilogue illustrates, as women and as mothers, we “recall that chaos, that lost control” and we make it into stories to explain ourselves to ourselves. “...I will tell you/ about your blood and the way it carries a word, repeated through the /pathways of your body.” Gutowski holds our belief and disbelief as women: our two hearts.



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