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Review: Boat Burned by Kelly Grace Thomas

Alexandra Umlas · Wednesday, January 15th, 2020

Kelly Grace Thomas is a master of metaphor. Her first collection of poems, *Boat Burned*, recently published by YesYes Books, is a testament to this fact. Tightly wrought and gorgeously written, these poems speak to what happens when there is no turning back, when we disembark on a new shore and then burn the boat on which we have arrived. In “Vesseled,” the first poem of the collection, Thomas writes, “Don’t you know how near drowning / sits? This isn’t something I can throw / overboard. I won’t go back.”

There is an urgency to the poems, a call for transformation of how we talk about mothers, daughters, women, bodies, storms, monsters, ownership, etc. The boat metaphor is striking for its ability to be many things at once. Burning the boats requires us to find new ways to journey, and each poem becomes a kind of boat of its own, carrying us to new discoveries and new ways of looking at things. Thomas asks, “If I am not boat / then what?” and in doing so bursts open the possibilities of metaphor, of all the things we are and can be. Boat becomes transportation, emptiness, violence, harbor, wood, safety—a multitude of possibilities rather than a single definition.



The boat metaphor is so powerful throughout the book, that I found myself thinking of boats even as I read poems that had nothing to do with boats. Thomas offers a love poem, which is also an effective political poem, in “I Suggest Omid Shaves his Beard,” writing, “Omid’s beard grows / fast with my worry. I fear / that half will never consider / the softness of his smile. / That Persians are poets. / That the sun rises / in the East.” In the poem, Omid’s beard becomes a kind of anchor in the collection, weighing the speaker down with worry while also providing a tether to identity and to one’s ability to be fully themselves even as “Half this country has eyes / like a loaded gun.”

Later, in “Dark Buoy,” the speaker recounts a dangerous encounter with the shore: “How it is dangerous / to leave / something chained up / so long.” Thomas’s collection speaks over and over to the unchaining of definitions and language and does so in both content and form, using metaphor, but also using language in other surprising ways to move the reader into new spaces.

Thomas plays with language and the possibilities it affords us. In “How the Body is Passed Down,” Thomas reverses our expectations when writing about how body image and shame can be both inherited and inherent in the female experience. Per her usual, there is a salient metaphor and line-breaks that startle us into a new way of seeing and keep us falling into the language of the poem: “My body has always been / a window I cannot throw myself / from”; additionally, Thomas also

employs chiasmus, where the construction of the sentence is reversed, to simultaneously stun and gut the reader: “I open / the fridge. Every time / the fridge opens me.”

Also, Thomas skillfully verbifies nouns throughout the collection so that what were people, places, or things become movement and action, furthering the idea that language and life are malleable and in a constant state of flux. In “The Houses I’ve Built,” Thomas writes, “Mom, I built this book / for you. Tell me a kitchen table / secret. Let’s heirloom each other” so that “heirloom” becomes something we can do, something that will last, rather than something to hold onto. Other examples include, “I stomach vacancy,” “*look how fast I / family*,” and “Watch as they pout, when we don’t / pay out. When the bling of our breasts doesn’t make them / Cheshire Cat the same.” The effect is an extraordinary one, the verbification giving the poems an unmatched vibrancy so that they seemingly breathe on the page, sometimes stretching, sometimes sprinting, sometimes squirming, like radiant animals newly released from their cages.

Yet another way *Boat Burned* surprises is by Thomas’s use of words that had not existed before. Newly birthed compound words like “blueburnt,” “boatburned,” “bloodwolf,” “tendertangle,” and “bloomdizzy” keep the reader surprised and delighted. Other times, a word that does exist gets repurposed in an unexpected way. In the shortest poem in the collection, “Another Fight About Omid’s Beard,” Thomas writes, “My friends say *you should consider your surroundings*. / And all I hear is *you’re surrounded*.” The simple juxtaposition of *surroundings* and *surrounded* illustrates the complexity of language and how it both allows us to be simultaneously delighted (surroundings) and trapped (surrounded). “To The Lobster We Cooked At Kenyon,” continues this theme of juxtaposition and paradox, “He said: *slaughter* / I said: *dinner* / It didn’t change / a thing.” And yet, these pairings of words change everything. We are unmoored, swept along, willing to see everything differently. In “I am No White Dress,” the waitress comes over “to take our hunger,” there is an “empty mug / and half eaten cages,” and “hospitals stuck / to the bottom of my cup.” This is a language of new shore, a language that rises out of the smoke of burning boats, the language of possibility.

Kelly Grace Thomas asks us to consider what we must destroy so that we can create. Each poem becomes a small vessel that we can climb aboard, but at some point we are asked to transcend the vessel, to become the vessel, or maybe to allow words to become the vessels that buoy and sustain us, that allow us to reconsider our place in the universe and how we have defined ourselves or have been defined by others. *Boat Burned* writes the destruction of what has been in order to allow the resurrection of hope, of newness, of breath, even when we are fully submerged. In “Dear Kerosene,” Thomas writes “I raze the house I live in. I bluff then burn / each boat. / There is no retreat.” Every poem in this collection matters. Every poem is a hook that both attaches us to our thoughts while simultaneously freeing our thinking. Thomas’s poems will both hold and sustain you. You will leave the collection changed, your own boat smoking on the shore, a horizon of possibilities stretched out before you.

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