

# Cultural Daily

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## Subterranean Lovesick Clues: Alexis Rhone Fancher's Poetic Topography of Sex

Angele Ellis · Wednesday, April 14th, 2021

Alexis Rhone Fancher might be Joan Didion's daughter turned red-hot poet. Rhone Fancher's first-person evocations of sexual love are landscapes of intensity and danger, located with laser-point specificity in a Los Angeles whose environment (both natural and manmade) shapes the erotic autobiography of a woman—or of numerous women—as much as ‘that Donna Karan sheath...with the slit up the side’ shapes the speaker's body in “Second Chances,” or the killer stilettos in “I Want Louboutin Heels” mold her feet in the relative chill of December, as follows:

...I want them slingback and peep-toed  
so I can flash the purple polish  
on my tootsies.

...

I want to wow them  
on Washington, saunter past C & O Trattoria  
and Nick's Liquor Mart, those bottles of Stoli  
stacked in the window, calling my name,

past the summer-clad tourists in December,  
shivering, barefoot, like L.A.  
has no winter.

*Erotic's* poems are punctuated with black and white photographs by the author, also a noted photographer. There are street scenes reminiscent of Edward Hopper (“[n]o one paints loneliness like he does” states Rhone Fancher in the Hopper-inspired poem “White Flag”) and cropped portraits of beautiful bodies, both posed and candid. These photos pulse with the sensual energy as well as the sadness of the poet's multilayered city. In “this small rain,” about the return of summer rain to “drought-wracked” Los Angeles, it is as if Rhone Fancher is taking snapshots:

...this small rain moves like a Latina  
over-plucks her eyebrows  
drinks Tequila shooters  
fronts a girl-band

...

this small rain settles on the hierba seca  
 sleeps under freeways  
 plays the lotto  
 is unlucky in love

Reader’s advisory: bring just one of the eighty poems in this collection into your imagination every day, or Rhone Fancher’s world—its tropical and desert lusts for flesh and revenge, its razorblade seesaws between ecstasy and despair—may overwhelm you. “...I eat Bukowski for breakfast,” the speaker boasts in the prose poem “This Is NOT a Poem,” and she’s not kidding. (For more on Rhone Fancher and her influences—including “LA Noir”—read [her 2015 interview with George Wallace](#) in *Great Weather for Media*.)

The ravenous romantic speaker of *Erotic*—a collection of new poems and work from two of Rhone Fancher’s five previous books, *How I Lost My Virginity to Michael Cohen* (Sybaritic Press, 2014) and *Enter Here* (KYSO Flash Press, 2017)—has loved both women and men since early adolescence. “Subterranean Lovesick Clues” traces the doomed arc of the speaker’s affair with Donna, “my first Catholic,” to the soundtrack of early Bob Dylan:

...Look out kid it’s something that you did  
 God knows when but you’re doin’ it again...

These were the moments I lived for at 13: the hot disheveled solace  
 of Donna’s attic room, her clueless family asleep below,  
 Dylan’s growl on the stereo,  
 Donna in my arms, her lips on mine, her tongue down my throat,  
 fingers fumbling with my zipper.

The poet, a multiple Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, writes just as passionately of love with men, as in “Don’t Wash” (whose title is a quote from a love letter written by Napoleon to Josephine):

I touch myself so I can savvy what you rut in. [...] that ferine  
 moan, my always startled gasp at first thrust. I angle, cocked hips,  
 a bit askew. I arch for maximum penetration. Our bed is a rocket  
 launch, a bacchanal, a pelican’s deep dive into the sea.

Emotions wrestle with physicality in the twisted sheets of *Erotic*. In a series of ten “Sister Poems,” Rhone Fancher chronicles the speaker’s affection, jealousy, and grief for a lost sister. The sisters compete for and share lovers, including, in a few of the poems, “Formerly Amish Leonard.” But that game, like the poem “Playing Dirty,” ends: “we’re linked like galaxies, / till he walks away from us both.” These mirrored beauties spend a wild “Roman Holiday” “...screwing / our way through Europe, / a Brit, a Dane, two Spaniards, an Austrian / record producer, and a set of tri-lingual / Croatian twins.”

However, the final poem of the series, “Birthday Girl Blues at Phillippe’s ‘the Original’ French Dip Sandwich in L.A.,” finds the sisters—one “newly sober”—alone together in fallen glitter at a depressing fortieth birthday dinner: “...She smiles at me like she loves me...Night spills through the diner windows, blocking out the future, closing in on the past.”

The past is often present in Rhone Fancher’s work, alongside the heat—and the cool—of intimate

connection. In a pandemic poem, “L’appel du vide” (The Call of the Void), the speaker quarrels with her live-in lover over an infidelity (“...*It’s not all bad*, he answers. *We have similar tastes in women*. This is not the first time he’s waved romance in my face.”) Then, like a true Angeleno, she goes for a drive:

...A straight shot on the 110 N, but for the over/underpass near Watts  
where I want to swerve into oncoming traffic but, of course, there is none.

I return to remnants of moonlight and shut the blinds, but the truth  
persists, insidious; a germ. The mango bowl: a hole now, nothing but air.  
And his voice diddling the dark.

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[Purchase the book](#)

*Photo credit: Alexis Rhone Fancher*

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