

FOR THOSE WHO CANNOT YET SPEAK

a review by Melinda Thomsen

AE Hines. *Any Dumb Animal*.
Main Street Rag, 2021.

MELINDA THOMSEN'S *Armature* (Hermit Feathers Press, 2021; also reviewed in this issue) was a 2022 Eric Hoffer da Vinci Eye finalist and won honorable mention in the 2019 Lena Shull Poetry Contest. She is the 2023 Eastern NC Region's Distinguished Poet for the Gilbert-Chappell Distinguished Poets Mentoring Series, a 2019 Pushcart Nominee, and an advisory editor at *Tar River Poetry*. Her poems can be found in *Salamander Magazine*, *Artemis Journal*, *THEMA*, and elsewhere, including *NCLR*.

AE HINES'S debut collection, *Any Dumb Animal*, received honorable mention in the North Carolina Poetry Society's 2022 Brockman-Campbell Book contest. His poems have been widely published in anthologies and literary journals, including, among others, *Rattle*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Southern Review*, *Missouri Review*, and *Greensboro Review*. Hines, who grew up in North Carolina, is pursuing his MFA in Writing at Pacific University.

OPPOSITE AE Hines reading at the NC Poetry Society's 90th anniversary celebration at Weymouth Center, Southern Pines, NC, 17 Sept. 2022

AE Hines's debut poetry collection, *Any Dumb Animal*, was a finalist for the 2022 Eric Hoffer da Vinci Eye Award honoring "books with superior cover artwork" that are "judged on both content and style." Hines's poems delve into themes suggested by the title and the cover image of a boy looking upward, holding his breath at the bottom of a lake as he attempts to escape drowning. Hines grew up in North Carolina, and his childhood forms the foundation for these engaging, well-crafted poems struggling with the complexity of the poet's life as the son of an abusive father.

In "How We Learn," which inspired the cover art, Hines describes the physical and psychological abuse he receives from his father, who traumatizes his son by forcing him to face his fear of drowning. The father grabs the boy, drags him down to the pier, and throws him into deep water, so he can learn how to swim and says, "any dumb animal / can learn." The poet returns to animals throughout this collection, identifying with them and their inability to speak.

Starting from the first poem, "Phone Call," when the son comes out to his father as gay, their relationship is broken. The father responds, "Wasn't hard enough on you. I failed." Rejected by his father, the poet finds himself abandoned like the figure in the waters with only his air bubbles ascending to safety. In the collection's final section, a poem also titled "Phone Call," recalls how he broke with his father completely. The poet can no longer listen to a father unable to love his child because the poet

refuses to "develop the habit / of conversing with the dead."

The author's broken relationship with his father is one of the underlying themes in *Any Dumb Animal*. By viewing himself as an unwanted child, the speaker severs his role as his father's son. Since the poet's father rejects his son's sexual identity, their communication breaks down, and his son is muted. He can't speak with his father because he refuses to listen to his son. In "Language Immersion," Hines realizes how language doesn't have to be used as a weapon of force but can encourage a healthy relationship. As he learns Spanish, he admits he sounds like "a donkey / braying at the sky." He converses, not in the elegant way he hopes for, but by simply trying, and both he and his lover understand each other better.

The donkey's head tilting upward amplifies the cover image in a positive way, as does the poet in "Hoyt Arboretum Under Spring Rain." He looks up at the beautiful trees and is dumbstruck, unable to talk at all:

Here in this city forest,
I am the young boy
at high church, sitting dead center
of the cross-shaped nave,
staring up, dumbstruck
by the misty limbed vaults,
the dripping pine cones
like beatified faces
of saints looking down
from stained glass.

He feels nature looking down on him with the caring of "beatified faces," and such beauty takes his breath away.

As he is looking upward from below the water's surface, the figure's dumbness physically

comes from the inability to breathe underwater. Hines's poems also weave back and forth between the difficult moments he faces that prevent him from expressing himself fully: in "Language Immersion," the speaker realizes that he once used words as weapons with his partner, and concedes that his words "flew / from our lips like machine gun fire," but with his new lover, there is understanding, no need for this type of ammunition. They can communicate in broken Spanish or English. When he refers to his father in "My Father's Son," he describes him as "hard, cold like the hood of his Pontiac / on a January morning." The poet admits his father was once tender-hearted when he cherished his son's photo taken at about four years old, but his father preferred that photo, a silent image of his son, instead of the man he became.

In "Grace," the poet sees that there are others who can interact with the "dumb animal" in a way that is helpful, not abusive:

To wake at all, a kind of grace, even this day
when in the garden you stumble
into a nest of wasps, and each insect bestows
stinger and venom to your ankle,
swelling your mouth, closing your throat.

What grace, your new lover being there.
That he knows about adrenaline, to jab
that harpoon of a needle into your leg.

Here, the poet becomes the dumb animal through the allergic reaction closing his throat, and the harpoon transforms from a death weapon into one that saves him. The lover who rescues him here also appears in "Latin Dancing" where the poet begins to accept the awkwardness of his physical self. His partner "is grateful a white boy /



PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL GRIFFIN

can follow, keep time with his music / and for the most part / avoid his feet." Although the poet does not move like Fred Astaire, he is appreciated for trying by the man who loves him.

Any Dumb Animal dives deeply into the poet's North Carolina terrain like the poem "Regret," which takes place on the Cape Fear River. The poet watches a boy he loves diving, "his brown body spinning / into a comma" before he "becomes an exclamation point to pierce / and disappear beneath the rust-colored water." That beautiful moment of watching another boy dive into North Carolina waters reveals how vested Hines is in North Carolina, its people and land. Throughout *Any Dumb Animal*, Hines recounts not only our culture's brutality, but also its moments of grace. Some of these poems may pain those who have witnessed violence in their homes or community, but we need this book. Hines's poems navigate from the most aggressive to gentlest moments, resulting in poems that speak directly to us, and for those who cannot yet speak. ■

James Applewhite Poetry Prize
\$250 and publication in *NCLR*

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