

THE BOOK OF WHYS

a review by Christie Collins

Melinda Thomsen. *Armature*. Hermit Feathers, 2021.

CHRISTIE COLLINS is a lecturer in the Department of English at Mississippi State University, where she teaches courses in writing and literature. Over her fifteen years as a university educator, she has also taught at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge and Cardiff University in the UK, where her doctoral research focused on contemporary female poets of the US South. A poet herself, her first full-length collection of poems, *The Art of Coming Undone*, was published by The Black Springs Group in London in 2023.

MELINDA THOMSEN'S poems have recently appeared in *Stone Coast Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *The Comstock Review*, and *NCLR*. She's an advisory editor for *Tar River Poetry* and teaches composition courses and English Language Arts at Pitt Community College in North Carolina. In addition to *Armature*, Thomsen has published two chapbooks, *Naming Rights* (2008) and *Field Rations* (2020), both with Finishing Line Press.

Melinda Thomsen's *Armature* sings with a voice of experience and empathy, inviting readers to share in each poem's keen insight. Thomsen, a resident of North Carolina, is originally from Connecticut, and these two worlds – North and South, rural and urban – are skillfully melded within this collection. *Armature* is broken into four sections, and each of the sections begins with a poem that looks at a different casting of Degas's famous sculpture, *Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer*. The book's themes – which include memory, wonder, art, place, curiosity, grief, and connection – weave their way throughout the sections, creating a rich tapestry. This collection is not without a cohesive focus, however. The book's blurb offers a poignant understanding of the collection as a whole: "*Armature* renders a portrait of [the poet's] struggle with her 'whys.'" In essence, these poems are the result of the poet's curiosity of the world around her, of questions such as "why" and "what can I learn" from such subjects as the blue heron, a sculpture, the dwarf plumbago, the woman on a subway. For Thomsen, no subject is too elusive, too small, or too insignificant for poetic exploration or to provide wisdom about the human experience.

A key feature of *Armature* is the poet's predilection for ekphrastic poems – for example, the four poems focusing on the Degas sculpture, which has been recast numerous times since the original was sculpted out of beeswax with a metal armature (a likely inspiration for the collection's title). In each of

these poems, the speaker seems to find a bit of herself in the figure's gesture and history. For instance, in the poem "First Cast of Degas' Dancer," the speaker discovers that she and the dancer have both been held captive

by beeswax and decay,
we are cast from both

into a bronze embrace,
held by an invisible
lover, breathless.

In her back cover blurb, Kate Fetherston clarifies that in Thomsen's four Degas poems, the speaker transforms the figure into a completed piece, suggesting that we can only fully see entities, including ourselves, when we approach them from many angles. Furthermore, the book's description (also on the back cover) posits that Thomsen's poet-speaker "follows Degas's dancer as her guide." This reading adds further significance to the Degas poems, proposing that the figure of the young dancer is a kind of white rabbit which leads the poet-speaker on her explorations of both familiar and unfamiliar objects, people, and places. In this way, the ekphrastic poems in *Armature* are not merely static or self-contained; rather, ekphrasis is both a literary device as well as a theme that spans the entire collection.

In "For the Hedgehog," the poet focuses on the obscure watercolor and gouache painting by sixteenth-century German artist Hans Hoffman at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In this ekphrastic poem, unlike the others in this collection, the poet does not necessarily see



Little Dancer Aged Fourteen, 1878–81 by Edgar Degas

something of herself in this painting; rather, she longs to celebrate this ancient image of a hedgehog and wishes to bring the piece to the cultural fore. She even envisions recreating a giant, public version of the artwork:

... My zeal for giant-sized whiskers
and oversized nail beds would force

every person on Fifth Avenue to pause
at the expanse of you. They must see it.

The poet does not merely focus on "high culture" forms of art, however. Other poems celebrate the artful qualities of an old Remington typewriter, a sweet potato casserole, and "a lone chair at a town picnic." These ekphrastic poems are only part of a larger network of pieces that place the poet in the role of curious observer and interpreter. In fact, many of these poems find some link between the natural world/cityscapes and the speaker's interior landscapes. For example, in "Flight," the speaker observes

Two bald eagles link talons
above Highway 17

and flip over and over
like a plastic grocery bag."

The speaker then offers, "I can identify the mundane, // not miracles." For the poet, this moment of seeing a wonder of the natural world sparks a significant realization about the self. Similarly, in "Starburst Rising," the speaker considers "A dwarf plumbago, / a tiny starburst rising / from the sidewalk," only to later reveal that she wishes she too could "emerge from / crevices in vibrant / blue by the sheer / force of chlorophyll." In "Forsythia," the speaker turns her observations away from the self and into a kind of cautionary tale, reminding us that the poet and poetry can only do so much:

Be patient with someone hiding
in the forsythia, for I am not God.
I do not speak with a fire

that does not consume its leaves.

"Solar System" is a standout poem, a powerhouse combination of form and content, combining the poet's acute observational skills with grief. Composed as a visual poem (the lines form the clear shape of a cat), it focuses on what one might expect: a feline, in particular the heartbreaking experience of losing a pet to illness. In this poem, the speaker narrates her life with two cats, describing each with celestial features and gestures – the cats have "moon eyes" and their bodies are "planets in orbit" – that prime readers to think beyond the visceral when one of the beloved cats dies, turning our attention and grief skyward.

Armature asks readers to consider the commonplace alongside the remarkable, the rural against the urban, the self together with humankind. It's a collection that pinpoints what is miraculous and artful about our most unassuming day-to-day experiences. The poems are anything but ordinary, however. While they may be based on the poet's whys, by the end of the collection, the questions have been resolved, and we are all the better for having received the answers. In fact, the poet's reckoning with these curious questions encourages readers to ask their own daring questions of the worlds they encounter, both internal and external, past and present. ■

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