

reviewed

for Want by Cherie Hunter Day (2017, Ornithopter Press, Princeton NJ). 32 pages, 4⁵/₈×7¹/₈”, block printed cover wrappings, saddle-stapled. ISBN 978-1-942723-04-2. \$11 from ornithopterpress.com.

Reviewed by Melissa Allen

The title of Cherie Hunter Day’s chapbook *for Want* appears to be drawn from one of the haiku in the book (“raw umber the hill’s shorthand for want”), but before I noticed this, I took it to refer to the traditional verse that begins “For want of a nail, the shoe was lost...” and goes on to trace the loss of a kingdom to the loss of that nail. The reference seemed appropriate—the poems in this chapbook are full of small things, common things, things that are generally overlooked, but that through Day’s eyes expand to take on outsize human importance:

thistledown
a fugitive
at flight’s end

seeds loose in the pod—
his decision
to stop treatment

There’s a lot of wanting in this book, in fact—at times, an almost painful, wild cry of longing for something missing, something that can never be:

one myth left in the chamber

if only birdsong at the bone margin

The sense of grief and loss here is heavy, but not oppressive. Day skillfully connects the human condition to the condition of all the other life forms on the planet, giving a sense of cosmic meaning to our suffering and reminding us we don't suffer alone. There's a sly humor to many of the pieces, too, that prevents the tone from escalating from drama to melodrama:

a velvet-ant
masquerades as an ant
its stinger
essential for something
so invitingly red

A velvet-ant, Wikipedia informs me, is not actually an ant but a wasp, with a vicious sting. This specificity is characteristic of Day's work—she is a trained biologist—and recalls this book's epigraph, from Roethke: "May my silences become more accurate." Because Day is both accurate and strategically silent—her well-chosen words leave readers plenty of scope for making their own associations and drawing their own conclusions—her work has an understated authority that makes us trust both her observation and her judgment:

the flawless spiral
of a calla lily—
entrance and exit

All in all, Day balances thought and feeling as if on a knife edge, alternately stirring up our emotions and anatomizing them. It's a combination that makes the book impossible to put down and difficult not to reread repeatedly.