

BOOK REVIEW
**California's Best Emerging Poets:
An Anthology**

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IF ONE CAN THINK OF GEOGRAPHY as an “autopsy of the invisible”—to borrow the words of Joshua G. De Leon which serve as an epigraph to this collection—then poetry is geography’s great companion.

Z Publishing has been for the past several months releasing installments of geographically based poetry in a “best emerging poets series,” with each book arriving from one of the nation’s fifty states. The California edition is thematically organized with between ten and forty-five poems included in each of the book’s eight sections. The book opens with its longest section, titled “thoughts, reflections, and stream of consciousness.” This is followed by sections on life and memory; family and friends; love, romance, and heart-break; beauty; nature, wildlife, and the outdoors; and inspiration. The book concludes with a section titled “miscellaneous.” This is perhaps an example of clunky curating, but it reflects Z Publishing’s orientation—expeditious publishing to get words into the hands of readers.

Z Publishing presents itself as out to change the model of literary publishing. The press’s mission is to link emerging writers with enthusiastic readers, to raise the visibility of writers and help readers navigate an oversaturated publishing industry. The press started as a Facebook group and blog designed to bring independent writers together, and it has grown into a publisher of books across genres. The press has a new headquarters slated to open in southeastern Wisconsin.

Given Z Publishing’s mission, the anthology is an important genre and tool for the company. Their first release, titled *Z Poetry: An Anthology of International Indie Poetry*, signaled the beginning of several series of compendiums like it, with the U.S. state-based emerging poets series (of which this California edition is part) among them. The press states its interest in the

anthology as a mode of publishing: “By producing anthologies of multiple authors rather than single-author volumes, Z Publishing hopes to harbor a community of readers and writers, bringing all sides of the industry together.” *California’s Best Emerging Poets* does this work of bringing things together. In this collection, the reader can find poems on nectarines and landfills and “neon billboards selling sex and apple juice,” as a line in Mac Taylor’s “When the Night Comes” observes. There are poems that offer a snapshot in time: Katherine Farrell’s “2017” is a moment: “a mother and daughter on this bus/ smiling at each other like they have a secret/ the sweetest thing I’ve seen all year.”

Some poems are place-based, rendering the particularities of a location in a moment of observation. Mia MacNeill’s “Iceland” describes: “As far as the eye can see / There is a carpet of soft springy yellow green moss/ It covers the lava pillows that caused devastation so long ago.” Greg Yerumyan’s clever poem “Untitled” takes on the form of the parking lot, using the techniques of concrete poetry to visually and sonically render the repetition and sense of displacement one feels when navigating a full lot of cars.

As another example of place-based writing, Oscar Del Toro’s “Air Quality (or: Air Quality: Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups)” offers an environmental justice-minded portrait of Fresno: “I’ll die on a bad air day in Fresno” is the line that opens this poem. And it moves into speculative realism: envisioning the men who will prod the poet some day, “wearing breath masks as they/ plan for a robotic workforce.” The future of this poem is also very present, as the lines in a later stanza tell us:

The toxic countryside will weep of
genocide through pesticide.
Its poisoned rivers will spread disease
to remind us that no one survives
agriculture in the central valley.

The poems in *California’s Best Emerging Poets* move between future and past. “I scratch my spine/ where time has taken root,” Kym Cunningham writes in “Vegetable Temporal.” The poem exposes the plantlike nature of the human body, as the plant also has the status of personhood—all conditioned by history.

There are poems that speak back to the myths that have dominated. “Rewritten Origin,” a poem by Marissa Ahmadkhani, provides the counternarrative:

I like to think that Medusa asked for snakes.
That,
sick of foreign fingers
running
through her hair, she approached Athena—

Ahmadkhani’s poem signals an ethos that characterizes significant portions of the book: an orientation that allows the writer to turn the myth on its head.

The writers in this collection look to sky and ground to orient themselves. This is not a book of ecopoetry, but one can find an ecopoetics in its pages. “I want to be a colorographer,” Matthew Pringle writes, “mapping the colors of the earth”—the thousands of variations on blue and green in sky and earth.

As this collection is a specifically *emerging* poets series, the pieces included are of varied quality. Some fall to cliché or hackneyed craft choices. Some over-rely on abstraction. There are opportunities for greater complexity and defamiliarization. But there are gems to be found in this collection. Some of these gems find a way to critique and question their words—enabling self-reflexivity that is not overly self-conscious. Coccinelle’s “Dear Diary” is a poem in two voices that teases itself and draws out the implications of its words. When one voice says, “She lived in a world where being happy was not easy,” the other voice responds, “(dramatic much?).”

Voices abound in this anthology. The book offers us an artifact of a time and place—a group of poets brought together because of where they reside. If California is a story, as Native American writer and poet Deborah Miranda famously said it is, then this book offers a piece of that story.

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