



Rayfish

By Mary Hickman

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Mary Hickman's James Laughlin Award–winning second book, *Rayfish*, masterfully adopts and synthesizes the genre conventions of lyric poetry, nonfiction, and criticism, and extends the possibilities of each. Drawing on her childhood in China and Taiwan and her experience as an assistant in open-heart surgery, *Rayfish* combines the urgency and vulnerability of the lyric with meditative autobiographical accounting and the voices of numerous artists (Francis Bacon, Eva Hesse, Chaim Soutine, Ida Applebroog) to produce an uncanny chorus of voices. Haunted by the implications of making, these poems question how human beings can, with their limited resources (hand, material, vision, will), "fight against the monsters...against neuroticism and fear." *Rayfish* brings the thinking of the collective into even greater alignment with the intimacy of the lyric, seeking a global space of communication and contact in a world increasingly at risk.

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Editorial Review

Review

“*Rayfish* by Mary Hickman adopts and synthesizes the genre conventions of lyric poetry, nonfiction, and criticism, and extends the possibilities of each. Hickman’s prose poems weave art and the body into the viscera of experience.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Hickman (*This Is the Homeland*) fluidly melds poetry and prose in a collection crafted with an essayist’s narrative certainty and a poet’s dreamlike images and nonlinear sense of time. Though many of the James Laughlin Award-winning collection’s poems find their starting points in art, they go beyond the ekphrastic, blending together the writer’s response to a given work as well as biographical details and interviews about the piece and its artist.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“In Mary Hickman’s *Rayfish*, the body is both indescribable and described, both inescapable and mortal: “Soutine attempts to keep the color of his first carcasses fresh with buckets of blood,” but also “Anna is high in the air, higher than most men can leap. Her right knee folds beneath her even as her left thigh, ankle, and toes extend, pressed behind into darkness.” In these poems—essays? but if they are essays, they’re the most musical, and most poetically focused, essays I’ve ever read—the body is the source of the world in which the body suffers. And in this way, *Rayfish* ultimately tells a necessary story of America right now, an America attempting to overcome its hatred of the many different bodies of which it is made.”—Shane McCrae, author of *In the Language of My Captor*

“As a painter, I am utterly grateful for this book. To read these deceptively intimate texts is to learn how materials mean: a skin exchange with death, under fluorescent lights, in sterile conditions. In this encounter, touch heals and fouls; to look is to violate. We art-makers need language for process, for self-critique, for the thrilling backbend that is still at stake in the postmortem of Formalism or Process-Based art or Institutional Critique. What are we doing in our studios? Hickman folds multiple voices, of critic, maker, and maybe the ancient Greek chorus, into the bulky warm shame of morphing: fish/human/insect/image. Her refusal to mystify, and her profound intelligence, are reasons to praise, to sing praise, to shout praise.”—Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, painter

“Sometimes the body is damaged. Sometimes the body is dead. Sometimes the surgery is an autopsy, where the flesh is cut open to preserve some living part rather than to fix something that’s not yet broken. On an autopsy table, the body becomes meat — but the body was already meat on the operating table, mid-tummy tuck.” —Galen Beebe, *Full Stop*

“Then again--the essays are not essays at all, really. They are poems in prose, quicksilver and agile. They teleport--from one moment to the next, one can suddenly be in a wholly different place from where one thought one was, plucked from the backyard garden chatting with a neighbor and dropped at the Palaz of Hoon. So, in yet another respect, it is as though Ranciére and Hickey magically had offspring that were in turn possessed by the spirit of James Tate.” —Theobald, *Loads of Learned Lumber*

“It is more than worthwhile to read these poems aloud; in fact, it may be mandatory. For it is only by reading them aloud that one finds the rhythm and pace of each poem, hears and experiences the drama building in the narrative, and even tastes the precision with which Hickman writes.”—Glynn young, *Tweet Speak*

“When images, which take their strength literally from the moment between life and death, strive to become metaphors, a general resistance against metaphoricity develops. It is too real for the mind to wander off in another direction. To measure the endurance of her own images, Hickman often sets out to compose her poems with the kind of sobriety that a surgeon has to maintain during an operation. Her images strive to 'retain that shiver or shimmer between life and lifelessness,' as the poet once said of Chaïm Soutine's paintings.” —Melih Levi, *Colorado Review*

“Throughout the book the speaker reveals that she has worked as an assistant in surgery and goes on to detail the difficulties of that job: ‘Awake, I really did drop many valuable things. One of the things given to me to hold was the heart itself.’” —Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Academy of American Poetry*

“..Weaving biography, history, film, medical concerns, visual art and other elements, the weave of her prose poems provide a series of intimate spaces on biology, biography, self-invention and how the creation of any kind of art can't help but change the artist.” —Rob McLennan

Review

“With lyric momentum swift as the eponymous rayfish whose swimming is a variety of flight, Hickman's powerful and personal collection of ekphrastic prose poems explores the thrilling art of self-invention, engaging not only the endless involutions of representation, but also the spiritual implications of making art. Throughout, Hickman's attention to materiality in artworks whose shimmering obsolescence is part of the viewing, part of the making, reckons with the disorienting emotional flickerings of absence and presence that question what the difference between ephemera and objects of value might be in this tragic world.” (Robyn Schiff, author of *A Woman of Property*)

About the Author

MARY HICKMAN was born in Idaho and grew up in China and Taiwan. She holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she was an Iowa Arts Fellow, and is the author of *This Is the Homeland*. She teaches creative writing at Nebraska Wesleyan University and in the University of Iowa International Writing Program's Between the Lines exchange program.

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