



Alchemy for Cells & Other Beasts

Maya Jewell Zeller

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Reviewed by Tor Strand

The title poem of Maya Jewell Zeller's newest collection, *Alchemy for Cells & Other Beasts* ends with an offering: "& if you'd like to unlace / this alchemous beast / with me / please meet me in the most wild patch / of the meadow." She isn't kidding. Zeller's poems draw out elation, and a craving for the next line. Delightfully weird, her words carry a certain distinctness: sharp, wild, and unashamed, often taking on the vulnerability of the body, particularly that of the woman or the child. These poems are gritty, piercing, frightening, and finally, as if it must be noted, utterly beautiful. This is a book for meditation, for "when you're off in your mind field." Zeller also contemplates identity, purpose, and image, as her poems are paired alongside artist Carrie DeBacker's demanding, shape-shifting watercolors that accompany nearly every page.



Maya Jewell Zeller is a poet, writer, teacher, editor, and mother. An Assistant Professor for Central Washington University's Professional and Creative Writing Programs, Maya is the author of *Rust Fish* (Lost Horse Press, 2011) and *Yesterday, the Bees* (Floating Bridge Press, 2015). Situating themselves in ecofeminist traditions, her creative obsessions often interrogate human/animal and plant relationships.

In this collection, Zeller's tonal variety is striking. She opens poems as if they were love lyrics, as in little spell with chest x-ray, "sweet girl made of dust & water / please leave jewelry at home" and yet, just when it seems to be smooth sailing, everything inverts: "you are going to experience a small dose of ionizing radiation / you will not feel it at all / but possibly you will see the way we see / in shades of gray." She parallels the fragile magic of the child with the inhuman world touching on the dangers of losing both, while connecting them with vivid color and declaration: "sweet girl this dirt is so hard / & you are so much made of deep history & rapidly aging chromosomes & lichen, bright as graffiti—" Zeller's poems long for a release, as she writes in *Spell for Addressing Turtles*, "O you who descend from the lizard-like body / your shell useless for so long / may I please crawl in there with you / to live through the dark / it's going to be so dark out here." The delineation of "there" and "here" and the shocks of a disquieted climate, pervade these poems, as if to wish we weren't where we are, here in the intermountain West and across the world. "But I do want to be like a turtle, your safe little tank / or your big old polluted ocean / full of so much plastic." Zeller

seems to simultaneously look away from the world while also taking it head on. She longs for something better, while grasping vociferously for what breathes.

And all the while DeBacker's watercolors morph human heads into whales and pelvic bones, swarms of butterflies, jellyfish, even teacups and steamboats. The natural world and the human eye blend with conviction, responsibility, and indebtedness: "so animal" Zeller writes, "we drank we slept we snored like a boar / like bear / like whale" ... "so mammal / so leathery like our sin / the one I cover over my organs / like a filmy curtain / the one I paid so handsomely to sleep behind / we all paid so handsomely, didn't we / my mind brimming with a herd of wild breathing breeding tusked boar."

Zeller and DeBacker present a visual jigsaw puzzle, one that ultimately paints a scene of a roaring and whispering beast alongside a "sweet girl made of March light through a seed pod," alongside watercolor hummingbirds, and hammers for heads—a book of undeniable strangeness. It delves without fear, or, rather, with a reasonably wild fear, into our increasingly unpredictable climate situation and our currently harrowing political climate. And finally, when all trails of anything good seem to be drifting off, Zeller sings hope, coupled with strokes of mourning, perhaps most truthfully rendered in the closing of *Spell* for transcendence / for conjuring finches:

Though I can imagine what fleeting joy would erupt from a child / if suddenly we could lie in our living room, a damp carpet / like the moss or the mud of the ferny area / out beyond the weed garden / & see the whole blue eye / black flecks of birds / & the clouds — / all three kinds, whose names / they only just learned in school / how lovely and possible / how near to spring / how serotonin / how flourishing pile of small, soft seeds / so many small-billed finches / haven't you seen them hovering?



