



Scot Siegel, an Oregon poet and city planner, is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *The Constellation of Extinct Stars and Other Poems* (2016) and *Thousands Flee California Wildflowers* (2012), both published by Salmon Poetry of Ireland. He has received awards and commendations from the Oregon Poetry Association, Nimrod International, Aesthetica (UK), Poetry Northwest, and the Oregon State Library. The late US Poet Laureate, Philip Levine, recognized Siegel's long poem, "Pages Torn From a Schoolmarm's Diary," as a Finalist with Honorable Mention in Nimrod International's 2012 Pablo Neruda Poetry Prize Competition. Siegel's poems have been featured in *Terrain.org*, *The Oregonian*, *High Desert Journal*, *The Coachella*

### *The Constellation of Extinct Stars*

Scot Siegel

75 pages

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Reviewed by Jamie Houghton

I once heard that poetry is breath frozen in time, that when you read the classic works you are hearing a voice from hundreds of years away. In *The Constellation of Extinct Stars*, Oregon poet Scot Siegel's use of the first person allows the reader to not only hear his voice, but also the very intimate voices of the characters in his poems. The reader experiences a constellation of voices, from settlers in Summer Lake, Oregon, where Siegel spent time as an Artist in Residence at Playa Arts, as well as from the present day. The present-day poems are mostly Oregon-based, but with a fittingly larger, more global lens. Siegel is the author of three full-length poetry collections, and *The Constellation of Extinct Stars* is his second from Salmon Poetry of Ireland. His poems are both gentle and probing, piercing to the heart of everyday life with gratitude for the smallest of details.

In the first section of *The Constellation of Extinct Stars* is a series of elegant sonnets that capture the voices of three fictionalized characters inspired by Grace Brandt Martin and other historical texts from the early American West. The poems are eerie and intimate, and make the reader feel as if they are eavesdropping on private thoughts and moments. The book begins with a quote from Martin, "I bathe in a laundry tub,/ in front of the kitchen stove,/ with the window blinds discreetly drawn/ and the door firmly closed." Siegel opens the door, opens the blinds, and lets the school marm, the lineman, and the female ranch hand tell their stories. Hell-bent for a girl in Bend whose father owns a mill, June says:

I scrub the griddle with Borax and gravel, so hard  
My knuckles bleed. Beyond this hovel, dust devils  
Drill the onion flats, and the last of the geese  
Lift off from what's left of Summer Lake.

*Review, San Pedro River Review, and Verse Daily*, among others, and his writing is part of the permanent art installation along the Portland-to-Milwaukie Light Rail 'Orange Line'. Siegel has served as an Artist-in-Residence with Playa at Summer Lake and the Oregon State University College of Liberal Arts Spring Creek Project.

Siegel imagines a love triangle and a harsh winter in which the characters weather the difficult landscape, holding out for summer. Siegel's reimagining of Summer Lake's inhabitants is sensual and raw, depicting human desire and a landscape that is fertile despite its barren appearance. The wind is a central character too, changing personalities with both the seasons and the character's experiences. Siegel writes, "Sometimes, the wind is not a scythe."

In the second section, "What Was Lost," the reader leaves Summer Lake, but is compelled by the sharp yet tender tone to follow where the poems lead as they begin to tell another, more loosely woven story. The second two sections of the book are pierced with short pieces that are some of my favorites in the collection, such as the first poem in the second section:

#### The Light

Before we were conceived  
For eternity in reverse,

We trudged across the darkness  
And left no trace behind...

Then breadcrumbs from the dead,  
and the light.

In this section Siegel also writes, "We frack and pollute./ We lubricate earthquakes./ the mind is the only object/ that can retain our bearings."

There is no shock value in Siegel's expression of fear, but instead his writing has a feather-light touch on heavy issues. In poems like "The Hysterical Preservation Specialist," he suggests the small-mindedness of our efforts to keep places, and ourselves, the same. What I love most about this collection is how Siegel uses the past as a springboard to write about impermanence. In the third section, "What Remains," Siegel writes:

When the Great Quake ruins our city,  
And the libertarians begin begging

For emergency shelter and food,  
I'll remember this evening:

Blue heap of warm jeans on the couch,  
fresh pesto wafting from the kitchen,

and a light wind, like an old friend,

## lapping the house

This poem, set in current day Portland, suggests again that we are in danger as a species. It also points to the sacred nature of whistling in the dark, that it is a type of prayer, both captured in the sensory details of the folding laundry and the sound of the wind, always beyond human control. It's not so different from Summer Lake, January 22, when there is "Wind from the east,/ like rolling pins over the dull xylophone/ of our one-room school house." There is always the wind, Siegel seems to say, and his poems remind us that there were those who struggled to shape this world for us, as our actions shape the next generation. The poems speak not only to the past but to the future as when he writes to "Gen Z," imagining "under your watch/ the water is clean again,/ the fish plentiful, the rice cooked to perfection."

I love how Siegel is, at times, sharply political, yet the poems are in no way blaming or morose. In another of my favorite short pieces from the third section he writes, "The most powerful life skill is eye contact./ You can start or stop a fight with that." You could say the poems in this book are like breadcrumbs of light, leading the reader through time, but more importantly, each one by itself is like a gentle, steady, point of eye contact. Siegel's words stick, they've left me thinking about eye contact all week. Whether you are already interested in Oregon history or just pick up this volume for poetry's sake, I hope you savor each one of these poems as much as I did.







