

Books

A Review of *Girls Like Us* by Elizabeth Hazen

Michael Quinn



(Bethesda, MD: Alan Squire Publishing, 2020)

Poet Elizabeth Hazen writes that she “came of age...in the pre-Internet, grunge-tinted 1990s” and that influence is deeply felt in *Girls Like Us*, her excellent second collection.

With neatness and restraint, these poems convey smudged, smeared, and sometimes outright messy depictions of womanhood (vastly different than the ideas and ideals their “girl” selves imagined), as their speakers grapple with addiction, eating

disorders, illness, and uneasy reconciliations of desirability and desire.

The poems are divided into two sections. The first half focuses primarily on the self, whereas later poems are gradually consumed by a responsibility to others, primarily through motherhood and its all-consuming need to provide for and protect.

The feel of this collection is particularly well-conveyed in the wonderful cover artwork by Lindsay Fleming. The collage features a hand-tinted 19th Century photograph of a prim-looking girl in an apron, with curled hair and pursed lips, hands clasped tightly behind her back—the prototypical “good girl.” Lightning crashes to the ground behind her;

demons leer from the rolling clouds overhead. Near the girl's feet, a book lies on the ground with its pages blown open. An adventure awaits: dangerous, scary, exciting, confusing.

The vintage, childlike elements of this collage are reminiscent of the contents found in an old box in a basement by the young speaker in "Hide and Seek":

spilling secrets: love
letters, photographs, cracked
china dolls, handkerchiefs stitched
with strange initials.

This poem suggests the importance of the past and its mysteries—"In childhood, you believed everything / was waiting to be found"—and perhaps shows the unconscious source (the basement) where ideas of courtship and romance were first encountered that will not be found in the speaker's adult experience.

As the poem progresses, the speaker matures, and shrinks from the world through an eating disorder: "your body / stretched so flat beneath the sheet, / a wrinkle alone betrayed you." The speaker "dwindled" and "no one could see beyond / your hunger." The illness distracts and acts as a cover for a different kind of existential pain the speaker is also hiding behind.

"Eve at the Stop 'n' Shop" details a fantasy of gorging, as its speaker races through a grocery store, relishing the list of foods she plans to consume—"It takes four hours to ring / me up and six trips // to take everything home"—and perhaps later purge ("I carry a pack of / Doublemint gum"). Alone at home with her bounty, the room feels "deep with dismay / thick with flour and meat," and the speaker overwhelmed by the machinations of her desire. "I have / forgotten what it was // I

wanted” she laments, an overwhelm not unlike the one experienced by poet Shel Silverstein’s title character in “Sarah Cynthia Silvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out,” who, in her reverie of consumption, is smothered by its waste.

“Blackout” is a very effective depiction of the kind of drinking that’s crossed the line from a good time to a serious problem. In two-line stanzas, full of strong images, a disembodied experience is conveyed: “flashing // red and blue, the officer / guiding you to the curb.” The body bears testimony to that which the conscious mind can no longer bear witness:

muscles
knowing what has happened,

but not how or when
or with whom.

Other poems testify to experiences of drinking as addiction, including “Drown” (“no / more numbing loneliness / with 80-proof answers to *What // do I do now?*”) and “Dictation,” where the speaker wakes up in Mexico, dry-mouthed, with sand in her ear, trying to respond to the man she wakes up next to, who is asserting a kind of control over her wildness which the speaker recoils against, asking herself, “And are you not the one who wanted him // to stiffen up the drinks?”

“The Bereaved” shows a more contrite speaker in recovery: “I’m healthy now. I eat three squares and then some. / I haven’t had a drink in months, in years / in decades”, and foreshadows a kind of framing—“those / lost years when I was ill”—that will be revisited in subsequent poems, particularly in a kind of triptych at the center of the first part of the collection.

“Diagnosis I,” “Diagnosis II,” and “Diagnosis III” respectively depict three scenes. In the first, an unwell woman is assured by her male doctor that despite her undiagnosed source of pain, there’s nothing wrong with her. In the second, a young virgin’s group of male tormentors becomes her booze-supplying seducers. In the third, the past of a woman at midlife is thrown into relief when a drunk aggressively hits on her. “*Girls like / you*, he repeated, leaving me / a blank to fill.”

Men are everywhere in these poems, but often out of frame, except for their hands. That touch is sometimes something yearned for—sliding panties “from hips to ankles”—and sometimes a danger: reaching out, grabbing, “rough stone.”

Men are also the source of many of the names—“skank,” “slut,” “bitch”—these women are sometimes called, and each of these names can be thought of as a kind of frame in which the speakers hang different ideas about themselves. In “Devices,” the poem which opens the collection, the speaker realizes, “We’ve been called so many things that we are not, / we startle at the sound of our own names.”

The second part of the collection opens (and closes) with a domestic scene. “Moving Day” finds the speaker moving in with her partner:

my excess crowds

the garage: chairs, paintings, mismatched
plates, my superfluous coffee maker.

I too am a redundancy; his children

close their doors.

Stepping into her new roles as wife and stepmother, she steps out of the fantasy of being a bride, and her wedding dress now “hangs beside costumes / from long-ago parties” as if this too, is a kind of costume she once wore.

Sorting through their things, the couple works together to “cull duplicates from our bookshelves” but the speaker is careful to keep *her* copies—“my marginal scrawls like relics”—suggesting the sacredness of this private self and its secreted past.

But having been carried over the proverbial threshold, marriage doesn't mean a woman is out of the woods. “Addict” again considers excessive drinking, but its title shows the speaker has formally recognized it as a problem: “glossing over past mistakes, / vows I didn't mean to break.” Its short, two-line rhyming stanzas — “I am conflicted; thick with gin. / I can't remember where I've been.”— have a little bit of the same singsong as the classic child's bedtime prayer, “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep,” which again evokes how long the shadow of childhood extends into adult life.

“Circling” suggests just how precarious the stability of recovery can be: “Each day victory / feels more like delay.” The speaker's town is laid out simply and neatly, almost like a board game, empty of everything except its “neon invitations.” That temptation is made visceral through the poem's vivid evocation of sound: “A barstool's metal foot // scrapes the tacky floor”.

Girls Like Us closes on another domestic scene, the beautifully delicate poem “Monarch.” A found dead butterfly “pinned” over the speaker's desk stands as a kind of totem watching over her while she communes with her work. Carelessly tossed into a box “in a frenzy of packing and lifting,” the butterfly doesn't survive the move, disintegrating into “orange flecks like confetti / that I shook out over my empty desk”—

perhaps the same desk, but in its new home, where the speaker has moved to make a new life with her partner. “I was certain she was beyond repair, / but now that she’s gone, I see her everywhere.” For Hazen’s haunting collection, it’s a fitting, final image — a ghost, fluttering — assuming a much larger prominence than the physical space it occupied. Here as throughout the collection, Hazen reconciles with an uneasy past, evoking memories of loss to discover, uncover, and recover from their meaning. Absence asserts permanence, and these poems testify to the way its invisible presence continues to shape us.



Michael Quinn reviews books for *Publishers Weekly*, literary journals, in a monthly column for the Brooklyn newspaper *The Red Hook Star-Review*, as well as for his own website, mastermichaelquinn.com, under the heading “Book Report.” His reading list for the reviews he’s not assigned is determined by interest, whim, and chance—and by what’s available at the Brooklyn Public Library.

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