

Because: A Lyric Memoir by Joshua Mensch, W. W. Norton, 2018 cloth 128p. \$22.95 • Poet, visual artist, and editor, Joshua Mensch's first book, *Because: A Lyric Memoir* is a bold and unflinching debut collection that directly narrates a near-decade long story of abuse. Much like Barry Lopez's essay, "Sliver of Sky," the adult victim narrates a story that embodies a child's innocence, a perpetrator's evil deceptions, and sharply crafts the physical and mental spaces, "rooms," where abuse occurred. The collection unfurls in one long poem which is also one long subordinate clause. In fact, "because" appears 463 times and the semicolon is used to connect ideas 470 times, and the sentence/poem is never closed with a period. Mensch knows that readers will engage with the confession and crime, and he knows a subordinate clause makes the reader want more information, which he provides. The reader cannot but help to read on and dread the next detail.

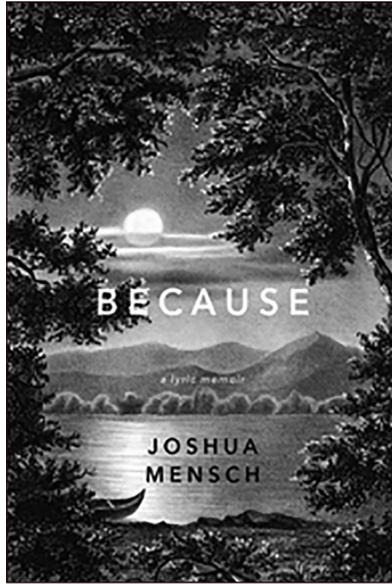
Don, the pedophile, is named throughout the collection, and just a few lines in is described: "his bathrobe slipping off / his stiff, shiny shins, / his legs like white / radish stalks speckled / with long wiry hairs." However, it's not Don's description, but rather his language of lies, compliments, and threats that seamlessly seep into the poem: "*this pain is the sharpest / part of pleasure;*" Don, erudite and cunning, runs a summer camp located in Forest Glen, a remote part of Nova Scotia. During the summer, several boys gather to camp in the woods, build bows, and track bears, but "we all know / what happens to a child lost / in a forest at night;" when Don's mouth or "hammer" hands depredate.

Throughout the collection, the abuse and its aftermath are chronicled through varying locations across North America, years, and seasons, all marked in the upper right-hand corner, so the reader has a clear sense of Don's long con and the narrator's confusing adolescence. In 1990, Mensch is sent to be homeschooled by Don and his wife in a rural cabin at the camp. The cold Canadian winters are full of beauty, "hills are a mosaic / of white-robed spruce / rolled in snow like rounds / of cotton glass," but also cold danger filled with "bark shrapnel." Much of the collection illustrates the paradoxical re-

Synecdoche

BRIEF BOOK REVIEWS

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lationship between danger and safety in an abusive relationship, "because that which keeps you warm / also cuts."

When Don is finally arrested in 1999, Mensch is then confronted by his family to explain how such a thing could happen: "Which one is it? / You were his lover or you / were abused?; because both things / can't be true." Ultimately, family, listening young female lovers, and the power of narration allow Mensch to gain agency and understanding over cruelty.

Because: A Lyric Memoir demands to be read in this #metoo movement, in the wake of the Catholic church scandal, and now when children speak truth to power about violence to adults. This narrative damns and saves. It must be read.

Valleyspeak by Cait Weiss Orcutt, Zone 3 Press, 2017 paper 64p. \$14.00 • Cait Weiss Orcutt's first full-length collection, *Valleyspeak* examines the personal and the public in one of America's most visible and romanticized cities, Los Angeles. The collection is set in the 1990s, when each year seems to bring a new disaster and eager eyes to L.A.: the Rodney King beating, the riots that followed, the Northridge earthquake, and the O.J. Simpson trial.

Against this violent backdrop, there is the false quiet of a family living in the valley, where pools, porn, pills, and booze create a muted, but familiar struggle of addiction. The speaker acknowledges these mirrored worlds early in the collection: "We live in fault / land, on fault lines."

To be sure, there is beauty in the book, not only in the "azure pools" and "mango" colored backdrops, but in the two sisters, who are among the "Sweet Valley / Ophelias, who haven't quite / drowned." The poems move between their childhood, tween, and teenage years to young adulthood, and meanwhile, the family falls apart. The mother "wakes in-patient from an overdose," and the adult speaker and her boyfriend start a sober life. In fact, it's the resolution of the speaker to survive after dependence that brings certain allure and assurance: "Every single fossil out there / once managed to survive."

The complex mother-daughter relationship emerges early; in the poem "Charity" when the mother dresses up her daughters for Easter and drinks "two Buds before [she] drove" to Venice Beach, where she forces the girls to hand out cupcakes to the homeless. Moments like these forecast the "genes [that] helix addiction" from which the speaker emerges, declaring that she will be childless, "a non-Mom future-Mom." Intimate spaces are explored post-factum and avoided in the bloom of struggle, and this tension creates honest juxtapositions of self-knowledge and anguish. In a collection that mainly uses lyric, some poems that splay across the page and fall into language play are powerful. As though afraid of encroaching on the white space, the poem "Plan B" confesses: "My mother at thirty-one / had a first & third grader & eighteen years / left of drunk days / shouting *Let's film / a fairy tale*. I have no years / of drunk left. I left you / behind when I thought / there'd be time."

Set in a time and place where the main industry is the objectification of women, *Valleyspeak* is fully feminist, as the speaker emerges fierce and earnest. Intriguing contradictions are a staple in *Valleyspeak*: guilt and forgiveness, parent and child, exuberance and avoidance—truly a magical and magnificent first collection. □