



A gift for the eyes
as well as the ears

Description

Review of Willow Loveday Little's first book of poetry, *Xenia*

By Jerome Ramcharitar

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Willow Loveday Little's *Xenia* can be hard to pin down. Sometimes, it's seductive. Other times, scary. Written in a dense, erudite style, these poems have a range in vocabulary to match the vivid emotions they depict: sadness, elation, desperation. A few are intuitive; most are challenging. Without exception, however, these poems are beautiful. In its daring use of imagery from classical mythology to modern medicine, Little's first book promises to be one that will provide readers with conundrums and comfort for years to come.

But be warned. As she writes in the book's opening poem, *This isn't a love story* – a clear and sober statement for a collection that sways from fiercely analytical to brazenly poetic. Then again, in *Xenia*, clear statements are surprisingly common. In fact, the experiment is in the argument, as her preface, *On Prefaces*, states: "This is how restrictions breed creativity." The reader is part of that act of creation, too. After all, the speaker asks of an absent non-reader: "Did you not read my dedication? / Did you not read? / Did you...?" The question decomposes, like a rotting body, but as the author reminds us, the "corpse incorporates."

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The word "Xenia" itself refers to a number of concepts, the most known of which is the act of playing host to guests; as we soon learn, however, there is never a host without a parasite. Poetry, though it is expansive, expressive, and arresting, is costly: "The gorgon's work runs deep and the pathway to vulnerability is one paved with the flint we chip from our flesh." Like a gorgon's victim, the words themselves are unmoving, fixed as they are on a page. In the



end, the creative act is transformative and the vulnerability it entails is a complex one, turning monster into masterful poet, and speaker into corpse, like the one found in the grip of ice, with *A hair of mute / Paparazzi gold*. Preserved, petrified: that is poetry on the page, and that is the reader, too, for a time.

Toward the middle of the book, Little's powers as a writer come to their height in the MRI Suite, a sequence of poems that both defy the limits of scientific vocabulary while denying any such worldview as ultimate. Science is beautiful in its way, of course, and Little uses its language to exploit its convenience and power. As the book seems to say, science is a poetry of its own: "Sonnets performing open-heart surgery. / Pass me the anapests. Clear. / I want a CAT of that synecdoche. Gestalt. Gestalt."

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But science provides merely one of many vocabularies Little uses; indeed, Little's writing has an emotional intricacy matched only by its textual complexity. As she writes in the final lines of *Mirror Neuron*, "Bundle neural bindle / I carry you to you." Visually, the word "neural" acts like a mirror, at least a deceptive one, deforming "bundle" into "bindle." In terms of metre, the rigidly regular trochaic trimeter ("Bundle neural bindle" – stressed-unstressed) is followed by near-perfect iambic trimeter ("I carry you to you" – unstressed-stressed): an inversion, another mirror, this time along the horizontal axis. And yet this last line celebrates symmetry, the mirror neuron, with the ultimate reflection a book can have: similitude between reader and speaker, the latter of whom carries "you to you." As the envoi seems to say, poetry is self-discovery for the reader just as much as for the writer.

Even as her subject matter varies from the more personal and concrete to the more mythological or scientific, her work never falls into mere repetition or rigid structure. Rather, the stanzas themselves are a shifting stage; her words are grounding and provocative, characters in a poetic drama. *Xenia* is indeed a gift for the eyes as well as the ears.

Willow Loveday Little's *Xenia* is available at [Argo Bookshop](#).

Feature image: courtesy of Willow Loveday Little

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Jerome Ramcharitar is a writer based in Montreal, Quebec. Most of his days are spent teaching English as a second language and occasionally causing more trouble as a poet. A language fanatic, he has dipped his fingers into editing, translation, and the dangerous world of card games. [The Wrong Poem and Others Like It](#) is his first chapbook.



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