

Our own memories of these iconic stories resonate with such paradox. Why do fairy tales, often fraught with danger, allow children to escape in peaceful slumber? Children know that there may not be such things as giants, but they also know that there are such things as grown-ups, who may seem like giants at times. While Cunningham reinvents these stories with adult humor and understanding, they still inspire with wonder and revelation.

And ultimately, in Cunningham's fairy land, as in the stories of youth, filled with witches and beasts and arbitrary magic, we remain safe: "Some went willingly, some went grudgingly, but all of them, every child, returned home, every night." ❖

CHRISTOPHER BUSA is founder and editorial director of Provincetown Arts Press.

Forbidden City

By Gail Mazur

University of Chicago Press, 2016

A BOOK REVIEW BY PETER CAMPION

THE POETRY OF GRIEF AND WONDER

Forbidden City, Gail Mazur's new collection of poetry, opens with its title poem, relating a dream in which the poet and her deceased beloved have been granted one more year together. As the poem wends its way to its ending, the dream circles back to a memory of China:

... Daylight

flickers through a bamboo grove,
as we approach the Forbidden City,

looking together for the Hall
of Fulfilling Original Wishes.

*Time is the treasure, you tell me,
and the past is its hiding place.*

I instruct our fictional children,
The past is the treasure, time

*is its hiding place. If we told him
how much we love him, how much*

we miss him, he could stay.
But now you've taken me back

to Luoyang, to the Garden of Solitary Joy,
over a thousand years old—


I wake, I hold your hand, you let me go.

This is a lyric of such intensity, such distillation of the poet's address into necessary speech, that as an opener it may raise a question—how will she ever follow *this one*? What makes this book so exceptional is the strength and nuance with which Mazur does rise to that challenge. Rendering grief, these poems also work to renew wonder.



Mazur's aesthetic resourcefulness shows, in fact, in those same lines from "Forbidden City." For one thing, humor tempers and deepens the poignancy of this ending: as soon as the poet hears the oracular words from her deceased beloved, she not only mistranslates them to her fictional children, but does so to "instruct." Throughout the collection, Mazur's irony, often paired with a wholesome dose of self-deprecation, reveals a restless, curious, and sometimes accident-prone intelligence at play. "Inventory," for example, has the poet addressing her lost beloved, this time to tell him about the visit an appraiser has paid to their home. However, every time she mentions the appraiser, she misremembers the woman's name, inventing new names as she goes on. In "Family Crucible," Mazur repurposes Walt Whitman's famous declaration "Look for me under your boot soles!" to refer to the way one grown sister has treated another.

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The Narrow Door: A Memoir of Friendship

By Paul Lisicky

Graywolf Press, 2016

A BOOK REVIEW BY SARAH MESSER

These comical moments help to alleviate the painfulness of loss; they also show an artistic sensibility in action. Mazur's medium, language, is forever being questioned, culled, objected to, and enjoyed—not only for its felicities, but also for its recalcitrance, its quirkiness: just as dream life unsettles the surface of reality in these poems, so words themselves reveal a dynamic instability.

Forbidden City is a book of wondrous form-finding. These poems are often about art itself, but they have none of the insularity we might associate with “art for art’s sake.” For Mazur, the pursuit of form is not a matter of neglecting emotional, messy content, much less of writing in traditional measures (though Mazur employs rhyme to excellent effect in a poem called “My Studio”). Instead, in all their tonal variety, these poems reveal form as a quality that philosophical concepts and good jokes have in common, a logic of simultaneous surprise and inevitability.

Maybe what’s most moving about Mazur’s mastery of form is the way it includes the fundamental balancing acts of everyday life, our little attempts to make sense of things, to set our ordinary affairs in their right relation—and, at times, unsettle them. Consider “Unveiling,” a poem occasioned by the unveiling of a mother’s gravestone:

I say to the named granite stone, to the
brown grass,
to the dead chrysanthemums, *Mother, I still
have a
body, what else could receive my mind's
transmissions,
its dots and dashes of pain?* I expect and get no
answer,
no loamy scent of her coral geraniums. She
who is now
immaterial, for better or worse, no longer
needs to speak
of wisdom, love and fury. *MAKE! DO!* a
note on our fridge
commanded. Here I am making,
unmaking, doing, undoing.

This poem seems to me emblematic of everything that makes Mazur and *Forbidden City* so vital to American poetry right now. Traveling deftly from raw, existential statement to notes on the fridge, Mazur’s poems are acts of embodiment, giving shape to experience, including the most painful and most ecstatic, the most monumental and most ordinary. I can’t think of another living poet who, while honoring both the need to give shape to life and the inevitability of “undoing,” has so successfully realized this passion for experience in all its tones and forms. ❧

PETER CAMPION is the author most recently of *El Dorado*. The recipient of the Rome Prize and the Guggenheim Fellowship, he directs the creative writing program at the University of Minnesota.



WHILE READING Paul Lisicky’s new memoir, *The Narrow Door*, I felt as if I were standing outside a series of clear glass doors that offered glimpses into many years of the author’s friendships, love affairs, and life as a writer. The doors belonged to houses and apartments in New York City, Philadelphia, Fire Island, Nantucket, Palo Alto, a beach town in North Carolina, and other places. William Zinsser describes a memoir as “a window into a life,” a slice, a small part of a larger autobiography, and that is certainly true here. Lisicky has subtitled the book “a memoir of friendship,” specifically his decades-long friendship with the novelist Denise Gess, but the book contains many other friendships and losses too—lovers, parents, and animals. It is a book filled with friends, losing them, getting them back, losing them again, and how to face this impermanence. Some readers will remember that Lisicky was married to the poet Mark Doty (called simply “M”), but the book is not about that relationship, nor the end of their marriage (though it is present)—*The Narrow Door* is fundamentally a long, ragged love letter to Denise, whose death from cancer in 2010 forms the impetus and reason for this beautiful and completely new literary architecture. I can say, right here and now (in case you are wondering what kind of review this will be) that I read the book pretty much nonstop over the course of two days, folding

down corners of pages and filling it with sticky notes and pencil marks, in awe of its power, honesty, heartbreak, and innovative form.

The book begins with Paul, a closeted young fiction writer, caught in the headlights of fellow graduate student Denise’s glamour and recent success; she’d just had a novel accepted for publication, she’d been to the prestigious Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, she’d had an affair with a Famous Writer. Lisicky describes her movie star qualities, her “wattage,” which dims and brightens over the years as her career stutters and his takes off. Paul winds up marrying a Famous Writer, publishing books, winning awards. So the book is also about literary friendships and their boons and treachery—Denise had a tendency to be as competitive and jealous as she was generous and genius. Lisicky is honest about this, and yet it never detracts from the narrative or our love for Denise. No one, it seems, is safe from her charms, no matter how badly she acts. In a heartbreaking scene near the end of her life, when Denise is dying of cancer, she asks Paul if she can put her feet up on his lap as they both sit on the couch. “See how we’ve been a little bit in love all this time, and not able to say it?” he writes.

Much of the book is about this too—what can’t be said, what needs to be left out. How does one write a history of a friendship, indeed the history of one’s own life? Perhaps this is what we ask ourselves, when someone we love dies—how can we tell the world everything about this person? But Paul Lisicky doesn’t attempt it: “words fail in the face of strong emotion . . . the list would never tell the complete story.”

So what we get, as readers, is a friendship that unfolds through snippets of conversation, arguments, e-mails, phone calls, a blossoming love, a meditation on Vincent van Gogh, a new dog, deaths, and other endings: “What happens when you die? The broken light switch in the kitchen, the doorknob glistening in the saucer by the window. How can you get in?” Structurally we are let in through chapters arranged around themes—Volcano, Wave, Furious, Famous Writers—and within these chapters, smaller sections arranged only by year—2010, 1986, 1998, etc. For lovers of the linear, I can say that the book pretty much progresses in chronological order, albeit in a sidwinding way. But there’s a lot we’re never told. We never find out when and how Paul met his own Famous Writer, M. We are never shown Denise’s childhood, or hear much about how