

HOW DO I NET THEE

(SALMON POETRY, 2018)

Shira Dentz

REVIEWED BY RACHEL ABRAMOWITZ

There is a telling trick at the beginning of Shira Dentz's poetry collection *how do i net thee*: an untitled poem appears before the poems, hung somewhere between definition and lyric, a warning and a lure:

piece of openwork fabric made of twine,
synthetic fibres,
strong cord, forming meshes of
a suitable size, used for catching fish, birds, or other living
things

for various purposes as covering, protecting, confining,
holding, delimiting,

arrangement of lines,
math. ; spec. a reticular

Immediately we are snared by a number of entangling forces: illustration, mathematics, objects sentient and non-, and a hazy delineation between predator and prey. This collection is at once an "arrangement of lines" as all poems are, and a constant negotiation between the protection and confinement those arrangements offer, between holding living things and providing the parameters necessary for freedom. Even the title is itself a knot of meaning: without the question mark, the implication becomes "*this* is how I net thee," while the ghost of punctuation transforms the title into either a sotto voce calculation or a plea. All ye who enter here must watch their toes.

Even when Dentz employs a straightforward form, the effect is no less a snare. *if it were rep-re-sent-a-tion-al* [sic] is a tangle of register and association:

slice worms into a salad bread would be better
 seal eyes with envelopes black seeds
 must say *lookin good* at a banister eye again
 pins hillseverything
 rolling no chance of rhyme black covered with ash
 climb perhaps
 not this far stop thrill me will you will we climb birds fauna
 seafoam algae
 fall back onyx eyes roll up sleeves olives
 pare the echo again

The title, again, performs a sleight of hand. That “if” (not to mention that “it”: the poem? The impersonal pronoun “it” or the impersonal verb “it”?) chafes against the broken rep-re-sent-a-tion: is the poem the result of defying representational expectation, or is it a sort of double negative, rendering the poem an actual representation of something so deeply internal as to be unfamiliar to the reader? Furthermore, the eye appears as object here, not subject, netted by the action — slicing, sealing, rolling, climbing — around it. There is nowhere to settle; even the hills, which should be solid as anything, are portmanteaued with an abstraction, rendering them unreliable. There is a somewhat panicked energy in these poems: the panic of the reader netted, the answer to the title’s question laid bare.

Fittingly, Dentz is a master of visual form, using line breaks, white space, punctuation, font size, and drawn lines to build dimension that pushes beyond the flat page. Often the page is spun ninety degrees in one direction or the other, forcing the reader to literally alter her or his physical space. “Twin,” for example, is a blend of concrete poetry — two thin justified columns stand like the Twin Towers — and page layout marks that, as part of the poem, are imbued with political significance (the “registration” mark is a cross-hair target icon, while “crop” and “bleed” become horrific in the context of the 9/11 attacks). The fact that this poem is laid out (the same words we use for dead bodies) in “landscape” orientation emphasizes how the literal landscape was similarly transformed. The words in the columns derive from the definition for “twin,” one tower capped with a definite article, the other with an indefinite one. Later in the collection, whole poems will be twinned, as the

same beginning, flipped sideways, has room to continue itself. If we are to push the net metaphor, we are trapped in the net made of *these* words, and though the materials do not change, the shapes they take cannot but shift.

If we come back to the title of the collection, we see that archaic “thee” sticking to the end of “net,” pulling backward and forward in time. Nearly every poem in this book has a nearly physical effect, pushing and pulling the reader linguistically and in relation to the page. It is no surprise, then, that the speaker of one of the poems states — threateningly? Promisingly? — that she can “Throw my voice a way the potter throws clay.” These are difficult, tactile, dangerous poems, and yet, in the end, it is the beauty that nets thee.