

WHAT I KNEW

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Eleni Sikelianos

REVIEWED BY KELLY WEBER

It's always a pleasure to read one of Eleni Sikelianos's books, to see the mind at work through the lyric voice on the page, and *What I Knew* is no exception. *What I Knew* is a kind of rhizomatic resistance to the monetization and control of knowledge, self, and private life ("our private territories," as she says in the closing note of the book) that feels prescient and all the more relevant now than ever. What, Sikelianos asks in her closing note and book, can poetry do to combat the ways our interiority and lives are systemized and programmed to produce capital without intimacy? Stake out a place for a different kind of knowledge, perhaps — though the past tense of the title suggests an elegiac tone to this fierceness and humor.

What I Knew feels, in some ways, like an intersection of Walt Whitman and Bernadette Mayer: an expansive, global focus on the ecosystem of bodies and sky and earth filtered through daily-ness, dream, bits of found text and headlines, voices of children, acts of random violence committed in the world. In opposition to the search engine, Sikelianos creates a fixed textual object that resists single, utilitarian interpretation — a wealth of observation and poetic knowledge constructed in an artful (not optimized) order with seemingly secure boundaries that expands far beyond the limits of web filtration systems. Here, to speak and to know are open questions of an oppositional phenomenology. Early in the book, the speaker asks

“Should I know how to speak / Should I speak
how to know.”

If, as Dan Beachy-Quick has said, a poet listens by speaking, then the “I” of *What I Knew* speaks into a field of the page generated away from web-based controls. Knowing and speaking, particularly in an age where every action and word — and thought — is recorded, are fraught. What if speaking permits yet further control of the self? How are knowledge and speaking already ethically challenging without the interface of the Internet? Should the lyric “I” speak of

knowing at all, and should one know how to speak, if language reifies crisis even as it is necessitated by it?

Indeed, so much of *What I Knew* speaks out of and into crisis: of violence, of control, of overwhelm. Slipping from association to association with both irony and sincerity, Sikelianos juxtaposes empathy with horror, frequently making strange stock or trite phrasing in the process. Early in the book, for example, the speaker notes, "I am a friend to caribou / and the mines leach toxic." This Whitmanesque phrasing, like a lyric reclamation or statement of empathy, is also evocative of the way the Internet manages to make knowledge of global crises both immediate and detached from our lives. We can be both a friend to the caribou and complicit in the ongoing toxicity — the ability to hold two opposing thoughts in the mind that is the foil of the ethos of poetry. Again and again, Sikelianos drives this home through parataxis:

in lace light
meat-like

what does a murdered body
smell like?

like the Quaboag River (question mark)

From lace to meat to murder, we follow the track of a mind able to hold all of these things at once. The leaping and association of the mind, its ability to make connections, feels at the heart of this ethos of *What I Knew*. It resists the way search engines and data mining not only mimic the human mind, but also attempt to remap and reroute the mind's decisions for monetary gain.

Key to that resistance, too, is play. Words bump, slant-rhyme, mutate into one another in a way that is pleasurable as well as part of the ethical force of the work. Halfway through *What I Knew*, the speaker creates a sort of nursery rhyme that becomes elegiac (though aren't fables, stories, and rhymes often coded with such darkness?) and an act of witness to all our complicity:

Jingle-jangle, my mind's a tangle

Overhung with what we've done. Please put *grace* back in
Scapegrace for my brothers to hold close to all
Elegance and I will celebrate a
Funus imaginarium — funeral rite for my

unnecessary selves, all of them, built publicly

The proliferation of selves in the Internet, the insistence that artifice act as authentically as possible, is counteracted here by ruptures of syntax and sound, by a funeral rite that also manages to contain the word “fun” in it. A poem is in many ways an *imaginarium*, a living thought-organism that refuses to adhere to programmed group-think and constructed, economized reality. So much of *What I Knew* uses such sharp play and fluidity of syntax, recursion and inversion of questions and statements, to reclaim the private territories of thought. The speaker observes the reprogramming of language by noting, “we demilitarized the verbs under oceans and seas / the weight of information was too much in Oakland.” The ethos of the poem is undo this complicity of language, and it does so through re-awakening us to both humor and devastation: *What I Knew* contains both the speaker’s daughter making stories about feces and the speaker asking gutting little questions like “Will our worlds live on?” The *imaginarium* of the poem contains it all.

In this way, *What I Knew* is a reclamation of intimacy away from interface. The speaker asks, “please don’t text but / whisper the answer most intimately to me.” The poem seems an act of reifying language and intimacy into something that cannot be distilled and dispersed into a data-minable object. It is a connection of speaker to ear, a whisper of language across and into the body. Within a poem — this poem, any poem — the overwhelm, the juxtaposition of details, the mundanity of violence and observation, are pieces “curated to speak.” Speaking, knowledge, interiority, a refusal to be silent: these form the ethos at the heart of the house the words make in *What I Knew*. Like all good poetry, this book makes us think and see again, to question the way our lives and thoughts seem to already be curated for us by those who stand to gain from them in the world. Authors like Sikelianos give us ways to fight back against this. That the result is dazzling, moving wordplay is the inevitable surprise that keeps us coming back to books like this.