

The Taxidermist's Cut (a review)

(I sat down to read Rajiv Mohabir's stunning and bloody book on a cold and sunny north Florida afternoon. I have finagled Tuesdays off from my day job, being a mom to an adopted child with special needs I need this day for his therapy appointments. Then I take him back to school and write until the children stream out into the sunlight. This is how I manage to write and be other things.)

1. I have touched an unusual number of birds this winter.

2. The first, a small sparrow that flew into the car. I tried to catch it but it clung to the corner where the carpeted car ceiling touches the back window. We left the door open and it flew out. I wanted to cradle its nervous soft body; this my maternal feeling: to snatch up, to stroke.

3. My son announced, "That's the first time we've ever had a bird in the car," as if it was only a matter of time before a bird flew into the car, and now it will happen regularly, once every six months or so, until we die. I've told this story many times now, and nobody else has ever had a bird fly into their car.

4. A larger bird with a red throat the cat tried to kill. I put it in a box and scolded the cat. When nobody answered the phone at the wildlife rescue, I took it to the veterinary school at the University of Florida. They have a form for that. "Do you want to donate the bird?" Well, I can't afford to pay the doctor to try to save it.

5. The elementary school butts up against a small wetland, possibly protected but in either case ringed by a wire mesh fence that the children are not supposed to cross. Walking him in one breathy morning, he freezes. *Look! Ducks!* Two black ducks dive under the brown water, their heads shining.

6. Trauma's hypervigilance pays off in these moments of noticing, of naming.

7. He refers to a group of birds as a school. "A school zone of birds."

8. *The Taxidermist's Cut* is a book about tracking—how we track our histories, how we track the elusive animals.

9. Once slaughtered, how we sew ourselves into these hides. How they do not fit. The names we give each other do not fit.

10. “Thank you, young man,” I’ve been called now, twice, this week.

11. This is a book about bloody and delicate wordplay. Tears and tears. Razor, eraser. The link between sadness and violence. Between once violence and another.

12. My cousin told me a ghost story and I got so scared, one of my students says. If you talk of spirits, you call them up, another replies.

13. This is a book about what is left. *If a pheasant is shot hard, its carcass/will never appear to fly after death.* How our memories trick. My mother, for instance, does not remember things I am certain happened.

14. *No matter how well you prepare/this memory, doctored to reshape/my chest against your back,/ I am not inside that skin you fix.*

15. Can a spirit slip out to save itself? Can the prey slip away?

16. Reading “Payne’s Prairie, Gainesville,” I startle with recognition. I have laid down by the Danger Bison sign, in my own moments of great sadness and surrender. We love to see our special places, our own selves, our homes in someone else’s poem. Egotistical, we look for our own faces wherever we go. (*What glass won’t distort/your image?*) Every time I go to Paynes Prairie I think, I ought to learn the names of birds. I’ve named this place my home. But I don’t.

17. Trauma can manifest, partially, in an inappropriate desire to touch things, referred to as sensory seeking by occupational therapists.

18. The baby’s sensory system doesn’t wire correctly due to a lack of nurturing care. (I am cold, the baby might cry, and the caring adult swaddles him; I am nervous, the baby might cry, and the loving adult rocks the baby, stimulating the fluid in the baby’s inner ear and developing the baby’s vestibular sense, the understanding of how to balance in space.) The neglected baby cries and nobody holds her.

19. When babies do not experience this feedback loop: discomfort, cry, the need is met—their sensory systems do not wire properly; their belief in their ability to voice their own needs does not develop. They learn to speak in a broken voice, the therapist says. Some of us still speak in broken voices, she tells us.

20. Poets are sensory seekers too.

21. What happens when our culture doesn’t hold the bodies of its young—its queer young, its brown young? *How will this child survive being cast out/ or abandoned for what he cannot change?* This is a trauma too.

22. *When you cut mouths along your forearm/your whole body gasps.* Mohabir writes. I read this at my son's gymnastics class, the class where he once let go after climbing a 40 foot rope to the ceiling. He did not understand to go down slowly, hand over hand. He crashed into the arms of the handsome young coach below; I flew across the gym. This feels incongruous, to read this bloody, sexy, terrifying book while I watch children practice kicking balls and walking beams. But my life is incongruous, the pieces don't fit, the darkness and the history right under the surface. These things touching, that is poetry.

23. Is this how poets are made? The ones who survive, reach out to stroke the bird's feathers—do they know how to use gentle hands? Do they break pencils from gripping too hard?

24. *Place your arms and legs into the empty pelt and sew yourself up.* The poet seeks compression, containment; the poet doctors himself, fathers himself, presses against skins that do not fit. The poet makes do.

(all italicized text from *The Taxidermist's Cut*)