



Once: Poems

Meghan O'Rourke

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“The poems in Once illuminate and echo themes of loss and grief.”—*Vanity Fair*

The incandescent poems in Once, the second collection by an astonishing and formidable poet, explore loss, violence, and recovery. Facing a mother’s impending death, O’Rourke invokes a vanished childhood of “American houses, wet / kids moving through them in Spandex bathing suits; / inside, sandwiches with crusts cut off.” But the future hangs ominously over this summer paradise: not just the death of O’Rourke’s mother but the stark civic traumas faced by American citizens in the twenty-first century. “The future,” O’Rourke writes, “is all still / a dream, a night sweat to be swum off / in a wonderland of sand and bread.”

These poems are shadowed by illness, both civic and personal, and by the mysterious currents of grief. What emerges over the course of the volume is a meditation not only on a daughter’s relationship with her mother but also on a citizen’s to her nation. Throughout, Once examines the forces that shape war, divorce, and death, exploring personal culpability and charting uncertain new beginnings as the speakers seek to build homes in a shattered land and find whole selves amid broken, thwarted relationships.

from "Frontier"

... At times,
I felt sick, intoxicated
by BPA and mercury.
At other times I fasted and the stars
stumbled clear from the vault.
Up there, the universe stands around drunk.
I hope the Lord is kind to us,
for we engrave our every mistake . . .

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