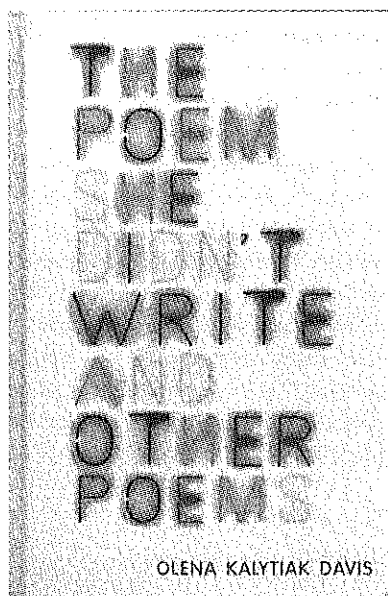


# THE POEM SHE DIDN'T WRITE AND OTHER POEMS

Olena Kalytiak Davis  
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In his recent book, *Twenty Poems That Could Save America and Other Essays*, Tony Hoagland discusses the divide in our understanding of contemporary poetry's function as "the thrill of recognition versus the thrill of disorientation." He then raises the crucial question: "What do we, as readers, want from a poem?" This question can serve as a useful reverberation for those who pick up Olena Kalytiak Davis's most recent collection, *The Poem She Didn't Write and Other Poems*.

For those who tend to read and write in a poetic terrain that indeed thrives on that "thrill of recognition," Davis's book will be a step out of one's comfort zone, which arguably makes for a valuable reading experience. Her work defamiliarizes the typical poetic experience in almost every way possible: oft-dropped punctuation and capitalization, fragmented and destabilized grammar, erratic and crackling wordplay—at times serious, at times irreverent, laden with irony, peppered with pop culture references, intentionally whimsical, and sometimes obscure. Take "SONNET (division)":

i have not held them side to side, nor wished  
as with less(er) love(s) to have them: back to back.  
if evil choose a place to lay its wrack  
it lie(s) with "i": that steneded and (w)retched dish

(i has not seen me as they must) of self,  
and if me looks i can but lose. suggest me!

These poems run the risk of disorienting a reader groping for recognition. There are small moments of information and narrative heat, flaring only to extinguish before a true sense of their scope can be grasped. Take the second of three poems titled "Threshold," which creates a sense of urgency, of outrage, of violence and violation, with only scant detail:

unWELCOMEd  
he stepped  
into my HOUSE

past (,) the photos on the refrigerator  
past (,) my children  
past (,) my well-appointed LIFE

Other poems, like "The Lyric 'I' Drives to Pick Up Her Children from School: A Poem in the Postconfessional Mode," have an anaphoric pattern—"i" likes the dubus thing about adultery having a morality of its own. / 'i' also likes 'human drama'. / 'i' really enjoyed 'i♥ hucka-bees'"—that lend the poem cohesion and seem to contextualize the collection in the contemporary poetic landscape. Jeffrey McDaniel describes post-confessional poems as "poems that enter into a place of psychic fracture, often involving family, and elaborate on or develop

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techniques used by the confessional poets." With more than one poem that directly addresses Robert Lowell, the premier confessionalist, Davis clearly enters that "post" terrain.

The "psychic fracture" that McDaniel notes perfectly encapsulates the space these poems inhabit—ones that tackle motherhood, sexuality, rape, domesticity, adultery, the body. The surface and subconscious of Davis' work are continually mystifying, but snatches of lines—"Poem—get a job. / Poem—get a life . . . Poem—you say too little. / Poem—you are so not enough"—may well entrance readers seeking the "thrill of recognition," perhaps even challenging them to ask more of what they expect to find in poetry.

Hoagland says it best when he describes this exact sort of reading experience: "Even if we are falling, we can feel that we have some human companionship in the descent and that we are having an adventure." There is an undeniably candid and colorful voice at work in this collection, one that seeks to be understood, one that aims to thrill in its disorientation.

—Paige Sullivan