

Kate Baer, *What Kind of Woman*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2020. Pp. 112. Softcover, \$17 US.

Kate Baer, *I Hope This Finds You Well*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2021. Pp. 96. Softcover, \$12 US.

Kate Baer is that rarest kind of poet, with her first two books on the single metre-long “poetry section” in the tiny bookstores of international airports. A self-described “millennial with an English major,” claiming Margaret Atwood as inspiration, Baer started a blog titled “Motley Momma” in 2011. By 2014, her personal essay “When you are Tightly Wound” had gained more than a million hits and was picked up by the *Huffington Post*. By 2020, her first collection of poetry, *What Kind of Woman*, had shot to the *New York Times* bestseller list, and Baer was profiled in the *New York Times*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and elsewhere. Less than a year later, her second book of poetry, *I Hope This Finds You Well*, was rising up the charts.

This type of success is unusual for poets, of course, but it is not unprecedented in the age of social media. Millennial poets such as Rupi Kaur and Atticus have fostered audiences in the millions on their Instagram accounts, and have enjoyed mainstream publishing success as a consequence. Baer has long written for online audiences and often the first publication is posted on the internet. Early on, with nearly thirty thousand followers on Facebook, she faithfully responded to readers’ comments, according to a profile published by her alma mater, Eastern Mennonite University. Reviews of Baer’s work regularly note that her poetry has resonated especially with young mothers, many of whom, over the past two years, were locked down with their kids during the pandemic, and unable to return to the workforce as the pandemic subsided. A 2022 report from the American Psychological Association suggests such women have not so much “opted out” of the workforce as they have been “shoved out” by “insidious societal messages that women should be mothers and that mothers should put their families first.” Little wonder, then, that Baer’s debut collection, *What Kind of Woman*, has resonated so strongly, and so far beyond the confines of social media: critique of “insidious societal messages” in a culture that sentimentalizes the sacrifice of mothering but fails to support the women who do that labour fuels the emotional force of Baer’s first book.

Baer’s publisher, Harper Perennial, has capitalized on the poet’s social media origins. *What Kind of Woman* packages her work in a petite, handheld format, choosing a Barbara Kruger-style news font for the flowery cover and poem titles. This easy, open feel continues

inside the book, where readers find no table of contents and no poem more than a single page long. These aesthetic choices give the collection a sense of accessibility, and position it as part of the social media environment. Yet, as noted by *Vogue* magazine, Baer is “a different kind of Instagram poet,” meaning that she’s something more than a mere slinger of platitudes or digital pictures of domestic perfectionism. She is, I believe, a poet who writes out of necessity, striving to articulate in the clearest way possible what it’s like to be alive at this moment in time.

Accordingly, many of Baer’s lyrics hit sharp and hard. Here, for example, is a poem that cuttingly conveys the spectacular losses that come with maternity, quoted in its entirety:

Things No One Says to Me

*You make it look so easy  
You don't look like you just had a baby  
Motherhood looks good on you*

This poem is exemplary of many tight poems in collection, in that it sets up expectations with a deceptively direct title, and deploys quotation and exploits the list format to expose the ways we talk about women and our lives. “Female Candidate” is composed of demeaning phrases common during the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign without naming the candidate, while “Fat Girl” gathers faint praise and scraps of weight-loss advice. “What Children Say” and “What Mothers Say” capture the monotony and exhaustion of long days, while “Deleted Sentences,” addressed to a “Dear husband,” includes the refrain, “What time will you be home?” And, “Things Men Say to Me” is made up of—well, you can imagine! In other poems, such as “Marriage as Death” and “Wedlock,” Baer confronts related concerns while moving away from the quotation and list strategy, working with more lyrical language. In “Motherload,” for example, she writes of a woman with “an office in her sternum,” and her vertebrae filled with “more carnal tasks: milk jugs, rotten plants, heavy- / bottomed toddlers in all their mortal rage.”

Baer’s representations of burdensome mothering have garnered the most attention to date, but the book extends a broader range. “Mary’s Disappearance,” for example, launches a theopoetic critique of the absence of the feminine Divine, as in Anabaptist and evangelical traditions, both of which inform Baer’s background. Several others reflect on coming of age as a young woman in North America, including these acerbic lines from “College Boy”:

Did you know when you bait a deer  
it's called a *violation*, but when you poison  
a girl it's called a *date*.

The frank fury of such poems is undeniably effective, and Baer shows her range not only in topic but also tone. A number of the strongest poems represent sustaining friendships between women, and reading them made me realize how infrequently I see those kinds of relationships explored in literature.

Of course, social media's requirements—immediate and accessible diction, urgency—are also its limits, and occasionally the language in *What Kind of Woman* feels flat, merely utilitarian. Yet these poems have important work to do. Baer follows a strong line of poets who have chosen to name gender inequity alongside the pleasures and pains of marriage with children. She follows Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton of the 1960s, Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* in the 1970s, and the early work of Sharon Olds in the 1980s. That these poets go unmentioned in Baer's work suggests that she may be considered outside that tradition, unfairly dismissed as media ephemera. I see the late National Book Award winner Lucille Clifton as Baer's nearest predecessor, with her clear, short lyrics, generous but critical vision, and voice so close to speech. Like Clifton, Baer celebrates small joys and a full figure while resisting misogyny with humor and wit.

Baer's second collection, *I Hope This Finds You Well*, appeared within a year of her first book. It is composed of erasure poems, a kind of found poetry that quotes a source text but masks sections of it, rendering a retort or critique of the original message with the words that remain. In the author's note at the beginning of the second book, Baer recounts her first experience with hostile "Strangers on the Internet" in the early 2000s, when an avatar named Brian posted "SHOW YOUR TITS OR GET OFF THE INTERNET." Years later, experienced with that reality of life online but not entirely injured to it, she hit on the idea of applying a digital "pen tool" to a disturbing message, and she posted the original along with her transformation. When the success of her first collection sparked predictable backlash, she collected a host of messages, comment threads, and emails that she would use to write her second.

The Trump era saw a boom in erasure poetry in the United States, and here Baer uses the form to address not only the interests of her first book—sacrificial mothering is back as a central concern, for example—but also a range of the emotionally charged social issues recognizable as characteristic of this period: police accountability, domestic violence, LGBTQ rights, racial justice, and body

image, as well as Donald Trump himself. Baer's source texts are drawn mostly from reader comments, but also from news articles and other texts, including the Bible, and she includes the original text for each poem on the left, opposite the erasure poems on the right. It is fascinating to see Baer transform aggressive or narrow-minded messages into something softer and smarter. The book design makes the erasure visible, but also reveals the limits of erasure poetry. As delicious as the "gotcha" results can be, the thrill of such tricks can sometimes feel simple. In the poem "Re: Leaving the White House from Donald J. Trump Mike Pence," for example, Baer reduces the former president's advice that a person "can go" down in history either as a "patriot" or a "pussy" to "you can go." And it is not the only risk one runs when turning misogyny and other forms of vitriol into poetry. Baer writes that the process of writing erasure poetry is "cathartic" at times, but at others she finds it just "abundantly sad." As a reader of these pages, I share those sentiments.

*I Hope This Finds You Well* builds on the success of *What Kind of Woman* in a very literal and direct manner. It, too, is a success, although I miss Baer's more conventional lyric poems. I appreciate that the second book includes source notes and citations in back, but question the editor's choice to skip a table of contents—again!—as if these poems were not printed in a codex with linear pagination. With her popular reach and success nearly assured, it will be fascinating to see whether Baer will strike out in a new direction.

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