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Book Review: Radiant by Kate Marshall Flaherty

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The first poem of Kate Marshall Flaherty's *Radiant*, "Welcoming Angels," begins with: "I will not see cancer as an enemy / nor foreign intruder, / but a passenger pigeon, (not extinct), / flown from a roof box." This inaugural stanza establishes and previews the defying and sweetly metaphoric poetics that Marshall Flaherty develops throughout her collection, which intimately guides her reader through her journey with cancer. Her poetics is inviting as it is introspective, a spiritual communication between actors in the life present and the life beyond.

"Welcoming Angels" continues by characterizing the pigeon as possessing no "pecking order / (no band 'round his ankle)," simultaneously granting an agency

to the cancer as well as the speaker, the creator of a new world. Ultimately, Marshall Flaherty shows how she approaches her journey of cancer with curiosity, transforming this experience into an opportunity to reveal her love for herself and for others within pain.

Throughout the collection, Marshall Flaherty employs rich, naturalistic imagery to describe her cancer and her body. The sea, the ocean, becomes an organic basis for this exploration into the known and unknown. In “Tumour”, the cancerous narrates in first person, calling itself an “ominous orb... in soft oyster folds.” From this narrative the tumour comes to life as the speaker becomes the helpless “you”, the other. And yet the image of this darkly yet beautiful pearl, almost invites a compassionate admiration, being “bright as a silver lure in an ocean mound.” In “Ode to my Vagina”, the attention of the sea is bestowed upon a vagina that was once “squid-soft” but now “a sand stranded conch.” Marshall Flaherty crafts an intimate detailing of the vagina that is at once vibrantly symbolic and physically visceral. These courageous explorations of the aging body and the body with cancer demonstrates how *Radiant* pays respect to the metaphoric beauty of the body, or perhaps more genuinely, the metaphoric body of beauty.

Beyond the individual and the individual body, compassion and love for others weave the collection into a whole. In “The magic is in the salt, they say,” Marshall Flaherty’s speaker asks herself, “How can I hold his sorrow?... His first love, sex, heartbreak. / I know salt in the wound / will make his life richer, / how can I tell him this?” These moments of empathetic questioning bring the reader closer to the speaker; although the speaker is ill, we cannot help but feel strength resonating from her, and believe that she would be able to comfort us, too. In “Book of Hours”, observing her son’s “luminous” face lit by an e-Book and the “moon full”, Marshall Flaherty’s asks another question: “What time is it?” The answer is: “It is now, and sacred.” Whether rhetorical or not, the questions in *Radiant* reveal the speaker’s care for others through their sensitive perceptiveness.

There is a sense, throughout *Radiant*, that the speaker is continuously transcending her cancer. The cancer is very much present, and real, but it is

simultaneously being overcome by the intrinsic and extrinsic will of the speaker. As Marshall Flaherty writes eloquently in “Note to Self”: “Cancer is a maze to self, / a solitary walk, and yet / the sun set shadows directing / my trek, and friends / left crumbs and markers.” Further, in “I will write me a love poem,” the speaker describes herself as “A trinity of me,” and reflects, “I sing myself a song / of my Self, three word / miracle: / I am Love.” With a deeply Whitmanian nod, Marshall Flaherty multiplies her self generously, and the mention of “trinity” automatically evokes the image of her three children. Later in the poem, Marshall Flaherty writes: “Katie... plaiting three strands / me, we, us.” Marshall Flaherty steadily, confidently achieves a union between the self and the collective, the cancer and the body. The result is a reflection on illness that is neither over-defined or diminished within the stream of life, becoming the unexpected intensity of life itself.

With *Radiant*, Kate Marshall Flaherty spiritually and honestly guides herself and the reader through her journey with cancer. A warm glow wraps her poems, sometimes in a joyous manner, but mostly in a humanizing manner. Radiance, the reader comes to learn, not only comes from the speaker’s strength and love for her family and friends, but also from radiation and from pearl tumours. Within the gratitude evoked in Marshall Flaherty’s narrative comes an acceptance of what is, which is both fixed and ever-moving, known but unpredictable. As the speaker reflects soberly and tenderly: “Will cancer return? Will sunshine / Will drought?”

Radiant is published by Ianna Publications, and can be purchased from their [website](#). Furthermore, you can learn more about Kate and her work on [her own website](#).

Kate’s poems, “Lying Cows” and “Poem to my Son on the Occasion of Dropping out of University,” can be found in [The Trinity Review 131.2](#)

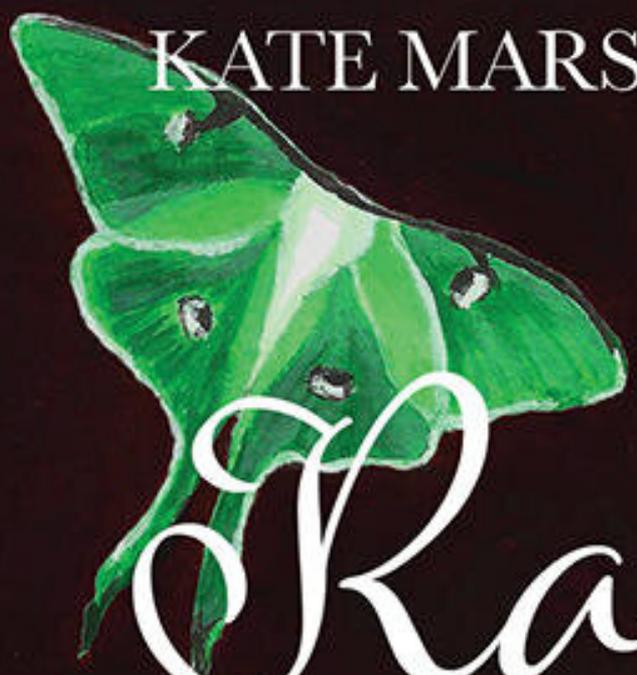
Written by Grace Ma | Edited by Antonia Facciponte





poems by

KATE MARSHALL FLAHERTY



Radiant



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