

## Macular Hole

On Catherine Wagner's *Macular Hole*

Reviewed by Peach Friedman

Somewhere between soft image and cutting line, Wagner has birthed a book representative of not just two opposing sides, but infinite angles of a woman as mother/self/person in relation to any other person/thing/experience. Singular and several combined into one poetic story of multiplying. "I needed to be alone reproducing."

This scenario of 'the one' vs. 'the many' finds kinship with body. The body: a singular, graspable place of autonomous identification, as well as the force that propels us forward into childbearing. So what initially is a woman's own flesh to claim and be alone with becomes a house not only for the man who impregnates her, but also for the fetus that grows in her belly, and later for the baby that feeds on her breast. The body becomes shared. Now that the writer-mother functions as a prism of possibility in her quickly multiplying roles, is there possibility, too, for singular identity?

Wagner builds a body of her book. The speaker's claim on language retrieves a sense of authority over her personhood. Alongside the demands of now having several different versions of herself to tend to (and to tend to others), the voice of *Macular Hole* reveals itself as a fully 'whole' entity able to stand alone while still housing great variety.

The theme of multiplicity in *Macular Hole* lets this reader interpret liberally. The last line of Wagner's poem, *There was a place in the brain, a red knot* reads, "I birthed a big one," and when the next poem, *Big bang* appears on the facing page, I read it first as *Big bite*. I'm satisfied that this is a fair way to mistranslate Wagner's title; it makes sense in the context of birthing, birthing which is naturally followed by feeding, and it adheres this logic: if a woman's body can claim myriad identities, and she has made a body out of language, why couldn't her language offer the same potential?

The fact is, bang or bite, *Macular Hole* is a true and brave account of just being: yes, mother. Yes, writer. Yes, woman. Sexy dirty angry and ecstatic, that's "me, wearing a fuckable mighty."

**To turn the outward in, unfurl it.**

Catherine Wagner's *Macular Hole*

Reviewed by Steffi Drewes

Wagner's book begins with a loss of self, a dividing female opposite a male, God figure, as she directs her identity, "begone! and 'I' begone, ballast over the side." The speaker

assures us, “I saw it from out here / I wrote it from later,” thus launching a fierce narrative of physical, spiritual, sexual, psychological, maternal, and linguistic transformation.

The advent of motherhood acquires universal proportions, as the poem titled “Big bang” calls forth imagery not only of earth’s creation, but of human birth and conception, as well. Half pleading, half commanding, the speaker responds to the process with dissatisfaction: “Make me an animal better than that.” And the reader is “somersaulted out on a cord of blood” as the text unwinds in a gritty lyric that feels equally defiant, alluring and explosive. Keeping time with the rapid and strange cell division—the multiple selves, emotions and emerging offspring—Wagner’s language also splinters:

Tyrant. Asleep and saying huu,  
fantastic waxen kicking  
figurine, like a kick in the head, little  
fat bag, a good drug  
I see more of the  
him in.

For the speaker, writing functions as a sanctuary, a much-needed form of self-replication that does not evoke the same feelings of terror or repulsion that motherhood can: “I knew I would scream if I didn’t write it down because I needed to be alone reproducing. / I wasn’t imitating.” In contrast, sexual acts seem to require unwanted, unremarkable repetition: “I was pushing away on your head with my feet into a huge horse I was inside of, / & I knew I was imitating, because my legs could make no gestures that had not already been made.”

Sex, marriage, child birth and writing become processes of imitation and exchange, through which we construct meaning, create life, initiate dialogue with our separate selves, and make trades for other objects/beings. Midway through the book, we find two black and white photos of mailboxes labeled, “INDUCE” and “INMOST.” Twenty pages later, the speaker elaborates, “I wrap what I take in / and ject it out objectified. / This pleasure is a mighty wine / to turn the outward in, unfurl it.” Together text and image serve as portraits of self, of the female body reduced to a receptacle for information (sexual or textual) and for babies. The speaker’s tone becomes raw with exasperation, “I’m total I’m all I’m absorbed in this meatcake.”

Tied up in this sensual hyper-vigilance and language of commerce, we also observe the female body as active portal. Wagner resurrects a previous claim that “God was neither personal nor impersonal, it was a / questionnaire” when she writes, “God off my debt in a macular hole” and “I bought my ghost I walk my ghost.” Transformation happens quickly in this wounded world, and as we gaze through “the scary several light” of ballads past, we find some reassurance by retracing our steps to the poem titled, “There was a place in the brain, a red knot.” Once again we are startled at how Wagner’s poetic pathways inevitably align the female brain with the womb, both complex systems capable of amazing creation.

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