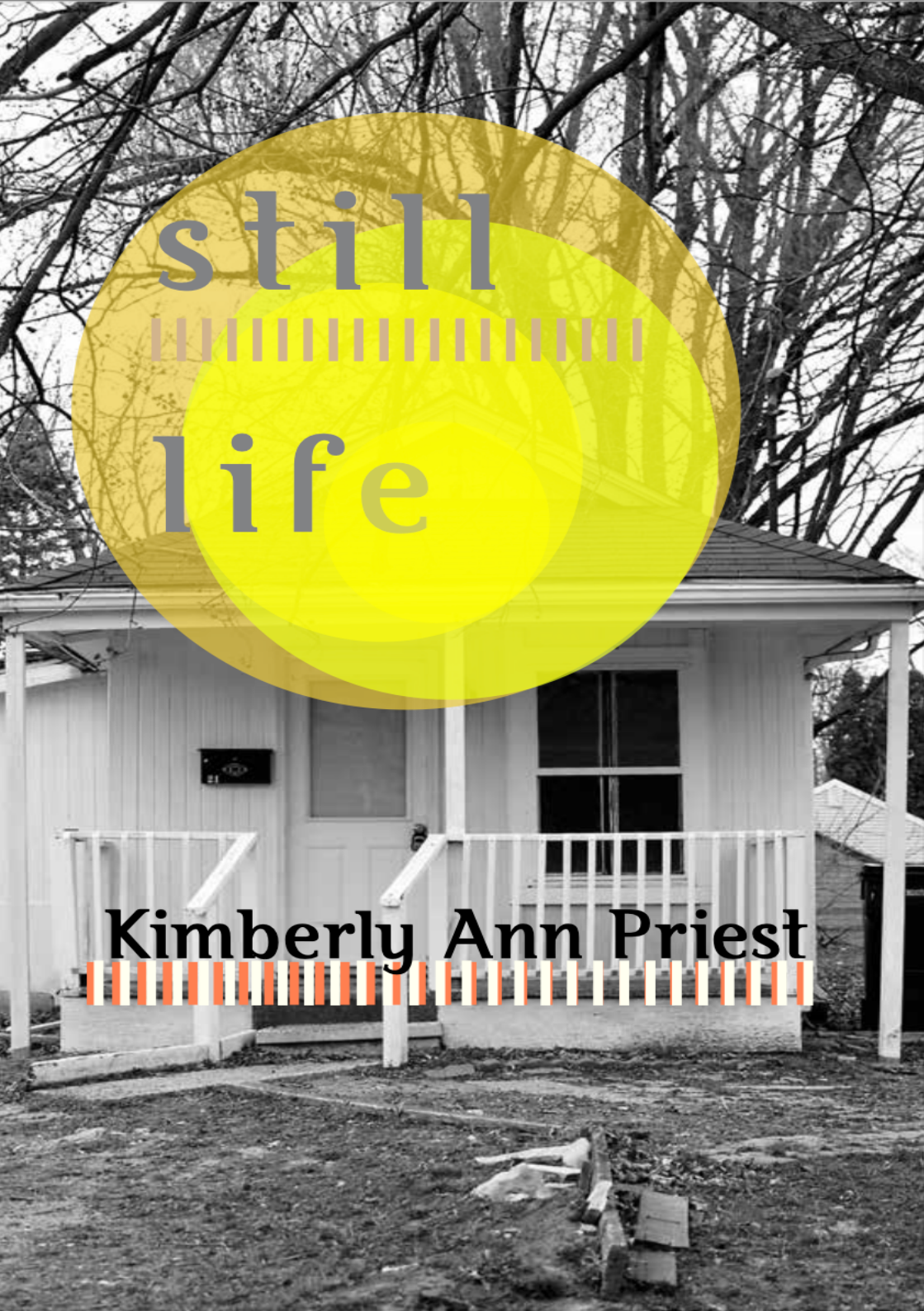




still

life

Kimberly Ann Priest

STILL LIFE

KIMBERLY ANN PRIEST

[PANK]BOOKS

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STILL LIFE

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flashbacks form the future

cathy eisenhower

my pedophile is obsessed with details

when he says *appropriate* // he is not referring to the number of dollies in the room / or how well they are centered on the tables / or whether or not the items on the dollies are centered on the dollies / or the arrangement of the room is equal to the arrangement of dollies / so that the dollies themselves do not attract all of the attention in the space // he is referring to whether or not *they are essential* to the space since the rooms should not be a compositions of dollies // as in / some attention should be given to the frame of things // for instance // the fact that all the items in the room are *less* than the room // the windows / the plaster / the paint // the hard wood floors / the doorways / the beams beneath / above / behind everything // these things / he says / are *essential* // having nothing to do with my hands or my feet / or how they are connected to my body // or how he wants the right to space everything symmetrically // rearrange a life in the most appropriate way

my pedophile requires attention

when he speaks of *proximity* // he is not referring to the fading photograph in the hall / or the razor blade rusting in the shower / or the silver frame on the dressing table for which there is no glass // he is speaking of *making things* // dried glue peeling on his fingertips // sequins and glitter in small drinking cups, plastic membranes of synthetic roses // smell of polish remover and paint // the sickly slice in his thumb from an X-Acto knife // the cut he keeps opening and closing like a lipless pair of lips // the popsicle stick shoved under his mouth playing patient to the doctor of his hand // the “O” he says while thinking an “Ah” // the runway out his doorway littered with bright colored feathers // sparkles / and things

my pedophile celebrates his limbs

if he is satisfied // it is *portrait by number* // half-moon of pink
spooning ocular greens // papyri corridors / ganglionic walls //
a hemic marketplace creasing the stairway // the button of his
choosing fitted with infinitesimal mouths poised to call back
curtains of chrysalis and wing // butterfly houses for sale on
the road to embargo // his elbow in the mouth of a wasp nest /
all honey / no sting // insert one pin into the hair on a brown
beetle's back and it will tell you he is fortunate to have all his
pinchers free in their sockets // half-moon of bone spooning
ocular tweeze // as he sets all the silver pinheads in a cushion /
only to pull them one little limb at a time

my pedophile seeks a cozier space

if he says *we are safe* // it is the long sloped surface of a bath towel woven with innumerable loops and folded around the small of his back / the button of his waist / resting on the cap of each knee // how it is acceptable attire in the morning // the bathroom mirror portraying his robe // white shaving cream / white toothpaste / white smile // white from waistline to knees // all the color of the room reflected in his skin tone // visible only to thin razors scoring the escarpment of his cheek / lifting and cutting away // how if he says *we are not safe* // he does not refer to the steam fogging up the shower due to a dysfunctional fan or how everything is too moist and the razor keeps slipping and the towel leaves his body too wet // no / he is referring to the towels in the closet and how they were not folded in thirds but were folded in halves / overextending the limits of their allowable girth

my pedophile experiments with genders

if it is *remarkable* // it is the marginal line between white bread
and wheat // how the distance is measured in grains // how to
move a grain over has no effect on the general composition
// but to move it with ease demonstrates inclination toward
platitude // as with a slice of cheese cut thicker than thin //
a thing not added to the sandwich since it would never fit
collaboratively into the designated space // the way he scrapes
mayonnaise slowly over a cracker / minding the boundaries of
its dimpled crest with the feminized angle of his knife

my pedophile has a discerning palette

if it is *factual* // it is a raisin desiccating in his belly // the way
that bile replaces water // not the way that moisture is subsumed
by light // the way that all are fluid // full of waves yet their
aftertaste is dissimilar // one being sour / the other transposed
// how the tongue is not partial to either but will choose one
in an effort not to drown or be asked to applaud // how the act
of drowning may only be a demonstration of replacement or
sublimation // the way he is playing with the raisin in his teeth
// inferring that it is neither a vintage nor a proper grape

my pedophile takes me into his confidence

pouring is equal to *panting* // if the wine glass he is holding cannot decide how long it will stand at the windowsill and study the view // if rolling two words together is merely to steady their sounds // if when closing one eye he patches the other with a short *e* and reaches through the wire screen to grab loose advertisements falling from the sky while all the other party goers act ambivalent // if *confetti* // if he has just passed me a drink as though it is a corpse // if under the bed someone is listening and it's not he or me or anyone we know

my pedophile prefers my childhood

if he is *not satisfied* // it is the shift of dry beans between paper plates // a bubble exploding too softly // that silicon wheeze a soda cap makes when only asking simple questions: *what sort of woman likes flannel / sharp pencils / and strawberry lemonade* // the form of the question being merely symbolic // not attempting to gain information or trust // chimes on the front door / pool in the backyard // the grass strewn with toys too wet now to touch // dolls in the house shaped like real Barbies // but hollow / shorter / not weighing enough // less easy to pose in a tiny Barbie kitchen // plopped on a mattress / a carpet / a couch fainting with love

my pedophile remains objective

he washes his hands // smooths a freckle of glass // burns-marks
where the dishwater caught fire // discovers the strength of
acetylene every time he holds a clean finger up to a mirror //
this is where the smoke becomes insightful // full of dancing
matches no one will ever get to light // he lights them to
illuminate watermarks on knives / spoons / a fork // so well-
pronged // standing upright in a cup / holding its figure just so
// as though it is a finger / a match / or pillar of smoke // his
tongue wicks too close to its flame // he stands upright // places
his eyes on two platters // immerses them in dishwater / white
frothy bubbles / small pieces of leftover meat

my pedophile experiences superficial pleasure

if it is *a seam* then it must also be *seemly* so as not to attract his attention too much // like the eight inch shadow that cuts the cake into two equal parts // a top and bottom layer // how it suggests a thick unbroken cloud of frosting cleaving to the inside of the cake // how children pry that fissure open / their fingers probing like dental tools inside a timid orifice // how later when their mother goes to cut the cake / she sets aside one large triangular piece with saliva-stuccoed walls // how it remains neglected / discarded with the trash // the paper / the plastic // and a dozen stained toothpicks

my pedophile decides to try something new

if it is *forged* // this is not the same as a *forgery* because in a *forgery* the original is preserved but in a new location // or on a new location // or something like that // yet if it is forged the landscape has been altered // past tense for *he drove his car through new terrain* / but only new to him // so now / in fact / it is a *forgery* of what others have actually already done // Washington / Lincoln / or Hamilton slide their faces across a counter at a grocery store where the clerk doesn't check to see if the bill is fake or not // since it is small enough // just a one / five / or ten she doesn't hold up to the halogen bulbs shining through cheap tile squares overhead // doesn't notice slight differences inferred by the visual // i.e. *thrill of dragging fresh road through grass* // OR *the siren in the rearview is clearing its trachea.* // i.e. *she is obsessing over the price of a Snickers bar* // OR *he is placing it on the conveyer belt anyway*

my pedophile stays in the moment

if this concerns *imagination* // it is the long crease running down the center of stage // how the stage master steps over it consciously / his eye on the audience // how he looks to be a man of considerable flexibility / shifting his weight effortlessly from limb to limb as a puppet enamored with his strings // the way his feet are not bound to a surface / his hands not accountable for the arch of their swing // the way his chin is posable and the weight of his head increases its speed // how he wears heavy make-up so as to be seen when the lighting is intense // how the audience sits in the dark increasingly unconscious of an aisle leading to the exit of the room or the center of the stage

my pedophile is performance ready

he reshapes the face of the clock // bends its left arm forward enough to greet a neighbor but backward enough to laugh at the small dimple in his chin // and brushes the number 9 off of its cheek before its right arm knows that his two legs are saddling the 7 // a whole room of people going for a ride // silly and balancing the 8 over his nose // everyone thinking he is silly // the children too // the 0 in 10 sucking in its sides to impress his audience as he squeezes his hand around the 6 / reaches for a 5 / changes his mind // asks for a 4 / drinks soda water out of a cup // the 3 taking a deep breath / noticing the outline of the 1

my pedophile times all my future orgasms

if he says *we have time* it is the shape of the glass // how it is
blown with air // how the glassblower covers its mouth and
handles its bulb // how *light* is a word for knowledge / weight /
and touch // how all are invisible // and if I believe *it is time* it
is the bubble / the oxygenated seed that rises to the surface im-
perfecting the whole shape // a welt / a blemish / a seam // but
if he tells me *it is not time* / then table salt sifts slowly through
the slender neck of the hourglass turned over // then over /
then over again // whispering / relenting

my pedophile produces a cinematic frame

if it is *pornographic* // there is the soft spread of butter on toast / the few crumbs that suck salt from its yellow-white solid / thick with table knife scraping the center into furrows / yellow running onto white plate showing through deep cuts // and if she is *nude* the eggs are undercooked / soft round bulb of yellow shaped bright bulb / fork impressions on transparent shield / the full runny width of white plate // and if there is *sex* it is embryo / salt / slices of toast // but if it is *breakfast* / it is me // the whole white surface / bright and bulbing / undercooked / tight as egg // how much he loves salt / to lick it from the surface / butter rolled over his tongue // the way he sets the knife at the edge of the plate after preening yellow yolk from its teeth and never talks about *porn* or *nudity* or *sex* yet I feel photographed // a film played across a makeshift screen / white sheet / clothespins / the cheap re-enactment of something he eats // the eggs / the toast / the butter of me spread over its surface

my pedophile is a graphic novel

not as a strip of bacon already fried / having sloshed around
in grease an extra half hour for flavor to cool // to bring out
the salt // to pucker the half-corpse in the alleyway dripping
with loose-leaf pamphlets and an extra side of bottled beer //
having already sizzled in the smell of warm batter wafting from
a kitchen where he handles the spatula so seductively even the
cat hiding under the counter turns down her eyes // but this
is his love of pancakes / he says / not an appetite for macabre
cover art // he stares down at the scene in the alleyway and
shrugs / slices pan grease seductively with a syrupy spoon

my pedophile suddenly turns me on

as *fidget* is to *form* or the fragment of a flower pressed into a book that no one ever reads // he sits like a pipe // smoke-stack // memory of a time when *boyish* is a thing // page after page after page reading for new storylines // bored // busy with the handle on the toilet tank / with injury / satire / and flank // with my head coddling the melody of saxophones / cymbals / and strings / a flickering TV // what *soap* is to *opera* / what *stamina* means when its paired up with *pray* // what the remote tells him is ready for viewing when he holds it up to the light / caresses the buttons / feels the fat one near the top and lifts it toward the screen

my pedophile prefers my Motown cds

if he *decides* it is not the same as *decision* // not a synonym for
pushing my dreams // not file card / flip chart / or free stuff //
but the slap down of lyrics on a cold floor / tables and chairs //
silverware matching my outfit and dressing me down with its
praise // transactions on que cards and somebody yelling as the
line out the door grows insane with strangers / strippers// the
over-elite // a microphone slithers into this sequined night // all
thigh / all shoulder / no cheese // sneeze // go baby / go baby /
go baby / go // Milburn / Smokey / Gaye *discovered* if I ask the
bartender questions // *discography* if anyone suggests this a fling

my pedophile feels the need to dance

he bothers the sight of plastic fruit and fills a bowl with dimes
/ makes the comments stammer / wraps himself in yards of
cellophane / shoots himself full of tiny white spines // *from*
where? // unknown // but this is too much to juggle // too much
to jugular / gesticulate / ejaculate / believe // so porcupines are
freed and this seems to satisfy the audience / disinterested //
clapping their forearms together in f-stop / full-stop / freeze
// leaving capacity and range // items and elbows in every
direction trying to score a good seat // my designers working
with delicate compassion / folding corners / lifting centers //
helping the fragile comb out with steam

my pedophile dates all my future partners

if it is *ambivalence* / it is the two inches of froth dimpled with cream / the way it fizzes of molecules so minuscule they cannot be scooped up as they multiply in their own white globe of sheen / like a pillow inviting good sleep // the bourgeois matter of a latte / smiling emoji / gleaming bright teeth // how its eyes make a horror of laughter / its simpering witnesses texting themselves clean // the excuse of himself in the bathroom / the break room / the Ramen noodle joint near the corner of Mac and Albert streets / slipped and sloppy / muffled out scream // a siren that pulls into the parking lot behind us / cop assessing the breath of a man who can hardly stand up to weave // his clothes sharp and stylish as the model he is made of // too much height / too much tight / too much discomfort wearing pants without pleats

my pedophile loves like still life

when he whispers *concerto* he is not referring to the wine / or
the candlelight / or the movie rehearsing a romantic scene // no
/ he is speaking of my litmus skin changing color / how exciting
this can be / how much he enjoys swishing his paintbrush /
back and forth / the acid or alkali symbols he breeds // how
my back can be flat as a canvas if turned over / and my belly
a surface if not // how the landscape is rife with fascinating
scenes / his lobes pulsing wild western dramas / co-pilots / cat
calls / and the horror flicks with mongrels and beasts // and
how this all reminds him of anatomy / veritable charmer with
sharp claws and teeth as he picks at his tawdry complexion in
a mirror imaging my body for / dialogue / bar brawl / a quality
death scene

acknowledgements

Thank you PANK. Thank you Jessica Fischhoff and Chris Campanioni for recognizing value in my work and choosing it as a finalist for the 2019 Little Books Contest. I am so glad this short collection of unique poems found a good home.

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Finally, special thanks to *New Delta Review* for also choosing this book as a finalist in their 2019 chapbook competition.

The poems written in this collection are the result of intuitive narrative therapy practice and research concerning the physical, psychological, and emotional impact of childhood sexual trauma on a victim's entire life.

Book's epitaph taken from Cathy Eisenhower's *distance decay*, Ugly Duckling Press 2015.

about the author

Kimberly Ann Priest is the author of *Slaughter the One Bird* (Sundress 2021), *Parrot Flower* (Glass 2020), and *White Goat Black Sheep* (FLP 2018). Currently, she is an assistant professor of first-year writing at Michigan State University, associate poetry editor for the *Nimrod International Journal of Prose* and Embody reader for *The Maine Review*. Winner of the New American Press 2019 Heartland Poetry Prize, her work has appeared in *The Berkeley Poetry Review*, *The Meadow*, *Moon City Review*, *Borderlands*, *Glass* and other journals. You may find more of her work at kimberlyannpriest.com.

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STILL LIFE

by Kimberly Ann Priest

While these poems draw attention to the residual effects of childhood trauma that haunt a victim throughout her adult life, they also highlight the pedophile's human bondage, revealing his own psychological entrapment. In this book, psyches are live wired, but every limb remains in its original, violated, place.

STILL LIFE

"Vibrations on the page, still life compresses poems of oppression and compartmentalization into an inhuman ordering that sticks needles in beetles' backs. Domestic environments expand into obstacle courses in language squared in one's mouth. Kimberly Ann Priest's *still life* is mesmerizing, a bedazzling, a magic act that invites us to be in danger, in tension, to be 'audience [...] in the dark increasingly unconscious of an aisle leading to the exit of the room or the center of the stage.'"

— Petra Kuppers, author of *Gut Botany*

"In *still life*, Priest's stark and stunning voice illustrates how trauma 'reshapes the face of the clock.' This collection makes eye contact with monstrosity through a 'lifting and cutting away' of darkness, where the speaker can count and catalog the 'forgery of what others have actually already done' through close examination. *still life* is a portrait of a 'veritable charmer with sharp claws and teeth.'"

— Kelly Grace Thomas, author of *Boat Burned*

"It was Terrance Hayes who coined the phrase 'wind in a box,' a metaphor meaning white noise and soil, slap and blues, housed in a harness of body, harness of grief. And such can be affirmed in Kimberly Ann Priest's lyrically poignant collection, still life. These poems are tight spirals. They are houses of trauma that will burn. Priest's speaker is calculating and concise, understanding that 'to move a grain over has no effect on the general composition//but to move it with ease demonstrates inclination toward platitude.' Priest is the master of her domain, the weaver of this piercing, unforgettable book!"

— Luke Johnson, author of *:boys*

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POETRY
STILL LIFE
KIMBERLY ANN PRIEST
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