



Unmaking Atoms

Magdalena Ball

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'Compassionate, poignant, otherworldly and profound: this thought-provoking, sometimes raw, collection is accessible contemporary poetry at its zenith of achievement.' - Mark Logie, author of the poetry collection *On the Road to Infinity* and the young adult thriller *Deadfall*

'Magdalena Ball has assembled a delicate memento mori of our many subtle frames of reference. Her imagery is beautifully structured in heart-breaking threads, and redolent of her intellect, her warmth, and her love of text.' - Basil Eliades, artist, author of *3rd i* and *50IV*, and creator of *The Men's Deck*

'The writing is polished and brave. Intellect melds with emotion to soar. Readers will find talisman poems and refer to them again and again.' - Jan Dean, author of *Paint Peels*, *Graffiti Sings* (Flying Island Books, Macau)

Unmaking Atoms Details

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From Reader Review Unmaking Atoms for online ebook

Bob Rich says

I am a literal-minded fellow, handicapped by a scientific training, so I find almost all modern poetry to be incomprehensible. I don't do very well on projective tasks, and gentle allusions pass me by. If you want me to understand something, simply tell me simply.

All the same, I have previously read and enjoyed poems by Magdalena Ball, so when she asked me to review her new book of poetry, "Unmaking Atoms," I agreed to at least have a look.

Predictably, the meaning of most of the poems escaped me. I can see the beauty in the words, the strong emotions skating below the surface, the deep wisdom there... somewhere, although I was not necessarily able to excavate it.

However, if you enjoy such mind-teasers, you will love this book, and get a great many hours of enjoyment out of it. I suspect you will want to read one poem, then have it run through your mind for a day or more, so if this appeals to you, you'll get tremendous value.

I think I need to give some examples to let you know what I am talking about,. Two poems of grieving spoke to the Buddhist in me:

Atomic Mess

When your last
fractured breath came
condensation of
a lifetime, I wasn't ready
but you were

pulled in constricting circles
battened the hatches
bolted the door

I felt the cut at thirty thousand feet
watched the cord slacken
lost the sonic heartbeat
before I arrived

after that
there was more silence
than I knew existed

fearless, you slid
into the atomic mess
safe from a life that assaulted
you at every turn

in all this quiet
how will I hear that song

your breath exhaled into cold air
gypsy lullaby
on my lips

does inheritance
provide solace
now you're no longer
here reminding me
to be brave?

Past Life

There are no chains
to hold that fragile
body down
no locks you can't unpick.

Earth waves in and out
of your vision
just one world of many
exquisite
but not alone.

It took so many years
to find what you knew already
the gemstone
in your pocket.

Here you are
ready to try again
eyes full of stars
not myopic
cataract-ridden dreams.

Real hyper-giants
fusing hydrogen to helium
shining with nuclear energy
burning through billions of lives.

Where will you alight
what love
will unhinge you
this time
entering the flesh again.

How will I
with all my limitations
deep in samsara
crawling on broken knees
find you?

Is the connection between us

me in this life
you in another
so tenuous
untethered by those bonds
we once thought permanent?

See what I mean? These are pearls in words; beautiful images in beautiful expressions. They force you to think. There is a kaleidoscope of different ways, all pointing to the same theme. You can immerse yourself in each of 96 offerings like this -- except that no two are alike. Each is a cryptic crossword in 17 dimensions, chasing each other out of sight, a carefully designed Rorschach blot.

Elvis Alves says

Magdalena Ball has written an ambitious poetry collection in *Unmaking Atoms* (Ginninderra Press, 2017). The work is peppered with themes that only an experienced writer can give force to. One such theme is loss. She presents this theme in a way that it sticks with you after you finish reading her book. We get the sense that she has experienced loss and writes about it due to this fact. She does not speak about loss from a distance. She names it and in so doing stays with it and in the process dares the reader to do the same. In this way, the theme is not easy to gloss over but lives with us as we imagine the writer has lived with it. I felt your hand, crooked with arthritis/brush mine/in the depths of my consciousness/like a stirring of memory/you became every mother/I had ever lost/to a bigger cause/the world too hungry/the lines too sharp/for me to cross (*The Last Report of the Day*, 11).

This staying power, and the technique employed to shine light on it, gives credence to Ball's work. She writes in a way that indicates nothing to prove. And deep down, this is true for us too. In order to stay alive, there are elemental things that we need to do, like eat and breathe. But sometimes, these things are difficult to do, such as in the face of death (either our own or that of someone close to us). Ball is acutely aware of the fragility of our humanness. She writes, "Where will you alight/what love/will unhinge you/this time/entering the flesh again," in *Past Life*, a poem that touches on the concept of reincarnation (22). In this and other pieces (*My body keeps reminding me/ at the atomic level/I'm little more/a substrate-attached, heat-driven/26-element molecule (Catalyst 25)*) in the collection, Ball is tuned into the inescapability of the human condition, with loss, death being a core element of it.

But she also reminds us that there are joys and happiness in life, even though these too are ephemeral in nature. She writes, "...coming home to what I really am/under skin and bone/through these/fleshy hominid contractions" (*Rough Ride*, 42). Here is allusion to the birth process, a signaling of renewal and the on-going process of life. The fetus yearns to taste life, as we do, simply because it is the thing to do, something we cannot escape.

Ball pontificates that we do not let go because of the things that we carry (and that this feeds who we are). For one, it has allowed Ball to write poetry. She reminds us that everything is a teachable moment. When the mind wonders, we pull it back, but it tells us that we can exercise our imagination. We find this behavior in *The No Times Times*, "Constriction/only happens in the present/which might/from the right stance/be perceived as future/leaving scorch marks with/its invisible arrow/as I try once more/to find time" (59). Ball writes with an investigative propensity, "...the retina/your third eye forming ridges/through an awakening mind" (*Walking into Eternity*, 62).

What do we, through the working of our feelings (emotions) and mind, awake to? Ball points toward an "arcane analysis" and "internal astrology" (*Radiology*, 65). In other words, we face the self and the world that we live in. The poems come full circle at times. The questioning leads to self, to one's destiny in this life, including one's "imminent immolation" (*Maven on Mars*, 66).

But we are bigger than this. That is what we tell ourselves. However, Ball reminds us that our smallness makes us big. She writes, "All the riches of periodic table hotpot/the scale of atoms and molecules/forged 14

billion years ago/exploded into space/carbon, oxygen, nitrogen/define you" (Reflecting Sphere, 88). This poem, along with the title poem and so many others in the collection, do a good job indicating for us the essence of the collection. Ball wants to make life grand by looking at how insignificant we are in the overall scheme of things. This, ironically, gives significance to us. It takes a sage poet like Ball to be able to drive home this point. And she does a good job of it in the collection.

Ball's poems have a natural feel to them. From Energy Conservation, "What was soft, yielding, lost in sorrow/emerged as stone, marble, wood/a Bangalow palm, fronds open to sun" (141). Nature tells us that there is hope and survival is possible. Life's experiences make us stronger, ready to live, even if death is part of "the natural order of things" (In Situ, 157). Ball's Unmaking Atoms has much to teach us about ourselves and is therefore worth the read.

Jessica Bell says

A remarkable collection of poems by a remarkable poet.

I adore how the majority of the poems lack punctuated pauses where they would naturally fall, giving each individual piece, and the work as a whole, a sense of urgency, as though memories are sifting quickly through the mind, eager to reach the next and the next, trying to fill an emotional void.

It seems as though the narrator (whether fictional or not) toys with the idea of suicide in many poems, but is in denial, and is therefore diving deeper and deeper into existence (her own, and the world's), to unravel it, right down to the atoms that create it. Perhaps answers can be found there. In the microscopic fundamentals of life.

Magdalena Ball digs deep into everyone's psyche with grace and beauty. Even the ugliness of this world becomes enchanting and attractive. In the poem "Luminous Air" we experience the mystery of loss in a way that one can almost taste it:

*We forgot the secret again lost on the island
you in your bare beauty bringing up goosebumps in the audience
while you tilted your head whispering small, small.*

All the poems deal with 'voids' in one way or another, an emptiness that's so solid inside us, that I wonder whether this was a considered reason behind the title. If we unmake those atoms, will the emptiness that exists in all of us disappear?

Mysterious voids are abound in many poems, but here are a few of my favourite lines which make my stomach grow hollow, as if in a sympathetic reaction:

From "Right Angles to Reality":

*In place of mourning I laughed silently, hysterically
a synecdoche
for all those things
we pretended were real.
That big open mouth the echoing void your waving hand.*

From "Orthonym":

*Would I forever be stuck in namelessness; a nomad looking for a home
lost in that lonely place where skin meets bone.*

From "Absenses"

*I'm in your house again all windows open
the kettle on tea for one
my company not augmented by your ghost
courted, coaxed and called
while silence echoes off the walls*

In a literal sense, this collection explores the way we identify with the solid matter of our worlds. But if you brush away the rocks and soil of Ball's work, what you are left with is an inescapable hole in our individual existence, and how we will never truly understand how to fill it.

But then you realize ... the hole isn't meant to be filled.

It's just meant to be.

And sometimes, working backwards, makes it all the more easier to cope with.

Kristin Johnson says

Magdalena Ball, the author of eight collections of poetry (several in collaboration with Carolyn Howard-Johnson) as well as two novels and a nonfiction book, *The Art of Assessment*, is a multifaceted author, but her specialty is verse, especially scientific, astronomical and physics-themed poems, with threads of anthropology, zoology and biology.

From a cursory review of the titles, you might not think the verse offerings and prose poems (there is at least one, a prose/verse hybrid) have anything to do with protons, neutrons and electrons. Titles such as "Pranayama," "Gargantua Redacted," "Woman with her hair loose," "Most of Everything is Nothing," and the intriguing "Shallots and Garlic" (based on an Indonesian/Malaysian folktale) all seem on the surface to be more literary than scientific.

Look deeper. Look with the wonder that physicists have when they observe the atom. Like atoms, words combine to make different elements, different states of energy (passion, anger, fear, celebration, grief). So it is with *Unmaking Atoms*.

How, exactly, can one unmake atoms? Through nuclear fission. How, exactly, can one unmake the illusions of our human lives? Through poetry fission.

In the first poem of the collection, "The Last Report of the Day," Ball introduces a recurring theme that hovers throughout the collection like cosmic radiation: the death of a parent, specifically a mother. She references a renowned woman poet in the opening line.

"I saw you, Adrienne Rich.
In my dream we were
walking like old friends
conspicuously cool
our maps drawn
before we took up pens
eyes searching for something
deeper than the wrinkles on our skin.

I felt your hand, crooked with arthritis
brush mine
in the depths of my consciousness”

How do the longing for an absent mother and a famous poet as a mother-figure in this passage relate to atoms? Or this verse in the next poem, “Charitable Crumb”:

“mother, father, siblings, lovers
the loss that kept coming
like water
suspended over blue-grey stones.”

Loss, specifically the loss of a mother, is the atom at the heart of this collection, split and reassembled in myriad ways with a dizzying elegance and versatility. Although the poetry examines birds, exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art, “loamy” soil (a favorite word in the collection), paintings as the subject of several ekphrastic poems (poetry that is in response to a work of art), yellow jacquard sofas, the sense of loss and wistfulness, of losing oneself in nature, science, literature and art, create the atomic chain reaction and the “Atomic Mess” that, in essence, is death. Those who have lost a mother will probably be saying, “She gets me, she understands,” when they read “Yellow Jacquard.”

However, matter cannot be created or destroyed, and this collection unmakes, and then reassembles, the words and images as well as emotions including the sense of joy that permeates Ball’s lyricism. That joy manifests in a “laugh that shakes the floor,” the line and curve that brings wholeness, a light “softer than the cut of love.”

The reader encounters surprises, such as anger and yearning for the same person/subject within the space of a few lines:

“your feathers rise
poison in your beak
brightens the plumage
rainbow body, earth to water
water to wind
all I know: the taste in
my mouth says find you
find you find you”

The “you” in the poem has “poison in your beak,” and yet Ball’s narrator yearns for the subject. A subtle commentary that what we love is not always sentimental or full of hearts and flowers, and that loss is painful.

We often create meaning, and different elements, by unmaking and reassembling aspects and details of our lives, misconceptions and words said and unsaid. This is the power of Ball’s poetry, especially in this collection.

Aaron Lazar says

Unmaking Atoms is a gorgeous collection of poetry by acclaimed writer Magdalena Ball, owner of the Compulsive Reader website. I have to admit, I don't read poetry often enough. You'll usually catch me reading or listening to a mystery. But this book, Unmaking Atoms, has grabbed me by the heartstrings, and I couldn't put it down.

The authors poems are deep and poignant, and they really make you think. I sensed great loss as I was savoring every piece, so skillfully did Ms. Ball relay her emotions through her lovely tapestry of words. Here are just a few snippets to give you a feel for the collection.

In the poem named “Luminous Air,” one passage struck me as especially beautiful:

The rain was full of ghosts
that night
the air luminous
with immortality

In “The Last Report of the Day,” it seems possible that the author endured hurtful childhood traumas.

I was a little girl then
all my unspoken need
pulsing like a lighthouse
your untranslatable language
transmitted through my pores
a scent you recognised.

In “Atomic Mess” the pain of loss soars off the page and reverberates with anyone who has suffered the loss of a loved one in their lives. See what I mean here:

When your last
fractured breath came
condensation of
a lifetime, I wasn’t ready
but you were

pulled in constricting circles
battened the hatches
bolted the door

I felt the cut at thirty thousand feet
watched the cord slacken
lost the sonic heartbeat
before I arrived

after that
there was more silence
than I knew existed

and here:

in all this quiet
how will I hear that song
your breath exhaled into cold air
at
gypsy lullaby
on my lips

How one writer can pack so much emotion into such few words amazes me. These poems will stay with me for a long time, and I will come back to often re-read them. Thank you, Ms. Ball, for a wonderful, heartfelt collection.

Highly recommended by Aaron Paul Lazar, www.lazarbooks.com

Geoff Nelder says

I've admired the poetry of Magdalena Ball for many years and I was honoured to include some of her science fiction poetry in *Escape Velocity* magazine. This collection is a wondrous mix of passion, and emotion crafted in such a way only a poet with an understanding of science can do. I could as easily say as only a scientist with an understanding of poetry can do because you don't need to be a scientist to appreciate these verses, nor need to be a poet to bathe in their prosody and richness.

For example: *Charitable Crumb* – 'after so many years of entanglement' ... 'whatever means / we could find to keep / the conversation going. ... typing words breathlessly against the rising steam of time.'

All of us can take something from this verse. Communication, time, the dual meaning of entanglement is clever.

Another sample from *The No Times Times*:

'Oh entropy / here you are, right on cue / Nothing regains order/ without work'

Reminds me of my first teenage graffiti "Entropy wins." The principal asked me to explain it but as I started to the science lecturer told him it was good science and so I was let off with a caution. This poem though is more than entropy as it is about time and its scorched expansive past saying the present can be the future if seen from elsewhere. And from 'Walking Into Eternity' we see that entropy is that elegant word for chaos, disorder, decay. Nicely put.

One of my favourites – I knew the facts but it's the way they're distributed in poetry...

Reflecting Sphere

'All the riches of periodic table hotpot
the scale of atoms and molecules
forged 14 billion years ago
exploded into space
carbon, oxygen, nitrogen
define you.

You are, chemically
already a star.'

In my science fiction novel, *Exit, Pursued by a Bee*, I use QM Time decoherence as a theme, so it sent a shiver up my neck to see Decoherence through the window

'Sometimes it's all about the window.

... (more verse)

Until the moment you open it
probability waves
a fluttering hand
the tightly packed microscopic
pixels remain unlimited
possibilities surrounding you
multifoliate, like energy.'

Wonderful. Of course I've yet to absorb every poem, it is a collection I'll return to time and again until I have none. I could say In no part did I stop to complain. After all that is from Unchanging unceasing murmur: a line from James Joyce Dubliners, which inspired Magdalena Ball's Unchanging unceasing murmur
In no part did I stop
to complain, warm, rewind
this path of nowhere

Other verses have been inspired by such luminaries as Emily Dickinson, Grace Cossington Smith, an ekphrastic poem by Vincent Van Gogh, and Francois Rabelais.

Highly recommended.
