



Sad Little Breathing Machine

Matthea Harvey

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Harvey, whose debut collection was praised by the *New Yorker* as "intensely visual, mournfully comic and syntactically inventive," offers her second stunning collection

*Units are the engines
I understand best.*

*One betrayal, two.
Merrily, merrily, merrily.*
-from "Introduction to the World"

In *Sad Little Breathing Machine*, Matthea Harvey explores the strange and intricate mechanics of human systems-of the body, of thought, of language itself. These are the engines, like poetry, that propel both our comprehension and misunderstanding. "If you're lucky," Harvey writes, "after a number of / revolutions, you'll / feel something catch."

Sad Little Breathing Machine Details

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Author : Matthea Harvey

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Catherine says

I made the note of "best poem" on several poems. Matthea Harvey has a wonderful sense of humor, sense of life, sense of ...well, just sense. Her mind must shimmer like the fireflies about which she writes. Read "Once Upon a Time: A Genre Fable."

Brian says

Matthea Harvey plays with words and poetic syntax in a fashion that often surprises and delights. For me, there is always a layer of irony or sarcasm that seems like a distancing filter, leaving the balance between the emotional and the cerebral strongly, very strongly, in favor of the latter. Which is only a problem for those of us who prefer the former. From "Meat Ravioli VS. Spaghetti Bolognese":

"Each film mentioned at the dinner party/
was a sinkhole we skirted so as not to fall/
into story. It's like Pete & Betty always said:/ self as discrete package or self in the world."

Susan says

I wholeheartedly love this book. It is a collection that once you have read the last poem – you start over again. One of my very favorite poems in this book:

The Crowds Cheered as Gloom Galloped Away

BY MATTHEA HARVEY

Everyone was happier. But where did the sadness go? People wanted to know. They didn't want it collecting in their elbows or knees then popping up later. The girl who thought of the ponies made a lot of money. Now a month's supply of pills came in a hard blue case with a handle. You opened it & found the usual vial plus six tiny ponies of assorted shapes & sizes, softly breathing in the Styrofoam. Often they had to be pried out & would wobble a little when first put on the ground. In the beginning the children tried to play with them, but the sharp hooves nicked their fingers & the ponies refused to jump over pencil hurdles. The children stopped feeding them sugarwater & the ponies were left to break their legs on the gardens' gravel paths or drown in the gutters. On the first day of the month, rats gathered on doorsteps & spat out only the bitter manes. Many a pony's last sight was a bounding squirrel with its tail hovering over its head like a halo. Behind the movie theatre the hardier ponies gathered in packs amongst the cigarette butts, getting their hooves stuck in wads of gum. They lined the hills at funerals, huddled under folding chairs at weddings. It became a matter of pride if one of your ponies proved unusually sturdy. People would smile & say, "This would have been an awful month for me," pointing to the glossy palomino trotting energetically around their ankles. Eventually, the ponies were no longer needed. People had learned to imagine their sadness trotting away. & when they wanted something more tangible, they could always go to the racetrack & study the larger horses' faces. Gloom, #341, with those big black eyes, was almost sure to win.

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The collection paces with a selection of imaginative, yet explicit prose poems, introduction poems and engine poems. Obviously, it is brilliant.

## Moose says

I read the majority of Sad Little Breathing Machine after having a class period in which the collection of poems was discussed; whether or not I would have grasped (or did come close to grasping even after a class period) the essence of the text, I certainly found the prose and poems of the book to be compelling.

Without knowing basic background information on the Hero's journey and Harvey's representation of that journey without all of the classic stereotypes (e.g. male hero) associated with it, I suspect SLBM would have meant next to nothing to me upon first read, and therefore I would have thrown it out as crap. Having this context, however, allowed me to approach the book knowing the basic premise and theme of the text, which allowed me to put some meaning to the text. Not much. But some.

I probably enjoyed 'Introduction to the World' most – the use of the phrase 'like thoughts, geniuses rush through' evokes, for me, the idea that geniuses aren't people, but thoughts that come to people – anybody can have a genius. It might take a lot of tries, but your genius will eventually catch – you will find your passion and follow it.

A close second was Baked Alaska – I liked this mostly because I like Alaska, and the idea of 'the flesh is hot but the heart is cold' was kind of cool in relation to the state. Also, I thoroughly enjoy the fact that the king finds nothing 'because he is a literal man.'

In 'Toe the line with me,' the author introduces the concept of the 'other' – it describes it as a duck and a sunfish going for the same piece of bread. In this scenario, their mouths are bound to touch. The other in this poem also appears – in the form of 'you' and also an ex. As the sequence of poems goes on, the author – the self – grows. Soon, it looks at itself in a spoon and realized it is just a head, it never learned to make ringlets. The self also feels the need to raise a Baby. At the end of the book, however, Baby is in the house in the incubator, and the sleeping bag contains the body but not the head. Perhaps the self has regressed to nothingness.

Finally, the self also is seen to evolve through poems that begin with the instructions to call it something different – "What You Will," "Content," and "responsible." On top of this, there is something going on with the word Engine: followed by symbols that change throughout the text; in one case the symbols also contain the words "You are Who." I propose that this technique was meant to evoke emotions of the inner workings of a machine like a computer to the reader - many of the symbols have no meaning to humans but have a lot of code and meaning to the machine.

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## Hannah Antalek says

Sad Little Breathing Machine is without a doubt one of my favorite titles for a book of poetry. When reading poetry I usually don't give much thought to the title in relation to overall content of the book because a lot of the time I feel these titles are arbitrary and chosen only after a particularly good poem included in the book.

While Sad Little Breathing Machine is also the title of one of the poems in the book I never felt that it was arbitrary, this title related to the book's content as a whole.

All the poems functioned as part of a machine- each influencing the other and bringing out each other's strengths, working together so well it was as if they were part of a single breathing body.

Matthea Harvery's poems are surrealistic in nature offering many absurd propositions and illogical scenarios that in the context of Harvey's world seem not only plausible, but reasonable. In Save the Originals Harvey introduces a copy machine by which people can duplicate themselves: "I don't fiddle with the dials, I make a copy. I like him immediately. He looks like me but with darker circles under his my-eyes, a more pronounced scar on his my-cheek. When I look up, I see that Sylvia has made herself three copies at 10%,

35% & 75%. A Sylvia crescendo.” Another notable poem is *The Crowds Cheered as Gloom Galloped Away* where everyone’s problems and sorrows are horses that gallop beside them and then eventually run away. In *Ideas Go Only So Far* the narrator talks about making a baby “in the shape of a hatbox or a cake.” and says, “When you make up a good baby, other people will want one too. Who’s to say that I’m the only one who deserves a dear little machine-washable ever-so-presentable baby. Not me. So I made a batch. But they weren’t exactly like her—they were smaller & without any inborn dread. Sometimes I see one rolling past my window at sunset—quite unlike my baby, who like any good idea eventually ended up dead.” Another notable poem is *Baked Alaska, A Theory Of* in which a castle takes on the form of a Baked Alaska, hot on the outside: “The moat simmers at 210 degrees” but cold on the inside: “Amongst the frozen slabs of beef, they sit in a circle on blocks of ice & watch the red fade from their lips & fingers, the frost on the floor creep up the heels of their shoes. Finally when the skin is numb, the heat starts retreating into their hearts & they can feel it—love, love, love.”

In addition to the title acting as a unifier for all the poems in *Sad Little Breathing Machine* it acts to describe all the characters woven into Harvey’s poems all of which become sad little breathing machines in their own right.

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## Terry says

*Sad Little Breathing Machine* has multiple parts, yet there is a sense of a cohesive structure as each section starts out with an introduction poem. The poems vary in style and each section has roughly the same proportions of style variety. Like her previous book, the titles help somewhat in shaping the structure, although there are points it seems she intentionally avoids following the title she’s given the poem. There are still many lines that contain insightful observations. For example, the poem “*Toe the Line with Me*” has the line “Consider this: if sunfish & ducks compete for the same bit of bread, at any moment their mouths might meet”, and the poem “*Life-size is what we are (A new history of photography)*” (5) has the line, “Which means the fish that live/ in a plastic bag think the edges of the world pucker” Both of which are things that people normally do not think of but could very well be true.

The question of what’s true seems to come up more in this book. These poems deal with complicated issues in life and language. Many of the fantastical stories stem from the question ‘what if things were this way?’ which ultimately brings up the question “why are things the way they are now?” In “*The Crowds Cheered as Gloom Galloped Away*” the premise is what would happen if sadness and pain could be transferred to miniature ponies that “came in a hard blue case with a handle” much like pills, until people could “[learn] to imagine their sadness trotting away” (18). Then in “*Ideas Go Only So Far*” there’s the disturbing idea of what could happen if one was able to make a machine-washable perfect baby.

All-in-all this book is edgier than her last book. With lines like “I pixilated you, ate sugar in the form of quince” (8) in her poem “*No More Frisson Please*” one gets the sense that this is a more serious matter indeed.

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## Glenn says

Matthea’s Harvey’s poetry is like going to a foreign country, and not knowing the language. Perhaps you stay a while. Eventually, words and phrases which pulled tantalizingly away from you at first, their sounds striking and bold, evocative and possessing an almost subconscious power, begin to coalesce.

Then, still with the breathtaking mystery of staying in a strange place, you may find you are able to gain some small entry into its true essence, while still maintaining the sense of wonder at something truly

different.

Matthea Harvey's poetry rewards the effort, involvement and attention of the reader. Her language is fresh and unusual in the best sense--without contrivance or petty literary gamesmanship. She has the ability to stimulate the reader's mind, and still be able to suddenly swoop in, and hit directly in the gut by creating shocking, unpredictable connections. The work is alive and moving on the page, vibrant, ever-opening, capable of astonishing power and emotional force, while never being melodramatic--the exactitude of Matthea's language will not allow it--and of course, the work remains stunningly original.

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### **M says**

the downstairs chandelier  
stayed still, its prisms prim.

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### **Jeff says**

Funny touching and endearingly odd.

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### **Heather Gibbons says**

It was definitely interesting to read this directly after reading her first collection and see how these poems engage and grapple with form in drastically different ways. This is a restless, wildly inventive voice and I found much to admire here. However, nothing really \*moved\* me-- lots of wonder and play and cleverness (wince, there I've said it), but on the whole, I missed the emotional torpor and crazy momentum of *Bathtub*. Still, to witness this kind of change/development in form from one collection to the next is pretty cool.

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### **Corey says**

Harvey is not an easy poet--she leaps faster than I can--but she is my kind of eccentric and I am fascinated by her.

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### **Tess says**

Harvey is one of those poets one can return to again and again for inspiration. A good mind at work.

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### **Aran says**

disjointed. lovely.

## **Mikey says**

Matthea Harvey arranges her poetry into six sections that each start with an introduction going from "Introduction to the World" to "Introduction to the End". The book moves through a path of life from birth to death. The book grasps a readers attention because there are so many ways to read it and so many paths that it follows. Perhaps one interpretation of the book is a movement through the discovery of self, but the book has other recurring themes that have a beginning and end and journey through the book. The themes that I found included the rise and fall of civilization, the loss of humanity and rise of machines, the start and end of an idea, the process of writing. I liked how the poems form a cohesive unit, but also feel that many of them can stand alone which adds to their intrigue. And while the book has some sort of structure, not everything is apparent. What do all the Engine symbols mean? What about the title? The title gives the collection a troubling cover. Does everything in the end amount to a "sad little breathing machine". Is that what each person is? When I think machine I think programmed and mechanical and without much choice. If nothing else Harvey's poetry can be enjoyed for the thought provoking imagery. "that's my love there in the swivel chair. I'm the sugar bowl on wheels" or "the trains twitched in their tracks". "holding veined circles against the rain" and "if oil spill, if imperfect pancake, then tupperware, terrarium, gumball machine". And even if we have a mind to change the weather, the weather can't be changed, and whirls around in unpredictable circles. And so we have the clash of the predictable and perhaps predestined (the sad little breathing machine... etc.) and the unpredictable and chaotic (the weather... the engine?... etc.)

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## **karen says**

overall i have to say blarg to this one. i liked her other 2 books well enough, and there are many things about this one i like, but overall i fear that i am not poetry-clever enough to appreciate what i assume must be calculated stylistic choices. to me it reads like disjointed and soulless wordmesses that leave me completely cold.

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