



Bright Dead Things

Ada Limon

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Bright Dead Things examines the chaos that is life, the dangerous thrill of living in a world you know you have to leave one day, and the search to find something that is ultimately “disorderly, and marvelous, and ours.”

A book of bravado and introspection, of 21st century feminist swagger and harrowing terror and loss, this fourth collection considers how we build our identities out of place and human contact—tracing in intimate detail the various ways the speaker’s sense of self both shifts and perseveres as she moves from New York City to rural Kentucky, loses a dear parent, ages past the capriciousness of youth, and falls in love. Limón has often been a poet who wears her heart on her sleeve, but in these extraordinary poems that heart becomes a “huge beating genius machine” striving to embrace and understand the fullness of the present moment. “I am beautiful. I am full of love. I am dying,” the poet writes. Building on the legacies of forebears such as Frank O’Hara, Sharon Olds, and Mark Doty, Limón’s work is consistently generous and accessible—though every observed moment feels complexly thought, felt, and lived.

Bright Dead Things Details

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Author : Ada Limon

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From Reader Review Bright Dead Things for online ebook

Sharon says

As a poet, I read a lot of books of poetry. I read to challenge my own writing, to introduce myself to new-to-me poets, and to keep up with what is being valued by the publishing/literary community. Mostly, I read books of poetry for pure pleasure. What I want from a book of poetry is sonic pleasure, intelligent word-play, a noticeable attention to individual word choice and images, and depth. It is rare when I find a complete book of poems that holds me and amazes me from beginning to the end of the book. Ada Limon's "Bright Dead Things" is just such a book. It is crazy smart and lyrically soaring. It resonates with me and my own dilemmas as a woman, while managing to circle such mainstream topics as love, identity, heartbreak, and home without falling into familiar tropes. In fact, it is the fierce and sassy voice of Limon that catches me from the book's first poem "How to Triumph Like a Girl": "I like the lady horses best,/how they make it all look easy,/like running 40 miles per hour/is as fun as taking a nap, or grass./I like their lady horse swagger,/after winning. Ears up, girls, ears up!/But mainly, let's be honest. I like/that they're ladies. As if this big/dangerous animal is also a part of me..." Limon splits her time between Kentucky and California, so it seems from this book that she has more than a passing acquaintance with horses. The speaker's voice in this poem is also full of "swagger" and whimsy. Who calls them "lady horses?" This opening poem announces that this woman poet has confidence, humor, and verve, and as she finishes this poem, she "knows,/(she's) going to come in first."

The book is broken into four sections. The second section deals, with searing honesty about the dying and death of her step-mother. That section captures and grapples with the complex roller-coaster ride of emotions that any loved one endures while trying to share those last weeks with a beloved other.

In "The Other Wish" Limon explores the flight of Icarus, which has been done in countless poems. But once again, she takes a somewhat familiar trope, and she makes it beautifully her own, as when, in thinking about that poor doomed flyer, she realizes, "Nights, I wonder about the sanity of Icarus,/wax and wings both wasted on the sun's scorch./If I'd a handmade, fanned out, feathered set, me?/I'd choose the moon, always the sister moon./Cold, comely queen of the sky. Pockmarked/with craters, pummeled by meteors and still/shining. Imagine, the gathering on the shore./you, holding my coat for a warm come-back.// We mean a thing is impossible when we say/we're shooting for that great orbital puller./ How hard can you glow? asks the owl's eye./ What radiant part of you wishes to dynamite?"

I met with two other poets to discuss this book, and we could not stop choosing "our favorite poem" here. I highly recommend this gem of a book.

Laura McNeal says

Approachable in the nicest possible way, by which I mean you re-read lines for the thrill of hearing them again in your head, not because you're confused. Intelligent and warm and surprising and unafraid of simple candor. Like "Miracle Fish, a prose poem that begins "I used to pretend to believe in God. Mainly, I liked so much to talk to someone in the dark."

I also love the poems that tell longer, more complicated stories, all of which seem personal and yet circumspect. There's a palpable sense of respect for every person in these poems (and every other living thing, to include the beautifully considered whales), and yet there's enough intimacy to make the stories feel raw, moving, and true. The one called "Play It Again," for instance, where her parents are listening to

Frankie Valli in the Castro District:

She's in the window
crying because the city is too big, and also
because we are at war, and he goes to work
in tough schools that need teachers,
Spanish-speaking teachers not scared of much
except how to make rent and make the world maybe
better or easier or livable. Nights, they get stoned
in small apartments and eat enchiladas in the warm corn-filled kitchens
and she's going to paint and have big ideas,
and he's going to save the world with curriculum . . .

It's that last line that gets me, really. "He's going to save the world with curriculum." This is a wonderful book I expect to return to again and again.

Haley says

I really enjoyed the mood of these poems (especially the ones set in Kentucky) - I felt they were really accessible (in the best possible way) with incredible imagery. I also really liked the organization of the sections. Here's a favorite from pg.74-5:

Oh Please, Let it be Lightning

We were crossing the headwaters of
the Susquehanna River in our new car
we didn't quite have the money for
but it was slick and silver and we named it
after the local strop club next to the car wash:
The Spearmint Rhino, and this wasn't long
after your mother said she wasn't sure
if one of your ancestors died in childbirth
or was struck by lightning, there just wasn't
anyone left to set the story straight, and we
started to feel old. And it snowed. The ice
and salt and mud on the car made it look
like how we felt on the inside. The dog
was asleep on my lap. We had seven more hours
before our bed in the bluegrass would greet us
like some southern cousin we forgot we had.
Sometimes, you have to look around
at the life you've made and sort of nod at it,
like someone moving their head up and down
to a tune they like. New York City seemed years
away and all the radio stations had unfamiliar
call letters and talked about God, the one
that starts his name with a capital and wants
you not to get so naked all the time.

Sometimes, there seems to be a halfway point
between where you've been and everywhere
else, and we were there. All the trees were dead,
and the hills looked flat like in real bad landscape
paintings in some nowhere gallery off an interstate
but still, it looked kind of pretty. Not because
of the snow, but because you somehow found
a decent song on the dial and there you were,
with your marvelous mouth, singing full-lunged,
driving dull-speed into the gloomy thunderhead,
glittery and blazing and alive. And it didn't matter
what was beyond us, or what came before us,
or what town we lived in, or where the money came from,
or what new night might leave us hungry and reeling,
we were simply going forward, riotous and windswept,
and all too willing to be struck by something shining
and mad, and so furiously hot it could kill us.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

These poems are in four numbered sections. The first seems to be about dislocation and isolation, the second about loss and grief.

I found most of the poems I liked in section three.

Some highlights:

Glow

"...Before now, I don't
know if I have ever loved anyone, or if
I have ever been loved, but men have
been very good to me, have seen
my absurd out-of-place-ness, my bent
grin and un-called-for loud laugh
and have wanted to love me for it,
have been so warm in their wanting
that sometimes I wanted to love them, too.
And I think that must be worth something,
that it should be a celebrated thing...."

The Good Fight

"...Like a fist. Like a knife.
But I want to be more like a weed,
a small frog trembling in air...."

Oh Please, Let It Be Lightning

"...And it didn't matter
what was beyond us, or what came before us,
or what town we lived in, or where the money came from,

or what new night might leave us hungry and reeling,
we were simply going forward, riotous and windswept,
and all too willing to be struck by something shining
and mad, and so furiously hot it could kill us."

The Conditional

S. says

This includes some stellar poems including the one that convinced me to buy it, How To Triumph Like A Girl. (link: <http://gulfcoastmag.org/journal/252/h...>)

These poems are confident and work with admirable chutzpah, but there's nothing arrogant or condescending about them. Limon has a great voice and you just kind of want to be friends with her. (If only she'd run for president!) The poems are accessible and honest, sometimes funny, sometimes daring, often optimistic. I like that. The setting is mostly tangible rural American.

The book is separated into four sections and I found the first and last the strongest. The second deals with the death of her stepmother, whom she both loved and didn't like. There are other family poems, too, and love poems and poems of displacement. "State Bird" is about living somewhere (Kentucky) rather than where you'd like to (Brooklyn) for the sake of a partner. It's really a gorgeous poem. It begins honestly -

Confession: I did not want to live here,
not among the goldenrod, wild onions...

It then kind of wavers and I, for one, thought it was about to falter but the conclusion soars.

In a couple cases the opposite happens. You are rapt with what's happening and then the end fades out or hits the wrong note. "Prickly Pear and Fisticuffs" would be one example, at least for me.

Still I'd certainly recommend this for those who like a strong voice and a mostly uplifting read. My favorites were How to Triumph Like a Girl, Roadside Attractions with the Dogs of America, Lies About Sea Creatures, The Great Blue Heron of Dunbar Road, State Bird and During the Impossible Age of Everyone.

Here's a link to Roadside Attractions with the Dogs of America: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/r...>

Hizatul Akmah says

actual rating: 4.6/5

this poetry collection comforts me in a way that makes me feeling all nostalgic and melancholic. i'd highly recommend everyone to read this book.

Brian says

Each of these poems has a weight measured in depth; as a collection they create a perfect circle of teeth-gnashing humanity - a circumference dotted with points of joy, pain, celebration, humor and loss.

I was fortunate to see Limón in July of this year doing a reading here in Northern California. She read 11 poems, most of them new work - her presence and narrative voice complemented the words in poetic totality. I wish that she had read "The Great Blue Heron of Dunbar Road" found in this collection - it's the type of poem that breaks you without malice, letting you slip between its fingers to shatter on the floor into the million pieces that will make of you something new.

Ken says

Ada Limon writes accessible and easily digestible poems, a plus from the start. Among the themes treated here are being a woman, being Mexican, and, in one section, death--specifically the death of her step-mother, which became grist for a set of poems.

Some cool lines I jotted down as I read are as follows:

"I'm like a fence, or a cow, or that word, *yonder*"

"not just to let the savage grass grow...."

"the clowned-out clouds"

"spring's pushed out every tizzy-tongued flower known to the valley's bosom of light"

"tongue out to catch what was left of the world"

"Every moon will be a moon of surrender and lemon seeds"

"Let's be owls tonight, stay up in the branches of ourselves.."

As is true with any collection, the strengths were variable. Some poems seemed self-consciously poetic, but others were true, with that certain *je ne sais quo* that just tells you "I've read a good poem. Damn!" An example is the poem harboring the book's title:

I Remember the Carrots

I haven't given up on trying to live a good life,
a really good one even, sitting in the kitchen
in Kentucky, imagining how agreeable I'll be--
the advance of fulfillment, and of desire--
all these needs met, then unmet again.

When I was a kid, I was excited about carrots,
their spidery neon tops in the garden's plot.

And so I ripped them all out. I broke the new roots

and carried them, like a prize, to my father
who scolded me, rightly, for killing his whole crop.
I loved them: my own bright dead things.
I'm thirty-five and remember all that I've done wrong.
Yesterday I was nice, but in truth I resented
the contentment of the field. Why must we practice
this surrender? What I mean is: there are days
I still want to kill the carrots because I can.

Then there's this:

The Riveter

What I didn't say
when she asked me
why I knew so much
about dying, was that,
for me, it was work.
When Dad called to say
we had a month, I made a list.
I called in my team
to my office in a high rise,
those Rosies of know-how,
those that had lost someone loved,
those that had done the assembly line
of a home death, and said,
*What's this about not keeping
her on TPN?* One woman,
who was still soft with sadness
said, *It depends on whether
she wants to die of heart failure
or to drown in her own fluids.*
I nodded, and wrote that down
like this was a meeting
about a client who wasn't happy.
What about hospice? I asked.
They said, *They'll help,
but your Dad and you guys
will do most of it.*
I put a star by that.
We had a plan of action.
When this happens, we do this.
When that happens, we do that.
But what I forgot
was that it was our plan,
not hers, not the one doing the dying,
this was a plan for those
who still had a next.
See, our job was simple:
keep on living. Her job was harder,
the hardest. Her job,
her work, was to let the machine

of survival break down,
make the factory fail,
to know that this war was winless,
to know that she would singlehandedly
destroy us all.

Limon also mixed it up nicely. Although there are no form poems, she includes prose poems and isn't overly partial to the single-block stanza, mixing it up now and then. What's more, she's made *The New Yorker* with one of these poems. End of story. Or poem, I should say. Here you go. Something that impressed even Paul Muldoon:

State Bird

Confession: I did not want to live here,
not among the goldenrod, wild onions,
or the dropseed, not waist high in the barrel-
aged brown corn water, not with the million-
dollar racehorses, or the tightly wound
round hay bales. Not even in the old tobacco
weigh station we live in, with its heavy metal
safe doors that frame our bricked bedroom
like the mouth of a strange beast yawning
to suck us in, each night, like air. I denied it,
this new land. But, love, I'll concede this:
whatever state you are, I'll be that state's bird,
the loud, obvious blur of song people point to
when they wonder where it is you've gone.

Erica says

Really well-wrought lyrical confessional poems with a hint of ironic distancing and the flat-surprise tone that is the earmark of contemporary young mainstream poets. Lovely for its thing, which is not my thing.

Jenna says

I am gleaming. Promise you'll see me gleam.
-Ada Limon, from "Lashed to the Helm, All Stiff and Stark"

I went to this book seeking solace on the week of the Orlando massacre, the deadliest mass shooting in recent U.S. history, which was also a hate crime targeting the LGBTQ community and the Latinx community. I went to this book because I craved optimism and hope at a time when those qualities seemed hard to come by. And it's true that Ada Limon's strong-voiced lyric poems are woven through with positivity and pluckiness, marked by a determination to affirm life in all its largeness and spikiness, its wanton loves and lusts and gluttonies, its often childlike selfishness and, most of all, its awesome animal vigor, its adrenaline-driven thrust to survive at all costs.

*...I remember the unruly
feathered fowl of my earlier years
that draped the flimflam landscape
of the home of the first girl I ever kissed....* (from "Day of Song, Day of Silence")

Quite a few of the poems in the book resonated with my current mood. Limon has a way of pulling disastrous news events into the embrace of her poems that feels startlingly immediate, intimate, almost casual: "Yesterday, so many dead in Norway" is a sentence fragment appearing in the poem "How Far Away We Are" that seems, almost offhandedly, to allude to the 2011 Anders Breivik killings, while another poem begins with the sentence "Big blue horizon wakes me / from a car catnap and the boys / tell me about Boston, the bombs," in an apparent allusion to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. Stripped of all but one or two identifiers, these large-scale tragedies are made to feel deeply personal; the wounds are made to feel fresh once again.

I expected to be emotionally moved by *those* poems; what caught me off-guard were a handful of delicate, elliptical poems near the end of the collection concerning a couple's uncertain fertility and their fear of not being able to have a child. "Call to Post," "Lashed to the Helm, All Stiff and Stark," "The Conditional" -- these poems surprised me with their emotional power, and they will probably stay with me longer than the poems mentioned previously.

*Say we never meet her. Never him.
Say we spend our last moments staring
at each other, hands knotted together,
clutching the dog, watching the sky burn.
Say, It doesn't matter. Say, That would be
enough. Say you'd still want this: us alive,
right here, feeling lucky.* (from "The Conditional")

Other favorite poems in this collection included "How to Triumph Like a Girl", "I Remember the Carrots," and "Prickly Pear and Fisticuffs". The book also includes four poems about owls and two poems about whales, poems that I probably *should* have loved as much as the aforementioned due to my affinity for their subject matter. But it was the poems that surprised me into loving them that really captured my heart.

Carmen says

[
HOW TO TRIUMPH LIKE A GIRL

I like the lady horses best,
how they make it all look easy,
like running 40 miles per hour
is as fun as

Elena (The Queen Reads) says

So instead, we looked up at the unruly sky, its clouds in simple animal shapes we could name though we knew they were really just clouds— disorderly, and marvelous, and ours.

Adriana Martinez Figueroa says

i was trying to come up with words to review this book but what came out was the following:

I visualized this book like a valley. You're writing under a tree that's turning in autumn. Sometimes there are occasional clouds crossing the valley, casting shadows along the way that remind you of an emotion you saw once on the face of someone you loved. When you run out of words to write down, you unravel the leash you had your horse tied to and climb on. You gallop home, to the person you're growing to love, who's cemented in your heart brain soul. In your kitchen, you drink a glass of water and see the landline's voicemail light flashing. You know it's her but it's gonna have to wait, even though she can't wait, doesn't have time to waste. But you don't know that. Not yet. Not while there's still sunlight coming through the kitchen window and the world keeps stretching s t r e t c h i n g

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Ellie says

This book made me want to be a poet. To make magic with words. To carve out beautiful, vivid, life-filled moments, to define grief or lust or both together.

This book made me write, such as I do. The words made me come to life, as only poetry can. It made me feel young again and my own age at the same time.

Limon writes about longing, and loss (her poems about her stepmother's death brought me painfully back to my mother's dying), and making a life. About New York City and Kentucky and other spaces in this country.

If you like poetry, read this book. And if you don't like poetry, maybe you should think about trying it anyway.

Mark says

Obviously, I am still learning the nuances of poetry but boy, when I read something special, it really resonates and clambers around in my skull, like a bat loose in the house. This collection, Bright Dead Things is filled with moments like this and I can not recommend it higher. Please try it for yourself and I am going

to seek out her earlier work.
