

A Cure for Loneliness: Review of Monica Fambrough's Softcover

written by Guest Contributor | April 21, 2021



Softcover by Monica Fambrough

Natural History Press, 2015

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91 pages – poetry

Last week, I brought a poem to my workshop that was about a virus, but not about coronavirus. When asked to provide context to the class, I told them this and we moved on to workshoping. But I think back now and it seems to me that as much as I want that poem to not be looked upon through a lens of this disastrous and deadly disease, there is no plausible way for me to pass this information onto my reader outside of the workshop setting, besides directly writing on the page that *this poem is not about Covid*—even then Covid is mentioned and thus, the poem still holds this association. In addition to this, there is also no feasible way to disconnect my audience's mind with the idea of a virus and the dark reality in which we currently live. By nature, it is inescapable. The fear of catching it is constantly at the forefront of the mind and every action that any human takes is decided with this pandemic as the predominant factor. Now, I can't believe I wrote a poem in this time period and had the audacity to claim it wasn't about Covid—everything is about Covid, everything might always be about Covid for the rest of my life.

When I first picked up Monica Fambrough's collection *Softcover*, I knew it had been written in 2015, but a few poems in, I could feel it was to be my therapy. This book is built upon human experience—relationships in the first person and direct address, whether that connection be with a lover, a mother, or even the decade in which the speaker was born. My best friend's grandfather had just passed away (do I even need to say from what?) and I was

in need of perspective, hope, connection, a lullaby. "Request" came to me with just that. The speaker's undying devotion for their patient is both heart-breaking and touching as the speaker would give anything to not only help the patient recover, but make the sickness a touch more bearable. It isn't a long poem, only seemingly so on the page because of its short lines, but it took me on a journey, beginning:

You ask for
a box of tissues
and I bring it.
You ask for
a specific flavor
of Gatorade, and
I bring that, too.
You ask for pills
and thermometers
and quiet, and
these are all
delivered. My little
hands, my wrists,
turned up.

What follows is more of the sickness, then recovery with wine and chocolate and good nights of sleep, all with a devoted helper to offer aid when needed. For my friend, I try to be this helper as she wasn't able to be for her grandfather. In a way, isn't losing a human you value deeply equivalent to being sick yourself? The only difference seems to be that you carry this loss with you long after the span of time it would take you to recover from an illness. In this sense, you stay sick until your own death.

As the poem progresses, the patient's requests become increasingly unattainable, someone lucky enough to be alive to request that a hummingbird holds still at just the right angle. The patient's final few requests are frankly uncontrollable, as much of life is, though the objects agree to the patient's favors, as does the speaker, committed to providing perfection, giving this patient not only a new life, but also a new perspective as the poem ends with:

You ask the plane
to land safely.
You ask the plans
to go without a hitch.
You ask the blue
not to be unbearable
and the blue says,
yes, and I say yes,
it is not too much
to ask.

That is what we are living in—an unbearable blue. How was Fambrough to know her words would remain so relevant?

How to protect my home from invasion? is the question asked by a later poem entitled “How to Behave in the Dark” that continues to stay with me. I have a dog, who treks down five flights of stairs to the outside world to do his business five times a day. Each time we return, he patiently waits for his little piece of treat while I wash my hands in the kitchen sink in an effort to protect my home from invasion. Another way to do this? *Flatten my schedule*, the poem answers. This poem is the shortest in the book, falls in the dead center of the pages—45 out of 91—and only consists of 8 lines:

I lay with a small piece of anger still burning
Like smoking in bed

How to protect my home from invasion?

Flatten my schedule
Review the list
Return the videos
Don't call them videos
When they aren't videos

If I were to have read this poem last February, I might have passed over it after a quick read through, lost without an abundance of context or grounding. Even now, I do wonder about Fambrough's intentions, though how strongly the poem resonates with me keeps me interested and curious.

My therapy session of this book came full circle with "The Sevens," a 8.5 page poem that follows the trajectory of love, loss, recovery, grieving, and yearning all in short lines, powerful verbs, and lofty, extended metaphors. In relation to death, I found this poem offers hope, as well as closure, in the most organic and peaceful way as it reads:

I've learned
that when
a person dies
they go
from being
in one time
& one place
to being
everywhere
at once.
And that is
comforting.

This idea of the omnipresent is comforting at any point in one's life, though extremely more so in today's age as it feels as though we are constantly surrounded by sickness and death. Though this poem, as well as much of this collection, is rooted in the first person and highly personal narrative, reading it doesn't feel like a lonely experience. Though we, as a society, have grown accustomed to operating individually, these poems employ such a sense of rawness and honesty that one is able to see themselves in the confessions. Wishing for a pill that could bring the presence of a loved one into the room, deserving good news for one's birthday, the idea of March being an anniversary all resonate with us as a collective, providing us with anything but loneliness.



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