

Every Fruit Is a Peach If You Dream About It A Review of *Saturn Peach* by Lily Wang

Thankfully, 2020 was not just the arbiter of chaos and uncertainty but has also seen some vibrant activity in the poetry community, such as the publication of exciting debut collections by a couple of talented poets on my radar. Lily Wang's *Saturn Peach*, published by Gordon Hill Press in autumn, is one of them. Ever since her first chapbook *Everyone in Your Dreams Is You* saw the light of day with Anstruther Press in 2018, I have been a fan of her work. Getting my fingers on her first full-length collection was a must and a little highlight amidst the pandemic monotony. On the cover, a mischievous devil figure greeted me, offering a magical fruit. Not an apple, of course, but the titular Saturn peach with a leaf sticking out like a demon tongue in a renaissance painting. Lovely illustrations in the same style are sprinkled throughout the volume, accompanying lines with witty and creative images, often indicating moods with little smiley faces worked into the drawings. *Saturn Peach* turned out to be not just a stimulating, thought-provoking, and entertaining poetry collection, it is also simply a pretty book.

The pace of the collection is set by a short opening prose poem. The narrative voice proclaims "I am rowing/away from myself into myself. In a dream where I decide everything". The poems in *Saturn Peach* often feel like constant collisions between different selves, oscillating between dreaming and being awake, but never giving away which side represents the dream, and which side represents being awake. Perhaps the perpetual dream does not have an outside. In *Saturn Peach*, everything is always new, although nothing ever is. Important is not originality in the sense of firstness; it is dreaming it up again by yourself, doing the dreamwork yourself. Whatever it is. The beauty of this opening is that it takes the idea of what Billy Collins calls the discovered subject of a poem and opens it up. Instead of seeking to understand *the* discovered subject that the poet explores, we are invited to "Go round and round" and find different discovered subjects with every reading. Like a dream that may recur in different versions over and over again, the lines of *Saturn Peach* take my familiar associations, thoughts, and feelings down new routes each time I dive into its five chapters "RE:", "Unsolicited Portraits", "Arcade", "Blue Olives", and "Concert."

In dreams, time is not straightforward, and neither is it in Wang's book. The title of the first section "RE:" suggests that its poems are answers, that they are the continuation of a story that has already begun. "We'll make a deal" has its narrator watch a movie time and again, being caught up in a loop, refusing to accept rejection as a fact. "The Christian Cycle/Redemption/etc" dramatically proposes to remove the true origin of our cyclically organised time: Eve. Here, cyclical time is positioned and critiqued as a strictly patriarchal concept. In "RE: Nothing Special" we read that "When

you say the past catches up to you [...] I am already in the future.” The separation between the time of the “you” and that of the “I” invokes the relationship between writer and reader. Once we catch up with Lily Wang by completing a read of her poetry volume, she is already way ahead of us, working currently on a novel, as she proclaimed during the launch of the collection. The title of her first chapbook *Everyone in Your Dream Is You* serves as a hint at another interpretation of the “I” and the “you”. They could be the two distinct manifestations of the same personality, the opposing sides of the same coin. The temporal rift between the first and second person might very well be the logical consequence of human interaction in the time of social media, which inherently allows for delays and preserves the past in the form of words, images, and other digital content indefinitely. By the time the “you” has consumed all online traces of the “I”, that person has already become someone else. One might even encounter one’s own past self that way by scrolling down their old posts, which would again blur the lines between the “I” and “you” as separate personae. This distortion of time by digital intervention highlights another motif that permeates the entire collection: Selfhood in the age of social media.

Through the internet, we are constantly being looked at and constantly looking at others. However, those images are not the same as our immediate offline selves. The prose poem “Kids” in the chapter aptly titled “Unsolicited Portraits” provides three snapshots like memories. It questions how much of one’s self can be reconstructed from just a few poignant instances, akin to our fragmented online presences. This sense of time flying in the face of minimal and scattered attention spans is also present in “Having a Thursday Morning”. The past and the future of the disoriented narrator collapse into each other after they received an email. Finally, they concede “It’s Thursday and already I am old.” The relationship between our lived experiences and our digital lives remains a site of friction throughout *Saturn Peach*. The dreamwork that the book slowly accomplishes poem by poem weaves together lived experiences that sometimes feel remote, irretrievable almost, and sometimes appear strikingly immediate. In many cases, they are characterised by the interference of the internet. In an interview with *PRISM international* Wang described herself as a “Zoomer”. This conscious immersion in online technologies which dictate the rapid pace of our lives today reverberates throughout her debut collection. Lily Wang shows us what poetry and dreaming feel like in the age of the internet.

Dreaming, of course, does not necessarily always mean something magical and positive. Our online encounters often leave us with disappointment, dissatisfaction, and unfulfilled longings. *Saturn Peach* does not shy away from these and other darker aspects of our entanglements with the digital. The short poem “Friend” almost feels like a story of flash fiction, in which distant staring and wondering about the efficacy of mobile phone communication replace real human interaction. “Another Try” seeps

with craving for excitement that seems somehow absent, lost. In my personal reading, this poem addresses how the constant distance from the 'real thing' that is created by the safety of our smartphones and online profiles can leave us numb and unfulfilled. Managing one's affairs from the same screen that one uses for messaging their parents, watching shows and googling trivia does quench the completely different sensation of all these activities before the arrival of the internet. Especially for those of us who remember the days when you would have to call your parents from a landline to actually talk and listen, or congregate at a particular time of the day in front of the TV, or pick up an encyclopaedia. In pandemic times all the more, the final line "All I want to risk" speaks to the flatscreen sameness that swallows our lives and suffocates any sense of adventure that the everyday can have in a world in which people have to leave their house to do things. Similarly, the narrator of "It's true" admits that they "can't face simple living". Again, there is a gaping empty space between the words of the line, perpetuating a sense of lack, of something that might be missing. Perhaps, the two lines are meditating on an absence that they also embody on the page. This absence is a profound element of our digital modern-day condition that is explored throughout *Saturn Peach*.

The internet also troubles the authenticity of our thinking and our ability to interact with each other in a sincere way. Nowadays, most of us have fabricated online presences to go along with our 'real-life selves'. The space for rampant judgement that is opened up by the superficiality of digital relationships is exposed in the poem "Internet Stalker". In the same vein, "Good Pasta" highlights the meaningless perpetual limbo that surrounds the social conduct of dating. In this disingenuous sphere everything descends into the ironic vault of nicety. All is "nice", though there can obviously be no verdict less genuine than 'nice'. Sarcasm prevails in the digital world. The collection is pushing the idea of technology as a game changer even further. "This Poem" questions what it means to be something (anything) and invokes a refusal to adhere to the category "girl" because "It does not matter." The narrative voice refuses to contort herself into the imaginary framework of gender stereotypes, because they are as irrelevant in the dreamworld of these poems as they are artificial in real life. The theme of artifice is also picked up by the poem "Open scene", which, like other works in the chapter "Arcade", invokes the aesthetics of storytelling via acting. As in "Kill Bill Vol. 1" and "Goodfellas, 1990", the line between the cinematic story arc and the trajectory of personal life is blurry. Just like dreams can take on the quality of movie-like drama, so do the stories of our lives when we contemplate them in retrospect. Without the ambition to cement a specific position, many poems in *Saturn Peach* invoke the age-old Wildean debate about the prevalence of art over life or the other way around. Most poignantly, this is the case in "Buzzfeed predicts my breakup", where online activity literally serves as the arbiter of a real-life event.

All that being said, the collection is by no means a bleak book and it does not sustain a serious tone throughout. Wang's lines often take playful turns and go surprising places. The dream sequence of *Saturn Peach* offers many amusing moments, like the surrealism of "There came a great buzz", the light-hearted conversation of "S.", or the heart-warming image of stacked chirping sparrows in "For my friends, who save me". The planted flower in "Perennial" is an image of hope and an allegory for a poem written by the "other self" of the narrator, returning in a positive and encouraging spirit to the multiplicity of selfhood, the way it is created by dreams, and the way it is created in our digital age.

Rightfully so, *Saturn Peach* has made it onto [CBC's 'The Best Canadian Poetry of 2020'](#) list, where Wang joins names as big as Ken Babstock and Margaret Atwood. Lily Wang's debut collection feels like diving into a realm of dreams that never allows me to emerge. Every time I break the surface, I only find myself in a different dream scenario, enveloped by new possibilities and images, unfolding from the same words. Like the estranging familiarity one senses in a dream, nothing remains the same when rereading the poems in *Saturn Peach*. Yet, everything is the same, as I have read them before. So far, I have taken this book as a meditation on what it means to explore a world that we navigate by means of online technology as if it were a perpetual dream. However, I am sure it will feel new when I pick it up again in a couple of months from now.



Saturn Peach by Lily Wang

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Available in the UK from [Gordon Hill Press](#) and Amazon

“This book is a lucid dream. Wang floats between head and heart with care; her voice at once tender and tough. She is in complete control of letting go. Hold onto her words. You will devour them, swallow them whole, and they will nestle pleasantly in your body for a long time after. You will dream of fruit and scorpions, of the sea and your crush. And then you will wake up and reach for this book again.” – SENNAH YEE