

Julia Pond

Just in Case of Absence

Fabrice Poussin. *In Absentia*. Silver Bow Publishing, 2021.

Fabrice Poussin's debut collection, *In Absentia*, opens with the poem "A Pile of Bones," pulling readers in to consider some of the collection's major themes of memory, time, life, death, and possibility. Infused with the warmth of "evening fires," the "glow of the ancient blaze," and a "fiery shower," the poem may seem to indicate dry lifelessness in its title, but like many moments in this book, it surprises with new perspective. Rather than death, the pile of bones from "a warm fire" invites community, gathering, recollection and worship in the endless opportunities present in our "infinite worlds." The spark and heat of life cannot exist independently of "bones of moments they could not truly cherish" as two sides to the same experience. Like "A Pile of Bones," the eighty poems in this collection seek to address wide-ranging topics, experiences, and emotions so that, although certain motifs resurface to create unity, the book, as a whole, spans time and space in breadth. Even its alphabetical organization contributes to this central strength of the collection—rather than working to express a single idea or tell a particular story, Poussin's book traverses landscapes. While each poem dives deeply into truth and experience, together, the collection offers a "Chest of Riches" that speaks to human reality.

With its emphasis on the totality of life, *In Absentia* does not shy from themes of death and the passing of time. Its very title gestures to something once present but now missing, and Poussin's dedication to his deceased parents might cause readers to begin to read with the absence of loved ones in mind. Furthermore, Poussin opens his book with two epigraphs, one a quotation by Candice James, "Absence is the gauze of loss," and the other an admonition by Jean Paul to part only with "loving words," in case they stand as the last between you. Like his first poem, however, Poussin does not allow what could feel like darkness and loss to overshadow the necessary other side to life's equation; loss only follows presence. For this reason, many of the collection's poems move between past, present, and future, remembering, experiencing, and imagining. In "Calling in Silence," for example, the speaker writes from a place of transition, "the noble envelope," between life and death, beginning a peaceful, restful movement from one to the other. Rather than fearing

or dreading death, this speaker finds himself “*at last* entangled in the blissful call / of a voice universal only to my name / and I lay myself to rest upon infinity” (my emphasis). This speaker retains the agency required to choose death for himself, death called for by a voice that knows him as an individual. As Poussin’s book recognizes, to consider life is necessarily to include death, but that inclusion can represent an ultimate good. Although a fair number of *In Absentia*’s poems concern more solemn themes, the presence of poems such as “Elegance” also lends a playful note to Poussin’s interrogation of life. The binaries inherent in life, as Poussin expresses them, also find representation in Poussin’s primary literary influence, Charles Baudelaire.

Present in works such as *The Flowers of Evil* (1857), so too does Poussin explore the duality of good and evil, dichotomy, even the androgyny of union between man and woman. “Eternity in a Vise,” for instance, expresses these themes of duality. Through recollection, the speaker of this poem remembers being destined to “come along, to walk beside you!” The speaker’s companion completes him as they “met / in a persistent explosion of senses!” What were individuals in the past now find unity in the present and finally “hold eternity in a vise” into the future as their inevitabilities are realized. The ambivalence of two also making one and the impossibilities that become possibilities are expressed throughout *In Absentia*, not only through the topics of individual poems but also through language. Oxymorons pepper Poussin’s collection, reminding readers that life contains oppositions. Through Poussin’s perspective, we can see a man “light[ing] up his death,” “the moment, which may be his last, / newborn,” and “thunder rolling / still.” Often created through enjambment, oxymorons such as these point to Poussin’s and, by extension Baudelaire’s, grappling with a profusion of dichotomies and experimenting with their reconciliation.

The weight of expressing life and its many iterations may explain the dense wording present in some of the collection’s poems. If a reader has trouble understanding how a woman “waved her grace at the passer-by” or how “senses beyond the earthly realm / shed . . . the obsolete particles,” they will neither be alone in their experience nor missing Poussin’s point. Not only does such phrasing share the complexity of existence, but it also serves to hide its author behind obscurity. This depersonalization both makes the poems relevant to more experiences and, counterintuitively, points to the very moments that Poussin may be shying away from too much intimacy. Either way, as W. H. Auden famously stated, “A poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language,” as *In Absentia* demonstrates.

Originally titled “Just in Case,” *In Absentia* fills the moment

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a reader might need encouragement, empathy in sorrow, or an escape from the tedium of an isolated life. This collection of poetry serves many purposes for its readers, and each brief poem may survive the closing of the book's pages to accompany him through a day. Continuing in the tradition of Baudelaire, Poussin faces the dichotomies of life head on, reconciling their differences in an experimentation of the language that expresses them.